

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi Ephraim Shapiro

Fifty Thousand Dollars for Shas

Allow me to share with you a story that you might already be familiar with. Why then would I mention it at all? Because there is a second part that is far less known, and it brings to light some remarkable lessons.

One young man was extraordinary beyond words. In every conceivable area, he excelled, whether it be his extensive and in-depth Torah erudition, his sterling character or his overall successful approach to life. He had gone for an entrance exam to Rav Yochanan Wosner in Montreal, Canada, and was tested on two full sections of the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim and Yoreh Deah). Rav Wosner attested that he had never seen such an accomplished young man in so many areas.

Sometime later, Rav Wosner met the father of the young man and asked if his son had always been that way, marked by both superb brilliance and character. The father was clear in his response. “He wasn’t. But let me tell you what happened years ago...

“When I myself was a bachur in yeshiva, I was once asked to do hag’baah (lift the Torah) on a regular weekday after the reading of the Torah had concluded. To the shock of everyone present, I did a reverse hag’baah whereby I turned the Torah around so that the parchment faced outward, away from me—as is done only on Simchas Torah—

instead of it facing inward, toward me. As soon as I did this, everyone began to murmur and talk about what they had just witnessed. Shortly afterward, I was called in to speak to the Rosh Yeshiva. It was there that he asked me directly why I did what I did. I explained as follows.

“The boy who had gotten an aliyah just before me had a terrible stutter. It was painful and terrible to listen to, and without question, it left him feeling utterly ashamed and embarrassed. The final beracha, said after the reading had concluded, felt as if it took forever.

“As soon as he finished the concluding beracha, I could tell that the people around were whispering about him. He had certainly humiliated himself and everyone felt bad for him. And then I came up to do hag’baah. During those few seconds before I raised the Torah, I started thinking what I could do to divert and distract the attention from all the bachurim to focus solely on me instead of the boy who had just terribly stuttered. And so, I decided to do something strange—namely, a reverse hag’baah. It actually worked in getting everyone around to start talking about me and forget about the other boy.

“It was on that day,” concluded the father to Rav Wosner, “that all of the windows in Heaven opened and blessings came pouring forth to my son. It must have been because I thought about the other boy that

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Hashem showered such blessing upon my family.”

This is the part that you might be familiar with.

But recently, I received a call from Rav Shmuel Dovid Hakohen Friedman who shared with me that he himself had spoken to Rav Vosner. Rav Vosner told him that the father, at that very same time they stood together at the wedding, in fact told him a second story. “It’s possible that the second story is even more remarkable than the first,” Rav Friedman told me on our call. At the mention of this, I grew that much more than interested in knowing what exactly the father had told Rav Vosner.

“My son,” began the father, “is now a yungerman living in a particular city near the Tristate area and learning in a Chassidische Kollel. A few years ago, as can happen in the middle of davening or learning, a meshulach from Israel collecting funds for the wedding expenses of two of his children approached the yungerman. Collectively, he needed to raise fifty thousand dollars for the two weddings and related expenses. The yungerman, in speaking with the meshulach and getting to know him, recognized that he was a fine gentleman, but at the same time, knew that he’d have a hard time collecting the entire sum he needed.

Realizing this, my son thought of a friend he had gone to yeshiva with who had become quite successful. And so, he picked himself up, trav-

eled hours away to the city his friend lived and asked if he would be able to cover the expenses of the two weddings so that this father could adequately provide for his family and quickly return to Israel.

My son’s friend was quite moved that my son would expend so much care and effort on behalf of another stranger. “Normally I give one or two hundred dollars to those who come collecting, and for you who really went out of your way, I certainly want to give more. But the full fifty thousand, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ll be able to give it all.” On the spot, my son turned to his friend and said, “I’ll make a deal with you. If you write out a check for the full fifty thousand, in one year from now, I will have learned Shas Bavli.” As my son knew, to accomplish this requires learning roughly seven and a half blatt (folios) every day. “And that Shas,” my son told his friend, “will have been learned for you, and all the merits will accrue directly to you and your family. It will be your Siyum HaShas and your Torah learning. I’ll give you those zechusim (merits) if you write out the check for fifty thousand.” Right there and then, the friend wrote out a contract, noting that he would pay fifty thousand dollars to the meshulach so he can return home, and that my son has committed to learn all of Shas Bavli in one year, with the merits accruing to the friend.

One year later, my son made the

Siyum HaShas and I was invited. When I arrived, I noticed my son’s friend sitting at the head table and inquired why. That is when he disclosed to me what had taken place.”

Let’s think about this for a moment. This man’s commitment wasn’t something taken upon himself for a day or a week. It was a serious commitment that would last hours a day, every single day, for an entire year. To learn seven and a half blatt every day with diligence and understanding is no simple decision or feat. And why did he do it? It wasn’t for his mother or first cousin. He did it for a man from Israel he had never met until just the day before.

Maybe he actually viewed the meshulach from Israel as his brother. May he really believed that this stranger from Israel was not a stranger at all. And with this attitude, he was willing to undergo a colossal and stratospheric commitment to learn all of Shas in one year.

And that is the second part of the story.

This is what it means to not live for yourself. Because truthfully, when you view the entirety of the Jewish people as your brother for whom you are responsible, you’ll do anything.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Turning from the Trends

Until recently, psychology proposed that willpower was like a battery. You start the day with a full charge, but each time you have to control your thoughts,

your feelings, or your behavior, you zap the battery’s energy and without the chance to rest and recharge, your resources run lower and lower and eventually you can’t resist any longer. Laboratory tests appeared to prove

this.

But in 2010, psychologist Veronika Job published a study that questioned the foundations of this theory with some intriguing evidence that willpower deple-

tion depended on people's underlying beliefs. She found that people who believe that willpower is weakened by constantly being challenged indeed had less and less stamina to continue the challenge. But people who believed that applying self-control strengthens you, did not need a breather to recover and replenish. It turned out that your mindset about willpower is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you believe that willpower is easily depleted, then your ability to resist temptation quickly dissolves. But if you believe that mental stamina refuels itself, then your willpower doesn't run down like a battery.

Judaism is the ultimate exercise in deferred gratification. We are asked to reject much of the immediate gratification of this world for the permanent gratification of the World to Come. But your ability to defer that gratification depends to a large extent on how much you believe that deferred gratification exists. People tend to think that belief in G-d is an on/off switch. You either believe or you don't believe. In truth, each one of us is on an infinite and constantly sliding scale, whose extremities are total faith at one end of the scale and total atheism at the other. "There are no atheists in a foxhole," runs the well-known aphorism. But on the other hand, as R' Elazar tells us in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), "Know what to answer an atheist." And that atheist includes the atheist

that lurks inside all of us as well.

Truth be told, belief is a middah, a character trait, and it can be either strengthened or weakened. And the key to strengthening faith is the belief that I can strengthen my belief without limit.

But not only has our world lent itself toward driving us to instant gratification; it has sought to alter the quality of life experience itself.

Buying English language books in Israel was always somewhat limited, even before the pandemic. To get a real paper book shipped out from the states or from the UK could take a month. Kindle promised to change all that. Amazon Kindle is an e-reader, a device that enables you to browse, buy, download and read electronic books. I bought a Kindle over two years ago. I must have read over 40 books on it, and for sure it's very convenient and certainly instant. But I realized after a while that there was something lacking in my reading experience. Having a real book, picking it up, seeing it age, and spilling coffee on its pages creates a relationship not just with the book, but the reading much of the book itself.

The way we interface with objects in our lives has an impact on our intellectual experience of them. The form influences the content. When I cast my eyes over my bookshelves, I sense a visceral relationship with the physical books that are there, and I

feel in some way more connected to the content of their pages because of that. What remains from the Kindle experience of reading is somehow more abstract, more distant, and colder. It's not just that there's a lack of a good cover, and the graphics are low resolution and in black and white. I don't have the same connection to the material of the book because I lack the physical experience of touching the book, opening it, cracking its cover, experiencing the exquisite aroma of fresh paper in glue, and the feeling of friendship whenever I see its spine on my shelf.

The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 16) asks a famous question about why we need so many mitzvahs to remember the Exodus or why one entire volume of Shulchan Aruch (The Code of Jewish Law) that deals with our daily lives is given over to the minutia of every aspect of the observance of Pesach. Surely to remember our leaving Egypt, all we would need to do is to eat some matzah every year. And then he outlines a key principle of human psychology: Feelings are created by actions. Our actions influence the way we feel about something. A mitzvah is a physical embodiment of a spiritual reality, and the experience of that spiritual reality can only be kindled by physical experience.

time and time again. Shared with our children, m'dor l'dor, from generation to generation.

This week's parsha, Bo, tells us "I'ma'an t'sapair b'oznei vincha u'ven bincha, a story you should relate to your sons and grandsons...."

Rebbetzin Chaya Sora Gertzulin

Write Your Story

Bnei Yisroel's dream of leaving Mitzrayim is finally becoming a reality. With HaShem's yad chazaka, His strong

hand, they are able to break free from the shackles of slavery and become a nation. Their story is one made of miracles. A story retold

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your children and grandchildren.” (Shemos 10:2) It is the story of HaShem’s supreme power, bringing upon the downfall of the mighty Egyptian empire. The story of our journey from slavery to freedom, from oppression to becoming the chosen people.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l teaches that the word sippur, a story, is related to the word sofer, a scribe. We are entrusted with the monumental task to be sofrim, to write our personal sippur, the story of our lives. It’s incumbent upon us to live a life of value, purpose and worth. A life of morals and ethics, Torah and mitzvos. A life story that we can be proud to leave as a legacy to our descendants.

We are living in historic times. So many special stories. So many heroic scribes, creating memories that will leave their mark on future generations.

I think of all the reservists who were out of the country on that fateful day, be it in Europe, the US or the Far East. Upon hearing about the war, they dropped everything and headed to the airports, trying to get on the first flight back home. I am reminded of Ezra Yachin, who at ninety-five is the oldest reservist in the IDF. He insisted on being with his fellow soldiers, to share encouraging words, to boost their spirits as they headed into the unknown.

I think of the mothers who sent their sons off to war. They said their good-byes with tears in their eyes, prayers on their lips, and pride in their hearts. So many soldiers – all of them, someone’s son, daughter, husband, father. I think of Iris Haim, whose hostage son, Yotam, was mistakenly killed by Israeli soldiers in Gaza. She reached out to the soldiers

with words of forgiveness. She invited them to come and visit her family.

I think of the volunteers of Hatzalah and Zaka, who put their heart and soul into their work. Dedicated volunteers who witnessed atrocities that no one should ever have to see. Many chapters will be written about the war effort. The restaurants that went kosher, so that they could prepare meals for the soldiers. The many chareidim whose homemade meals and incredible volunteerism brought together the secular and the religious. The people from all walks of life, who came to Israel to farm the land.

The sippur continues. The stories of countless people making a commitment to HaShem, to Torah and mitzvos. All the soldiers who started wearing tzitzis and putting on Tefillin, and all those who were happy to donate the funds to supply them with this spiritual armor. It is the story of Natalie Assour, who, upon hearing the terrorists’ gunshots, pleaded with HaShem – if You save me and my children, I will take upon myself to keep Shabbos. HaShem responded to her sincere cry – the terrorists left her home, she and her family were saved. She kept her part of the deal, starting to observe Shabbos from that day on.

Roi Assaraf was at the Rave with his wife. They made a quick exit in their car, only find themselves surrounded by terrorists. With his foot on the gas and his head down, he called out Shema Yisroel. They merited a miracle from HaShem, a miracle that saved them and brought them and their family to a Torah life.

I saw a clip of a soldier who was near Kibbutz Be’eri when the terrorists invaded. He went into hiding, and the only ammunition he had

with him were six words – Shema Yisroel, HaShem Elokeinu, HaShem Echad. He heard gunshots and RPGs, and just repeated the words of Shema over and over again. Eventually, all was quiet, and he emerged from his hiding place with the realization that there is a HaShem in the world.

Sadly, there are also stories of heartbreak. Of the horrific massacre that took 1,400 innocent lives in one day. 126,000 people displaced, 136 hostages still in captivity – amongst them 40 children.

We just passed day 100 of this terrible war. Parents of hostages converged on the Gaza border. They had loudspeakers, and called out their children’s names. With tears rolling down their cheeks, they all had the same message. It’s Ima, it’s Abba. We love you. We are here for you. We are doing everything to bring you home. Messages of love and faith. Never giving up. Hoping their children would hear them and be strengthened.

The book, the sippur, is still being written. We must ask ourselves, what will my sippur be. What am I doing for Am Yisroel... for Eretz Yisroel. Are we there for our people. Are we sending support. Are we davening with extra kavanna, concentration. Are we living life with less treats, less perks. Are we really feeling the pain of our brothers and sisters.

Bo. Come. HaShem tells Moshe to speak to Pharaoh, but instead of saying lech, go, HaShem says bo, come. HaShem is telling Moshe that he is never alone, he has nothing to be afraid of. Bo. Come. I am with you. I have your back. I am protecting you.

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Bring Them Home!

Names of Hostages in Gaza

(Updated: 9 Shevat)

צחי בן דבורה (עידן)	כרמל בת כנרת (גת)	אריאל בן סילביה מוניקה (קוניו)	אבינתן בן דיצה תרצה (אור)
קית' שמואל בן גלדיס (סיגל)	לואיס נורבטו בן נורה (הר)	אריאל בן שירי (ביבס)	אביתר בן גליה (דוד)
קרין בת אירינה (ארייב)	ליאור בן מיכל (רודאפי)	בר אברהם בן ג'וליה (קופרשטיין)	אברהם גלעד בן ליאת (מונדר)
רום בן תמר (ברסלבסקי)	לירי בת שירה (אלבג)	גד משה בן שרה (מוזס)	אגם בת מירב (ברגר)
רומי בת מירב (גונן)	מישל בן סולמירה (ניסנבאום)	גיא בן מירב (גלבוע דלאל)	אוהד בן אסתר (בן) עמי)
רון בן חנה (בנימין)	מקסים בן טלה (הרקין)	גלי בן תמר (ברמן)	אוהד בן אסתר (יהלומי)
רן בן טלי (גואילי) שגב בן גלית (כלפון)	מתן בן ענת (אנגרסט)	דוד בן סילביה מוניקה (קוניו)	אור בן טלי (לוי) אורי בן עינב (דנינו)
שגיא בן נעמית (חן דקל)	מתן בן ירדנה (צנגאוקר)	דורון בת סימונה (שטיינברכר)	אוריאל בן נעמי (ברוך)
שירי בת מרגיט (ביבס)	נדב בן חנה (פופלוול)	דניאל שמעון בן שרון (פרץ)	איתי בן חגית (חן) איתן בן רות אדית (הורן)
שלומי בן רוזיטה (זיו)	נמרוד בן ויקי (כהן)	דניאלה בת אורלי (גלבוע)	איתן אברהם בן אפרת (מור)
שלמה בן מרסיל (מנצור)	נעמה בת איילת (לוי)	דרור בן דורית (אור)	אלון בן עידית (אהל)
תמיר בן חירות (נמרודי)	עדן בת שירית (ירושלמי)	הירש בן רחל (גולדברג פולין)	אליה בן סיגי (כהן) אליהו בן חנה (שרעבי)
	עודד בן בלהה (ליפשיץ)	זיו בן תמר (ברמן) חיים בן נחמה (פרי)	אליקים שלמה בן אבישג (ליבמן)
	עומר בן ניבה (ונקרט)	חן חנן בן ורד (יבלונקה)	אלכס בן אוקסנה (לובנוב)
	עומר בן שלי (שם) טוב)	טל בן ניצה (שוהם) קורנגולד)	אלכסנדר סשה בן ילנה (טרופנוב)
	עומר מקסים בן אורנה אסתר (נאוטרה)	יאיר בן רות אדית (הורן)	אלכסנדר בן נינה (דנציג)
	עידו בן כוכבה (קלדרון)	יאיר בן פלור (יעקב)	אלמוג בן אורית (מאיר ג'אן)
	עידן בן יעל (אלכסנדר)	יגב בן אסתר (בוכשטב)	אלמוג בן נירה (סרוסי)
	עידן בן דלית (שתיוי)	יוסף חיים בן מרים (אוחנה)	אלעד בן חנה (קציר)
	עמירם בן שרה (קופר)	יורם בן בלה (מצגר)	אלקנה בן רוחמה (בוחבוט)
	עמית אסתר חיה בת אילנה אלין (בוסקילה)	יצחק בן אנטה (אלגרט)	אמילי תהילה בת אמנדה פרנסיס (דמארי)
	עמרי בן אסתר ורה (מירן)	יצחק בן גילה (גלרנטר)	אנדריי בן יבגניה (קוזלוב)
	פרננדו סימון בן טניה (מרמן)	ירדן בן פנינה (ביבס)	ארבל בת יעל (יהוד)