



## Chapter 1

# Breaking News

**M**rs. Tessler stared at her daughters and nervously toyed with the armrest of her recliner. Three sets of bright-green eyes looked back at her, three faces alight with curiosity. *They look so alike, my triplets*, she thought affectionately, *and yet their personalities are so very different*. She wondered how each of them would react to the news, and felt a sudden twinge of anxiety. What would they decide?

As they had planned, Rabbi Tessler would be the one to break the news. Leaning forward with a pensive look on his face, he said, “Girls, your mother and I have something important to tell you, something that’s going to affect your future. Please listen carefully until I’m done. Then you can fire away.”

Rabbi Tessler paused and smiled. His daughters had a tendency to ask question after question without stopping, until everything was clear. “I’ll explain

it all to you,” he went on, “and then it’s up to you. You’ll have to be the ones to make the decision.”

Sitting on the couch across from her parents, Chaya squirmed impatiently. Her gaze shifted to the window above her mother’s head, and she looked longingly at the large green garden that surrounded the Tessler house.

Although the house, with its seven bedrooms, three bathrooms, and large basement area, was adequate for the nine Tessler children and their parents, Chaya often felt stifled indoors. When she started getting that familiar feeling, Chaya would recruit two or three of her brothers, and they would go outside to play ball. She longed to be out there now, but even without this “triplet meeting,” she had no time to spare. It was June, and she and her sisters were busy studying for finals.

Esty, sitting on Chaya’s right, was also thinking about books and tests, but without her sister’s feelings of impatience and distaste. As her father spoke, mathematical equations and grammatical rules swirled around in her brain. *So if  $x$  equals 25,  $y$  must be...* With effort, she shook her head and tried to focus on what her father was saying. If her parents had called for a meeting during finals time, it must be serious.

Esty lifted her left hand and chewed on the nail of her index finger. Biting her nails was a bad habit she always fell back to when she was nervous. Suddenly,

she recalled the various phone calls her parents had been making during the past month. Sometimes, late at night as she was about to drift off to sleep, she would hear her parents whispering quietly in the kitchen. And once, she'd picked up the ringing phone early in the morning, and her mother had immediately taken the receiver from her before she'd had a chance to ask who it was.

Esty wondered if this meeting was connected to the whispering and the phone calls. Yes, she was definitely curious about what her parents had to say. She just wished they had called the meeting after the math final, which was two days away.

Shayna, sitting between her two sisters, glanced at them and then back at her parents, who were looking unusually serious. *I hope it's nothing bad*, she thought, twirling a strand of blond hair around her finger.

She didn't have to wait long to find out. His hands clasped in front of him, Rabbi Tessler informed his daughters, "Your friend Mindy Metzker and her family are moving to Israel at the end of the summer."

The triplets gasped. In the city of Little Rock, Arkansas, where they lived, there were only two *frum* families: the Metzkers and the Tesslers. The two families worked side by side to bring Jews back to Yiddishkeit. Over the years, they had helped many unaffiliated Jews, but those individuals always

moved away from Little Rock. And now the Metzkers were leaving! It was preposterous, impossible.

“And since the other two girls in your class are leaving to go to public school next year...”

“Jenny and Sara are leaving?” Shayna asked in surprise. Of the triplets, she was the friendliest with those two girls. She knew that, both being from non-religious homes, they sometimes felt like a minority among their religious classmates. Shayna had taken it upon herself to make them feel that they belonged, and she had developed a warm friendship with them.

Rabbi Tessler held up a hand. “Let me finish. With three girls leaving, that means there will be only the three of you in next year’s seventh-grade class.”

A small city with a small Jewish population makes for a small school, and Bais Chana was no different. Since it was the only Jewish school in the city, many Jewish parents sent their children there to learn the basics, but as their children grew, the parents pulled them out of Bais Chana and sent them to public school, where they could receive a “well-rounded” education.

The triplets’ class was the oldest in the school, and in the past two years, it had decreased from fifteen to six students. Rabbi and Mrs. Tessler were happy that it had held together this long, but now a different solution was needed.

“A class of only triplets is not an option. Your mother and I have spent a lot of time trying to work

out a solution. We've come to the conclusion we've always known would become inevitable as some point." As a rabbi and principal, Rabbi Tessler had a sophisticated way of speaking, and he didn't hesitate to use his high vocabulary on his kids. This had its advantages, and even two-year-old Shmuly had picked up some fancy words. Whenever he didn't want to eat something his mother put on his plate, he would look at her with a smile and say, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline."

"We've decided that the best solution would be to send you away for school."

Rabbi and Mrs. Tessler had hoped to soften the blow by slowly leading up to it, but there was no sugarcoating this kind of news. The triplets stared at their parents and then at each other. For once, there were no questions, just a shocked silence.

Finally, in a very shrill voice, Chaya spoke. "Why can't we be just three girls in the class?"

Mrs. Tessler looked at her husband and then across at the girls. Tears were beginning to flow down Shayna's cheeks, and Esty's eyes too were suspiciously red.

"We understand that this is hard for you. It's hard for us, too." She fingered a tissue and wiped the corners of her eyes. "But Tatty and I feel that in the long run this will be to your benefit. We could keep you here. We would love that."

She paused and smiled gently at her daughters. "But we know that if you go away, not only will you

learn in a more educational environment, but you'll get to meet *frum* girls, which you have very little opportunity to do here in Little Rock." She fell silent, allowing her daughters to digest her words.

Shayna's face was very white. She silently accepted the tissue her mother handed her and wiped her eyes. She was a real homebody. During the past summer, when her two sisters had gone off to camp, she had opted to spend summer vacation at home. An entire school year away from home? It was unthinkable.

Chaya's knuckles were clenched tightly as she controlled herself from screaming out loud. There were no tears in those green eyes; they flashed in anger. Her parents didn't want her to stay home next year? Fine! She could manage very well on her own. She'd show them!

Esty spoke next. In a small voice, she asked her parents, "Which school are we going to go to?"

"That's the choice I was talking about. We're leaving the decision in your hands," Rabbi Tessler said firmly. "We know it's hard to leave home, so we want you to feel comfortable wherever you go. We've looked into three schools, all of which are viable options. We'll explain to you the pros and cons of each one, but it's up to you to choose the school you wish to attend." He turned to his wife. "Rachel? Why don't you tell the girls about the schools we want them to consider."