

*Falsely accused and facing a mysterious foe, Ari and Howard travel through parallel universes for a date with destiny. This epic YA adventure blends sci-fi, humor, and profound spiritual insights. Buckle up for the ride of a lifetime!*

## **Ari Barak: Red Warrior's Gift**

By Shaul Behr

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SHAUL BEHR



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בארק

RED WARRIOR'S GIFT

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## WARNING

This book is addictive. Studies have shown that over ninety percent of readers are unable to put it down once they have begun.<sup>1</sup> Symptoms of addiction may include: elevated heart rate, increased brain activity, clammy palms, non-responsiveness to external stimuli, sudden bursts of laughter, and lack of sleep owing to an irrepressible urge to read just one more chapter.

This is not to say that it constitutes a health risk. On the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that reading this book may make you happier, smarter, and possibly even better-looking. Because happy, smart people just look good.

As with its predecessor, *Ari Barak and the Free-Will Paradox*, this narrative assumes a view of the workings of the Universe that may or may not be true. In either case, it attempts to portray the world through a Torah lens, and while actual *divrei Torah*<sup>2</sup> are few and far between, they are there. So, I apologize for depriving my readers of valuable opportunities, but you probably shouldn't read this in the bathroom.

Enjoy the ride!

Shaul Behr

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<sup>1</sup> These same studies concluded that eighty-four percent of quoted statistics are fabricated on the spot.

<sup>2</sup> Words of Torah.

## 1. THE WEAK AND THE MIGHTY

Thaddeus cautiously approached the bush beneath the overhanging rock. He poked his sword between the branches and peered through the gap, then nodded in satisfaction. There was certainly some kind of opening there; maybe this was the cave he was looking for. Kneeling down, he inspected the ground beneath the bush. It was worn away, exactly as it would be if people had been crawling beneath it in the direction of the opening.

He turned and motioned silently to the soldiers behind him on the narrow path leading through the brambles up to his position. *This is the place. We have them now.*

Jason, his deputy, approached him.

“Gather kindling and build a pyre at the entrance to the cave,” whispered Thaddeus. “Then fan out the troops in groups of five for a radius of a hundred cubits; there may be other entrances. We’ll smoke them out of there, and when they attempt to escape, we’ll cut them down, one by one. If there are no other entrances, so much the better.”

Jason saluted and turned to relay the instructions to the soldiers. But before he could open his mouth, he felt something collide with the top of his helmet, knocking it clean off his head with a loud, metallic clang.

Instinctively both he and his commander swung their heads up in the direction from which the projectile had come. Just in time to receive a bucketload of sand and gravel in their faces from the top of the overhanging rock.

Thaddeus attempted to shout out an order, but instead choked and coughed on the dust cloud. Jason, his head now

unprotected, lost his balance, stumbled, and fell over backward. Fortunately for him, his fall was broken by the lead soldier, standing right behind him. Unfortunately for the company, the lead soldier also lost his balance, and fell backward onto the soldier behind him. And the narrowness of the approach path had made it necessary for all the soldiers to march in single file.

Two young men stood atop the overhanging rock, admiring their handiwork. It was a glorious sight to behold: Greek soldiers toppling backward over each other like a human domino rally.

“That was a heckuva shot you nailed that first guy with,” said the taller one. “He had no idea what hit him.”

The shorter one with the darker skin returned the compliment. “Your timing was freakin’ excellent with that sand bomb. Look at them falling over each other—Greek poetry in motion! Did you plan that?”

“Well, it was more of a hope than a plan, I have to admit, but it worked out way better than I expected. It helped that the first guy lost his helmet, so credit to your throwing arm, there.”

“Thanks, I—”

Suddenly, a branch cracked behind them. They spun round to find Thaddeus about five meters from them, his face livid beneath the layer of dust, his sword pointed right at them.

“Now I have you, Hebrew filth!” snarled the Greek officer, waving his weapon menacingly. “And you have nowhere to run!”

The taller youth glanced behind him. There was a sheer drop from three sides of the rock on which they were standing. On the fourth side Thaddeus had penned them in. Yet the young man looked remarkably unconcerned, given that he and

his companion were facing almost certain death from a very angry Greek soldier with a very sharp sword.

“He seems to have a point there, Ari, if you’ll pardon the pun. I think we should leave now.” His right hand moved to touch a knob on the ornate bracelet on his left wrist.

“Not yet, Howard,” said the one called Ari, restraining Howard’s right hand. “These soldiers will be back in action soon, and the people inside the cave don’t yet know about them. We have to warn them.”

Thaddeus was nonplussed by his quarry’s casual attitude, and frankly *offended* by their *disrespect* of the fact that he was about to kill them both. He was much more accustomed to people falling on their knees and begging for mercy under circumstances such as these.

“You two *boys* are either imbeciles or insane!” he spat. “How do you think you’re going to get past me before I impale you?”

Howard smiled at him. “Like this,” he said simply, and touched his bracelet.

When questioned later, the bewildered Thaddeus could not recall how it had happened: one moment he was brandishing a sword at two apparently helpless Hebrew youths; the next he found himself suspended facedown from a nearby terebinth tree, a thick branch threaded through the backplate of his armor, and his sword nowhere to be found.

It took a full minute for his brain to process his new situation. Then he realized he had no way to release himself and decided to call for help from his soldiers.

After a minute or two of crying out, he was relieved to see his deputy beneath him, along with two foot soldiers. Jason studied him bemusedly. “Captain? How—”

“Never mind how I got here!” yelled the red-faced Thaddeus, cutting him off. “Get me down! And catch those two Hebrew boys! I will skin them alive!”

Jason looked round alertly. “Hebrew boys? Where are they? Are they the ones who ambushed us?”

“Yes!” Suddenly Thaddeus remembered what they had said before they escaped. “Hurry! Catch them before they alert their friends in the cave!”

Jason hesitated. “Should we get you down first, or try catch them first?”

Thaddeus’s face reddened even further. “I... Get me... Catch...” he stammered. After a moment he made the decisive call. “You two!” he shouted at the foot soldiers. “You get me down! And, Jason, you go catch the boys!”

“No need for that,” said a voice behind them. “We’re right here.”

The three soldiers spun around. Thaddeus cricked his neck trying to see where the voice had come from.

The two young men who had accosted them earlier were standing behind them. With them was a motley crew of about fifteen Hebrews, without uniforms or armor. Powerful and muscular...they were *not*. They had skinny arms, pencil necks, and a liberal coating of dust on their faces contrasting with their broad, toothy smiles. The appearance of this ragtag band would have been comical, were it not for the array of long, pointy implements they wielded menacingly as they moved to surround the Greeks.

“You will drop your weapons now,” said the leader of the band.

Jason calculated the odds fast and let his sword and shield clang to the ground. The two soldiers followed his lead. Thaddeus could only watch helplessly from the tree.



One of the Hebrew militiamen stepped forward to gather the fallen weapons. He stopped to gaze askance at the hapless Thaddeus and scratched his head in thought. Then he reached out and gave the Greek captain a gentle push on his side, causing him to rock back and forth on the branch like a human pendulum.

“How *did* you get up there?” he asked in genuine puzzlement. His compatriots burst into peals of laughter, while Thaddeus gritted his teeth and seethed quietly. *Perhaps the rest of my men will come to our rescue*, he consoled himself. *And then we will see who laughs last.*

There was a rustle of bushes nearby. The Hebrew fighters momentarily raised their weapons in alertness, then relaxed again as they recognized one of their own.

“What news, Naphtali?” asked the leader of the band.

“Peace to you, Yannai, and praise to God,” proclaimed Naphtali with a wave and a smile. “The trap worked perfectly. The Almighty has delivered around forty of the enemy into our hands today, with no losses on our side, save for some minor injuries. Yochanan bids you to join us in the valley presently for—” He stopped, noticing Thaddeus in the tree. His eyes widened in disbelief as he spotted the captain’s insignia. “*This...is their commander? Hanging from a tree like Avshalom?*”<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrews laughed again; Thaddeus closed his eyes and hung his head in shame and despair, knowing now that the rest of his men had been routed.

Yannai clapped his hand on Naphtali’s shoulder. “As you say, praise to God; it has indeed been a great victory today. But

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<sup>3</sup> Absalom, King David’s son, was trapped in a tree by his hair.

it could have been otherwise, had it not been for our two young friends here who came to warn us of the danger.”

“Who?” asked Naphtali, turning to see who was the subject of Yannai’s praise.

“Why, these young men here...” said Yannai, gesturing at where Ari and Howard were standing. *Had been* standing.

“Where are they?” Yannai asked his men, who simply looked around and shrugged. “They can’t have just *disappeared!* Where are their footprints?”

Yannai strode over, but a cursory glance revealed no footprints leading away from the boys’ last known position, nor any other clue as to where they might have gone. But there was something else there. Yannai crouched to view it closer, and screwed up his nose in confusion as his curious companions crowded around him.

“Now, what on earth does *that* mean?” he whispered.

Before him, scrawled in the sand were two words, followed by a crude pictogram:

*Happy Chanukka!*



## 2. LOST IN TRANSLATION

### Ramat Beit Shemesh, Now

“So, what have you boys been learning in Yeshiva?” asked Uncle Itzik, clapping his hand genially on Ari’s shoulder and nearly causing him to choke on his *challah*.<sup>4</sup>

Wanting to give Ari the opportunity to chew and swallow safely, and confident in his own significantly improved Hebrew skills, Howard gallantly stepped in and answered the question on his friend’s behalf.

“We’ve been learning about the Hasmonean Revolt,” he said, breaking his teeth on each word. At least, that was what he *thought* he said. What he *actually* said was that they were learning about electrical spinach. Howard began to doubt himself when Ari, who had been attempting to wash down the bread, suddenly snorted water out his nose. Ari’s numerous younger cousins all started giggling coyly.

“That’s...interesting,” said a bemused Uncle Itzik, eyebrows raised.

“What?” said Howard, switching to English. “Did I say the wrong thing?”

But Ari couldn’t answer, doubled up as he was, convulsing with laughter.

Aunt Orna came to the rescue, correctly deducing what Howard had meant, and correcting his Hebrew.

“Oh, thank you,” said Howard, blushing slightly, but bravely attempting Hebrew again. “Maybe I still need to practice my Hebrew more.”

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<sup>4</sup> Braided bread traditionally eaten on the Sabbath.

Aunt Orna smiled and graciously decided not to tell Howard that he had just offered to commit suicide for his poor Hebrew. Ari, less graciously, fell off his chair.

Notwithstanding Howard's translation blunders, Shabbos<sup>5</sup> with Ari's aunt and uncle was a highly enjoyable affair, involving seven boisterous children between the ages of five and sixteen, loud mealtime conversations, and copious quantities of tasty Moroccan-style food. Almost as good as the food they ate in yeshiva. Almost.

"Do they feed you okay at the yeshiva, Ari?" asked Aunt Orna over lunch.

"Yeah, it's...all right," said Ari casually.

It would have been difficult to explain that at their yeshiva, the food tasted like manna from heaven, because, well, it *was* manna from heaven. And Aunt Orna might have been offended that yeshiva food could outdo her cooking.

"I'd like to try electrical spinach sometime," said thirteen-year-old Avishai with a mischievous smirk.

"First, let's see you eat some regular spinach," said Uncle Itzik, playfully slapping the back of his son's head. "Anyway, how are you enjoying the learning?"

"Oh, it's really good," said Ari enthusiastically. "Especially the history classes."

Howard felt the need to chime in again. "When the Rosh Yeshiva teaches, I am a field in the hairdresser."

Ten pairs of eyes squinted at Howard. After a moment of awkward silence, Ari worked it out. "He means that when the Rosh Yeshiva teaches history, it feels like we're right there, in the story."

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<sup>5</sup> Sabbath.

Ari gave a knowing smile to Howard. They would feel that way, wouldn’t they? After all, Rabbi White’s method of teaching history was to experience it, firsthand, often as an active participant. But that aspect of the yeshiva’s curriculum wasn’t for sharing with outsiders. And the only insiders in this context were Ari, Howard, and Rabbi White himself, since the yeshiva consisted of exactly two students. You could possibly count Professor Naresh among those in the know, but he popped back from the late twenty-first century only when explicitly summoned. And then there was Igor, the mute giant who stood guard outside the yeshiva, who did the grocery shopping and occasionally clobbered intruders—and he didn’t really count, because as a genetically engineered clone without a soul, he just did as he was told and didn’t think much one way or the other about it.

It had been three months since Ari and Howard had arrived in Yeshivas Nekudas Habechira. Three months by the regular calendar, that is. If you had to factor in the extra time they had spent on field trips to the past, it would tack on several weeks.

“So, give us a *d’var Torah*,<sup>6</sup> then, Ari,” said Uncle Itzik with his genial smile. “Something you learned in yeshiva.”

“Okay,” said Ari. “How about the principle of free will?”

“Why not?” said Uncle Itzik.

So Ari told what they had learned about free will, particularly Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler’s thesis on the subject. How the only meaningful decisions in life are those between good and evil, and even those are meaningful only if they are evenly poised—not too easy, not too hard. And those free-will decisions are the battlefront of every person’s struggle to reach

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<sup>6</sup> A short Torah lesson.

the highest spiritual heights, with each victory conquering new territory, and each failure representing a loss of spiritual ground. How, at the end of a person's life, his final reward is based on his own particular challenges, and how close he came to reaching the pinnacle of his own potential.

Furthermore, there is an infinitely complex latticework of free-will paths known as the Regression Stream, each path representing a parallel universe where people made different decisions. And, if you just have the right technology (a Stream Engine), you can navigate through the Regression Stream, travel through time and space, and find out what *would* have happened *if*... But Ari didn't mention any of this, on account of that "insider" consideration. Besides which, who would have believed him?

"Well done!" exclaimed Uncle Itzik, genuinely impressed at his nephew's delivery of the Torah lesson. "I see they are teaching you well there! Maybe Avishai will come to your yeshiva when he's finished school?"

"No, thanks, Aba," said Avishai. "They learn in English, and my English is worse than Ari's friend's Hebrew."

There was some laughter at this comment, but Howard blushed; apparently, he had understood enough.

For a moment, Ari felt a little rush of vindictive pleasure. Usually, Howard was the intellectually sharper of the two; he quickly grasped concepts that made Ari's head spin, and despite his lack of Hebrew and Aramaic skills, he had taken to the Talmud like a duck to water, leaving Ari feeling distinctly slow. Conversational Hebrew was still the one area where Ari excelled, and Howard sounded like a moron. But his *schadenfreude* didn't last long. His conscience prickled at him.

"Hey, ease up on him," Ari gently chided his cousin. "When he arrived in Yeshiva, he didn't speak a word of

Hebrew. He’s really pretty good, considering it’s only been three months.” He gave an encouraging wink to Howard, who smiled back wanly.

“Quite right!” agreed Uncle Itzik. “You’ve been learning English in school for how long now, eh, Avishai?”

“Eh...more than three months, Aba,” replied Avishai coyly.

“Right,” said his father. “So now, you tell us—in *English*—a *d’var Torah*.”

Avishai raised his eyebrows. “Seriously, Aba?”

His father nodded slowly with a glare that brooked no argument.

With a sigh, Avishai pushed back his chair and stood up. Everyone fell silent as he took a few moments to prepare himself.

“King Solomon say,” began Avishai with a self-deprecating smile, “before fail, is high wind.”

Ari took a moment before translating. “You mean ‘pride?’”

“Yes, that,” said Avishai, who seemed to be enjoying the attention, even as he struggled with the English. “And I had high wind—how you say—*pride*? And now—I am on my face!”

With that, he theatrically flopped to the floor, to much laughter, including from Howard.

On Saturday night, after the departure of the Sabbath, as Ari and Howard were packing their bags, Aunt Orna appeared in the doorway, jangling her car keys.

“I’ll give you a ride back to the yeshiva,” she said. “I’m going that direction anyway to pick up some stuff from a friend. Plus, it’ll be nice to see where you’re learning.”

*Uh-oh*, thought Ari. *My mom has put her up to this. And if word gets back to her that my yeshiva consists entirely of a rusty forty-foot shipping container with air conditioning and plumbing, this will probably result in an international incident. At best.*

“Um, thanks so much, Aunt Orna, but we’ve already called for a ride.”

“What, you called a *taxi*?” Aunt Orna bristled with indignation. “Did you think I wouldn’t drive my own nephew ten minutes away?”

“No, no,” protested Ari hurriedly. “There’s a driver who works for the yeshiva, and he’s coming to pick us up now.”

Aunt Orna looked unconvinced. “Your yeshiva has a driver who is coming specially to pick you up?”

Ari thought quickly. “Well, he’s picking up *all* the yeshiva students who spent Shabbat in Beit Shemesh.” *All two of us.*

Aunt Orna nodded, apparently mollified, if a little disappointed. Just then, a loud *paarp* sound from the street outside announced the arrival of an old Renault van.

The boys grabbed their bags and offered their last thanks to Aunt Orna and Uncle Itzik, who accompanied them out to the car.

“*Shavna tov!*”<sup>7</sup> cried Itzik genially at the driver as they approached the vehicle.

The driver slowly turned his head to face Ari’s uncle, piercing him with an ice-blue stare that made the bulky Moroccan stumble back a step involuntarily as he took in the proportions of the driver. Even seated in the car, the man was obviously gigantic.

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<sup>7</sup> “A good week!” This is the traditional greeting following the Sabbath.



The stare gave way to a slow blink and a deferential nod, but Uncle Itzik was still discomfited. “Are you sure this guy is...*okay*?” he whispered to Ari.

Ari chuckled. “Yes, this is Igor; we know him well. He works for the yeshiva. Great guy. Doesn’t speak any Hebrew.” *Doesn’t speak at all, actually. But you don’t need to know that.*

“Hmm,” mused Uncle Itzik, regaining some of his sense of humor. “Maybe you could get Howard to teach him some.”

\* \* \*

Howard was silent and broody for the first minute of the ride.

“Your Hebrew really *has* improved a lot,” said Ari, guessing that Howard’s mood was on account of the linguistic fiasco that was the past twenty-four hours, and wanting to give him some encouragement.

“Yeah, yeah,” mumbled Howard, slouching on the bench in the back of the Renault. “It’s just so *frustrating* that when I’m in the First Temple period wearing my Stream Engine, I speak Hebrew like it’s my mother tongue. Then I get back here, and I’m all *electrical spinach*.”

Ari nodded sympathetically. Then an idea came to him.

“Hey, Howard. When you go through the Regression Stream, it reprograms your brain so you can speak the language of whatever time and place you land up in, right?”

Howard raised an eyebrow. “Yes. So...?”

A sly smile spread across Ari’s face. “So...what if we had to use our SEs to travel to some place in modern Israel where they only speak Hebrew? Wouldn’t you come out speaking fluent Hebrew?”

Howard shrugged glumly. “Maybe. But how does that help? I’d lose the Hebrew again as soon as we come back home through the Stream!”

Ari grinned archly. “Who says we have to come back through the Regression Stream, when a regular bus back to Beit Shemesh will do just as well?”

Howard’s eyes widened, and he sat bolt upright. “I *like* your thinking, Ari. We arrive in a place where I can speak Hebrew, and we come back here by bus with Hebrew already baked into my brain! Yes, let’s give it a try. Tonight. I’m sick of electrical spinach.”

“Um, okay. You adopted that idea a little faster than I expected, but yeah, why not?”

Howard thought for a few moments. “Now, what could we use as an Attractor? We’ll need some kind of relic of a free-will decision that someone made, tonight, in a place that matches our criteria.”

“Which means somewhere they speak only Hebrew, no English,” said Ari.

“And needs to be close to public transportation that can get us back to Beit Shemesh tonight,” added Howard.

“Unless we send Igor up ahead to pick us up?” suggested Ari.

Howard raised his eyebrows. “You think we can do that? Sounds like a bit of a liberty to me. I mean, it was nice of Rabbi White to get him to pick us up from your family now, but sending Igor out on a whim because we feel like doing this experiment may not be the right thing.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” said Ari. “So, public transport it is, then. Anyway, I know how we can find an Attractor.”

“Me too. News websites.”

“Yup. I’ll take the Hebrew ones; you take the English.”

Howard glared at Ari. “You didn’t have to rub it in, you know.”

Ari grinned sheepishly. “Oops. Didn’t mean it that way. Hopefully after tonight I won’t be able to poke fun at your Hebrew anymore!”

Igor rolled the minivan to a stop outside the yeshiva, and Ari and Howard sprang out to begin their research.

“Good thing Rabbi White got these laptops for the yeshiva.” Ari popped one open and deactivated the screen lock.

Howard was about to enter his own password, when a sudden doubt came over him. “You think it’s okay for us to use these computers for this? I mean, the reason Rabbi White got them was so we could do research related to our studies...”

“So? Don’t you think you’ll be able to study better once you’re fluent in Hebrew?”

“I guess so.”

“So, *nu*, get going. Look under ‘Breaking News’ if you want something from tonight.”

They began their search quietly and earnestly. A few minutes later, Ari spoke.

“How about this? The chairman of a kibbutz somewhere in the Galil got arrested tonight for allegedly embezzling funds.”

Howard shook his head. “No good. The free-will decision behind that story probably happened months, or even years ago. If we want to come back here without reentering the Regression Stream, we’ll need something where the free-will decision happened tonight. After Shabbos, in fact, since things get a little complicated if we arrive somewhere right in the middle of Shabbos. The Mishna in *Erwin* says that you can’t

move outside of a little four-by-four square until the end of Shabbos. That doesn't sound like fun."

"Agreed."

They lapsed back into a lengthy silence, punctuated by the occasional click of a keyboard or tap on a mouse pad.

"Here's something," said Howard. "Hit-and-run about an hour ago. Driver knocked over a cyclist and sped away. Cyclist being treated for a broken arm."

"Sounds promising," said Ari. "Where?"

"Ra'anana. You know where that is?"

Ari snickered. "I do. And it's not going to do us any good."

"Why not?"

"Because Ra'anana has about the highest concentration of English speakers anywhere in Israel, with the possible exception of Beit Shemesh."

"Hm." Howard grimaced. "Any other place names I should skip?"

"Well..." Ari rolled his eyes up in thought. "To be honest, most of the larger towns in Israel have significant numbers of English speakers. Maybe we should try a different approach. Like, maybe let's pull up a map and see if we can find any local news sources for places off the beaten track that aren't full of Anglos."

Ari loaded a map of Israel on his monitor. "Well, there's the Negev in the south. Aside from Beersheva, I don't think there are many English speakers down there. Let's try adding the word 'Negev' to our searches."

They fell silent again, searching for relevant and recent news snippets involving free-will decisions made someplace in Israel without any English speakers. Results were not

forthcoming. Occasionally one of them would venture a suggestion, but nothing promising surfaced.

“There’s a sports event scheduled for tonight,” suggested Ari, as the time approached eleven o’clock. “A second-tier soccer game at some little stadium in the middle of nowhere. Maybe someone committed a foul or something?”

“Pathetic,” said Howard, shaking his head in disgust. “I mean, not particularly your suggestion, just that we’re getting nowhere. Perhaps this is the wrong approach altogether...” His eyes unfocused as he leaned back in his chair and started thinking.

“Yeah,” said Ari absently, returning to the search engine. Something interesting caught his attention. He smiled mischievously and scrawled some notes on a piece of paper, which he pocketed. Then he looked back at Howard, whose face was now doing some interesting contortions: frowning, then grimacing, raising eyebrows, until finally his eyes widened, and his mouth spread slowly into a wicked smile.

“I have no idea what’s going on in your head,” said Ari, “but it sure is fun to watch. I should record you thinking on video some time so you can enjoy it yourself.”

Howard just cackled to himself.

“Okay, you have an idea, right?” said Ari.

“Oh, I do. But it’s totally crazy.”

“Let’s hear it, then.”

Howard drew in a deep breath and exhaled loudly.

“Uh-oh,” said Ari. “I know that sigh. That’s the one where the genius in the room is composing himself to explain something super complicated to the guy with half his IQ. Am I right?”

“No, of course not!” protested Howard. “I don’t think you have half my IQ.”

“Ooh, that hurt,” said Ari, wincing with a smile. The two friends were close enough not to take offense at their regular verbal sparring. “So, out with it. Just don’t make my brain hurt, okay?”

Howard rubbed his hands together. “Look, somewhere out there, *someone* in a place without English speakers *must* have made a free-will decision tonight. You agree?”

“Okay, I can accept that.”

“Which means somewhere out there is an Attractor that could get us there.”

“Go on.”

“That just leaves us the question: how are we going to get that Attractor?”

“Just what I was about to say.”

Howard took in another genius pre-explanation breath. “But let us leave that question for now. Let us assume that we *do* have the Attractor in our hands. That would take us to our desired destination, would it not?”

“I’m not *that* thick, Howard. I know what Attractors do.”

“So then, let us say we arrive at our destination a few minutes after Shabbos came out. We acquire the brain patterns required to speak the local language. And we would then be able to get on a bus or hitch a ride and come back here to the yeshiva...arriving...when?” He left the question open to Ari.

Ari shrugged. “I don’t know. Depending on where the place is, and how lucky we get with buses or rides, it might take us an hour or two...” He glanced at his watch. “Like, we could get back here even *now*.”

“Precisely!” Howard cried out triumphantly. “We could *already* be back now. And in that case, why could we not find the original Attractor, or write one out, bring it back with us,

and put it in a designated spot for the earlier 'us' to find...like, for example, on that counter by the open window, there?"

Ari spun around in his chair to look at the surface where Howard was pointing. He did a double take, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

"Holy red cow. No way."

Even Howard sat upright in surprise. "You know, I wasn't *actually* expecting that to work."

There, on the Formica next to the basin, was something that they could swear had not been there an hour before. A pair of glasses. Ari and Howard got up to take a closer look.

"So, let me get this straight," said Ari, closing his eyes for a moment to focus. "Some future version of us has already taken a trip back through the Regression Stream and brought *this* back for us to use as an Attractor so that we can...close the loop?"

"That's about the long and short of it," replied Howard. "Though, on closer inspection of our Attractor, I think there's going to be an extra wrinkle in the plan."

"Why? It just looks like a regular pair of glasses."

"Look closer."

Ari picked up the glasses and turned them over in his hands. "Nothing odd I can see about them. They look just like your glasses."

"Ari. That's because they *are* my glasses."

Ari squinted back at Howard, confused. "But you are *wearing* your glasses right now. How could these be..." And then, understanding. "Ohhh. *Now* I get it."

Howard smiled indulgently. "Apparently, the future 'we' are no less inclined to pranking our past selves than you and I are to pranking each other." He turned toward the door and called out loud. "Okay, wise guys, you can come in now!"

The front door opened, and in burst Ari and Howard, roaring with laughter.

“That was *hilarious!*” spluttered Future Ari. “We were watching from outside, through the window, and the looks on your faces were *priceless.*”

“Of course, *I* didn’t have my glasses on,” said Future Howard, “so I couldn’t see much. But still, it was worth it for the lulz. Hand those over, would you, Ari? They’re not *actually* your Attractor, and I’d like to see your respective expressions now.”

“This is super weird,” said Present Ari, passing the glasses over to Future Howard. “And no less than I’ve come to expect from life in this yeshiva. So, did it work?” He switched to Hebrew. “Can you speak Hebrew now?”

Future Ari and Howard just laughed again. “Oh, no, no, no!” taunted Ari the elder, wagging a finger while Howard mime-zipped his mouth. “No spoilers! We didn’t get any from Future Us when *we* went, so *you’re* not getting any from us, either!”

“Well, you both seem to be in a good mood,” said Present Howard. “So I’ll take that as a positive sign.”

“Take it as you wish,” said Future Howard, still chuckling. “But take your Attractor and get going.” He pulled a little square of paper with some writing out of his pocket and handed it over to Present Ari, then ambled over to the water cooler to pour himself a drink.

“Why the hurry?” asked Present Howard, joining his double at the cooler and also filling a cup. “Seems to me we could relax, enjoy each other’s company, and savor the novelty of being doubles for as long as we like before we head on our way?”



Future Howard gave a terse smile and raised his cup. “Two reasons. One, you will discover for yourselves soon enough that it’s not much fun hanging out with a future version of yourself. The other, because Rabbi White could turn up any minute, and even we have no idea when that might be.”

Future Ari raised his eyebrows with a sardonic smile aimed at his past self. “You can see how this might be awkward.”

Present Ari nodded. “I get it. Okay, Howard, let’s go.” He went into the bedroom and returned a few moments later, carrying what appeared to be two sets of headphones. “Here you go,” he said, offering a pair to his friend.

“Not me,” said the Howard who was thus addressed. “I’ve already been. You want the other Howard.”

Ari slapped his forehead and gestured to the other Howard. “Good thing we’re breaking up this little gathering; it’s too confusing for me to keep track of who’s who. Come on, let’s get moving.”

The other Howard shook his head. “Actually, he was kidding you. I’m the Howard from the future.”

Two Howards and one Ari burst out laughing again. The two Howards did a fist bump. “It was definitely funnier the second time round,” said Future Ari.

Present Ari rolled his eyes. “Holy red cow, if there’s one thing worse than continually being pranked by Howard, it’s having *two* Howards on my case. But I think I know how to sort this one out.”

He put on one of the headphones and flipped a switch somewhere. A large, fancy wristwatch suddenly appeared on his arm, and he pushed the little square of paper into a receptacle attached to the watch. Then he took the second set of headphones in his right hand.

“Well, I’m off,” he announced. “Catch, if you want to join me.” With that, he tossed the headphones directly between the two Howards. Only one of them, instinctively, reached out to grab them.

“Well played,” said Present Howard, pausing to nod at Ari before donning his Stream Engine.

Present Ari doffed an imaginary hat at his future self. “Ari, Howard, it’s been a pleasure to meet you. I can’t say, ‘See you later,’ but I *can* say, ‘Be you later!’”

“Wow, that’s so witty; I wish *I’d* thought of that,” said Future Ari. His eyes widened in faux surprise. “But wait! I *did!*”

“I think I’ve changed my mind about wanting to spend more time with you guys,” said Present Howard. “Everything we do or say is—”

“Completely predictable,” chorused two Howards and Future Ari.

“Told you the novelty would wear off quickly,” said Future Howard with a shrug.

“But before you go,” said Future Ari, “you should know that there are people there you need to help. You’ll know what you need to do when you get there.” He gave a wink at Present Ari, who acknowledged this with a slightly nonplussed nod.

“*Yalla*, bye,” said Present Ari, touching a button on his watch. He and his contemporaneous friend immediately disappeared.

The remaining Ari and Howard looked at each other.

“So, how did you enjoy your first round trip of meeting yourself?” asked Howard.

“First time was seriously annoying,” replied Ari. “But it was kinda fun on the return leg. Not sure I’d do this on a regular basis just for kicks. What about you? Think this whole exercise was worth it?”

“Of course! I did pick up a new language, didn't I?”  
And for some reason, they both burst out laughing again.

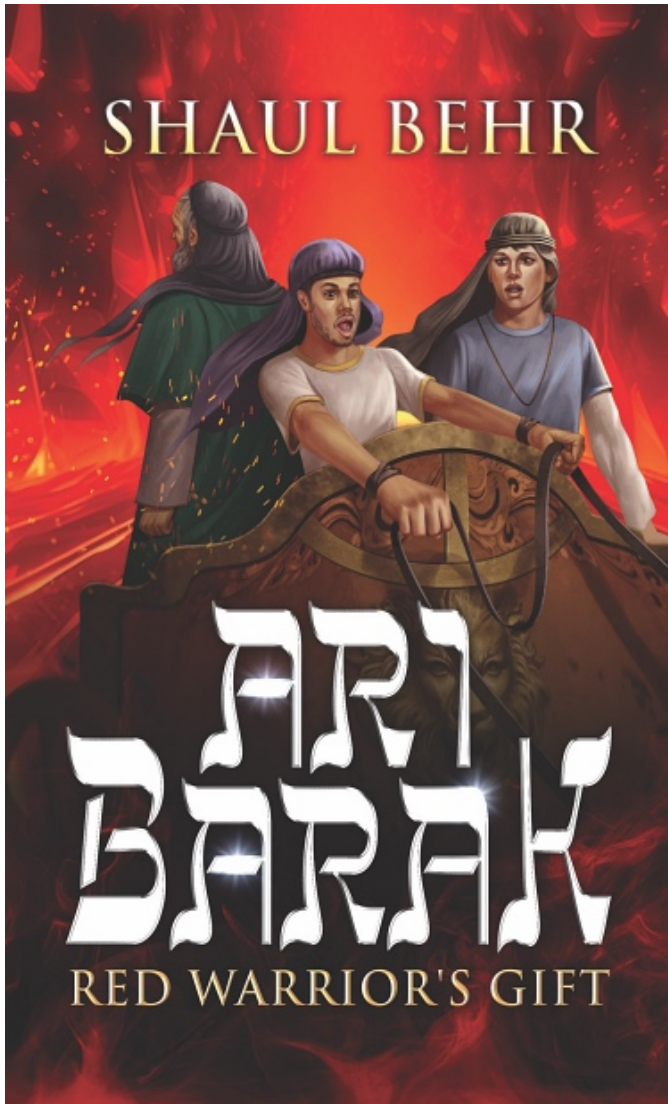
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meet Shaul Behr, a man who wears many hats (and sometimes a fedora). He's a husband to his wonderful wife, father to five awesome kids, proud grandfather to one adorable grandson, and donor of one kidney. By day, he's a software engineer, but outside of work, you'll find him writing, running, lifting weights, or belting out a tune.

But Shaul's not just a one-note guy; he's also a man of the spirit. With *semicha* in the laws of *kasbrus*, he's a knowledgeable and passionate Torah learner and teacher. And in his shul, he's a frequent *baal tefilla*, leading the congregation in prayer with his soulful voice. His writing is informed by his unique perspective on Jewish thought, which is both adventurous and deeply rooted in tradition.

Check out his website at <https://shaulbehr.com>. It's a treasure trove of thoughts on writing, current events, spirituality, and random other stuff. Join his mailing list to get very occasional updates and a free eBook: <https://bit.ly/shaul-behr-free-stuff>





*Falsely accused and facing a mysterious foe, Ari and Howard travel through parallel universes for a date with destiny. This epic YA adventure blends sci-fi, humor, and profound spiritual insights. Buckle up for the ride of a lifetime!*

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