

**THE *CHEYDER* TEACHERS:
How Zalman, son of Avram *der Baraner*, became a *goyisher kop*
(This manuscript is untitled)¹**

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Ten kilometers from Michaleshik there was a village Baran. There lived a Jew by the name Avrom Gontovnik, with his family—a wife named Pekhe, *iz gevesen aza shlumper vos di velt farmog nit* (such a slob that the world did not have anyone like her), and two sons, and a daughter. The elder son of his was called Zalman and he had a *tempe kop* (very dull head).

In Michaleshik in those times there was no public school, [but] there were two *cheyders*. [The teacher in one of them was] Leybe Yude *der Melamed* (teacher) and in the second *cheyder*, Yitskhak Leyb *der Melamed*. Leybe Yude was a quiet little Jew and his *cheyder* charged higher pay for learning than Yitskhak Leyb. Yitskhak Leyb was a very nervous person, and people used to call him Yitskhak Leyb *der Meshugener* (crazy man). At his *cheyder* the price of learning was lower, but he used to beat his pupils.

Avrom *der Baraner* (Abraham from Baran), as people used him to call, brought his son Zalman to Yitskhak Leyb in his *cheyder* because of the lower charge, providing for the study at the Yitskhak Leyb's *cheyder* and [Zalman's] *esn teg* (eating days) [having a daily meal in turn] at the *shtetl* Jews (houses)].² When [after some time at the *cheyder*] Avrom took Zalman back

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home to Baran, Avrom then decided to find out what Zalman had learned. *Tell me, what do you study at the cheyder?* [And the son replies] *He teaches us to say Kaddish* (memorial prayer).³

Avrom was then a younger man, he was angry at Yitskhak Leyb. *When I will send you back to Yitskak Leyb, I will give it to him so that the devil will take him! What kind of memorial service prayer [do you need to learn] when I am still alive and your mother lives, and we are rather young?!*

So, when Avrom brought Zalman back to the *cheyder* to Yitskhak Leyb, he said to Yitskhak Leyb. *People say that you are not in your right mind! Tell me, why do you teach Zalman to say Kaddish when I am alive, and my wife is alive, and we both are yet young?*

¹ This essay is referred to by Urke in his earliest letter to Dovid Katz (dated 10 Jan 1992) (with which it was enclosed) as [A]bout Avrom *der Baraner*, and his son Zalman, who became a *goyisher kop*.

² In Jewish communities with schools, it was common for Jewish households to take turns providing meals for the out-of-town schoolboys and doing so was considered an honor. By taking turns providing the meals, no one household was over-burdened. Thus, Zalman would have taken meals with one family on one day, with a different family on the next day and so on through the week.

³ Although there are several versions of the *Kaddish* recited at different points in the Jewish prayer service, it is the *Mourners Kaddish* being referred to here.

And Yitskhak Leyb listened to Avrom's worry and he answered: *Do not be afraid, when I am done teaching Zalman to say Kaddish, there will be no memory of you and your wife, such [a] dull head Zalman has.*