**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas shoftim 5781**

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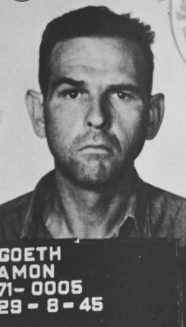
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**A Holocaust Survivor’s Moment of Consolation**

**By Daniel Keren**



**Amon Goeth, yemach shemo**

When Iyov (Job) argues with his friends that he had done nothing to deserve the harsh punishment G-d had inflicted upon him, his friend Elihu told Iyuv that he won’t ever understand the reason for his terrible suffering, but if you grope, you’ll be able to find some type of meaning.

Rabbi Yisroel Reisman spoke of an elderly Holocaust survivor - that he met and befriended in the locker room at the Sephardic Community Center where he regularly swam in the Center’s pool. The man told of his being a Holocaust survivor and how he never could come to terms with having lost most of his family and the terrible pain he endured and witnessed in the the Nazi labor and concentration camps.

And then one of those moments that Elihu told Iyuv occurred to the survivor. His granddaughter asked him to help her write a report on his horrific Holocaust experiences for a class project. He told her of a particularly painful moment that occurred when he was an inmate in the Krakow-Plaszow labor camp in Poland. The Nazi commander of the concentration camp – Amon Goeth, yemach shemo – was a particular brutal and cruel beast who enjoyed torturing the Jewish inmates.



**Amon Goeth, yemach shemo**

**at Plaszow (Yad Vashem)**

One time a teenage Jewish inmate insulted a German guard him and Goeth’s immediate impulse was to have that boy hung in front of all the other inmates as a warning to not act so disrespectfully to the German camp staff. However, the rope broke and the boy fell to the ground still alive. Goeth quickly ordered the boy to be hung again and again the rope broke. The Jewish teenager begged for his life claiming he would be worth more alive as a good worker in the concentration camp. The heartless commandant didn’t listen to the boy’s desperate appeal and had the hapless Jewish boy hung a third time and this time the new rope unfortunately did not break and the victim died.

A few weeks later the survivor related to Rabbi Reisman that he was particularly in upbeat mood. It appears that his granddaughter did some additional research and she told her grandfather an amazing discovery. After the War, Goeth was captured by the Poles and put on trial for his abuses of inmates (apparently there was also some non-Jewish Polish inmates) in the concentration camp. After testimony from surviving witnesses, he was sentenced to be executed by hanging.

**His Rope Also Broke**

Surprisingly, the rope broke and Goeth fell down to the ground. He was immediately brought up again to be executed and again the rope broke. This time his executioners simply took a gun and shot him in the head to death. The Holocaust survivor found that bit of information from his granddaughter a source of great comfort. As Rabbi Reisman said, sometimes Hashem lets you see just one thing and that allows you an incredible nechama (comfort).

*Reprinted from the June 24, 2021 edition of the Flatbush Jewish Journal.*

**The Expert Doctor or Hashem?**



Rabbi Zev Smith recounted that he once attended the *brit milah* of a boy who was the first child of a couple who had been married for 20 years. The father stood up to speak, and emotionally described the trials and tribulations that he and his wife had gone through.

“I’m sure you can imagine,” he told his guests, “all the blessings we received from rabbis, and all the heartfelt prayers we recited.” He then proceeded to tell how he heard about a great *tzaddik* who was visiting the United States. He made it a point to go see him to ask for a *beracha*. When he asked the rabbi for his blessing, the rabbi asked if he had been praying.

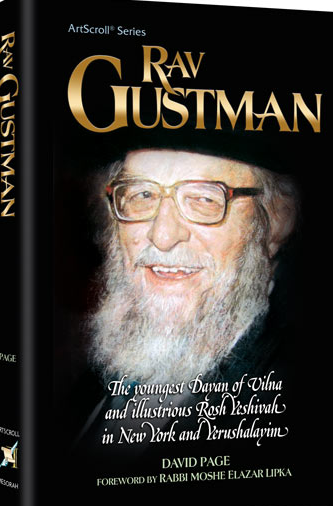
The man was insulted by the question. “*What does The Rabbi think I'm doing for the last 20 years?*” he wondered. However, he swallowed his feelings and respectfully told the rabbi, “Yes, of course I have been praying.”

“You don’t understand,” the rabbi replied. “Did you ever pray with the firm belief that Hashem is the Only One Who can help you? Did you ever put out of your mind everything the doctors have been saying, to focus on the fact that this is all the Will of Hashem? Or was Hashem just a side point along with the doctors the whole time?”

The man immediately acknowledged that the rabbi was right. He never really prayed with that kind of *emunah*. “This child,” the man said at his son’s *milah*, “is testimony to the fact that when you truly believe that Hashem is the source of your salvation, He comes through for you.”

*Reprinted from the Parshat Balak 5781 email of Jack E. Rahmey based on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Amram Sananes.*

**Hakoras Hatov for the Plants**



Rav Yisroel Zev Gustman, zt”l, was the Rosh Yeshivah of a Yeshivah called Netzach Yisroel in Yerushalayim.

The boys in his Yeshivah observed that Rav Gustman used to personally water all the plants and trees in front of the Yeshivah.

They asked him why he did this, and their Rebbe gave them the following explanation. When Rav Gustman was living in Europe before WWII, he lived

in Vilna and spent time with Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, zt”l.

Once, Rav Gustman had been walking in the forest with Rav Chaim Ozer. They were speaking in learning, and every five minutes, Rav Chaim Ozer would point to a plant and say, “That plant over there is poisonous, and that other plant is safe to eat.”

At the time, Rav Gustman thought Rav Chaim Ozer’s behavior was slightly bizarre, but he paid attention to what his Rebbe was teaching him.

When the Nazis pillaged Vilna, Rav Gustman was forced to escape to the forest, and he was on the run for two years. While he was in the forest, he was able to survive using the knowledge about plants that Rav Chaim Ozer had taught him.

Rav Gustman explained, “I have a debt of gratitude to pay to the plants and bushes. I must show Hakaras Ha’tov, and that is why I water them myself. They saved me in Europe!”

*Reprinted from Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg’s Parshat Balak email of Torah U’Tefilah*

**Saadiah Gaon and**

**The Simple Innkeeper**



**Tel Aviv street sign**

Rav Saadiah Gaon (882-942 of the Common Era) zt”l, once put himself into exile, and he disguised himself in simple clothes and wandered from town to town. One night he slept in a small inn that was run by an old Jew. The innkeeper was a very kind and simple man who spoke briefly with Rav Saadiah before going to sleep.

The next day, two of Rav Saadiah Gaon’s students came to the inn, searching for their Rebbe. They asked the innkeeper, but he wasn’t aware that Rav Saadia was staying with him, but when the young men described what their Rebbe looked like, the innkeeper realized that Rav Saadiah was actually there.

The innkeeper was shocked and upset, and he approached Rav Saadiah and said, “Rebbe! Please forgive me! I didn’t know that it was you! If I had known, I would have honored you more appropriately, as is befitting for you!”

Rav Saadiah was surprised. He said, “My dear friend, you treated me very well! You were very kind and hospitable. Why are you so sorry? You have nothing to apologize for!”

The man replied, “No, Rebbi! If I would have known who you are, I would have served you completely differently!”

Suddenly, Rav Saadiah realized that this man was teaching him a very important lesson in the service of Hashem. He later said, “Since that encounter, every evening when I say Shema before going to sleeping, I go over in my mind how I served Hashem that day. Then I think of that old innkeeper, and I say to myself, “If I had known about Hashem in the beginning of the day what I know now, I would have served Him completely differently!”

*Reprinted from Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg’s Parshat Balak email of Torah U’Tefilah*

**Extra Time to Learn Torah**



 Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, ZT”L, was known for his assiduous Torah study, and he never wasted a moment. Once, before traveling to raise funds for his Yeshiva, he asked his brother-in-law, Rav Moshe Shain, ZT”L, to study an additional half-hour each day that he would be going away, to make up for Rav Scheinberg’s lost study time. Rav Shain agreed.

Several years later, Rav Shain passed away. During the Shiva, Mrs. Shain told Rav Scheinberg, “you know you owe my husband those extra hours of study. Could you please add an additional half-hour to your Torah study time this week as a merit for my husband?”

          Rav Scheinberg was clearly uncomfortable. “I never borrowed the time from your husband. I asked him to use his extra time. What can I do if I have no extra time?” Then, noticing Mrs. Shain’s tears, he added, “I will make an effort to find an additional five minutes each day this week to learn in your husband’s merit. I want you to know, though, that I would not sell these thirty-five minutes to anyone for a million dollars.”

*Reprinted from the Mendel Berlin’s Parshas Balak 5781 email of Torah Sweets Weekly.*

**The Emperor and**

**The Holy Maharal**



Emperor Rudolf II of Austria

In 1583, Emperor Rudolf II of Austria moved his imperial court to Prague and proceeded to transform the city into one filled with astronomers, alchemists, artists, craftsmen, and humanists. He was fascinated with any sort of new knowledge, whether it was in science or the occult. He was also prone to mood swings and wild dreams, and he became unpredictable in his later years. Emperor Rudolf’s relationship with the Jewish community was positive on the whole - he changed laws to allow Jews fair trials and removed restrictions on trade. But he was most fascinated by the chief rabbi of Prague, the Maharal, R’ Yehudah Loewy zt”l, who was known to be well versed in Kabbalistic knowledge and mystical texts.

In sefer Tzemach Dovid, a work on history by Rav Dovid Ganz zt”l, a talmid of the Maharal, we read the following: “The famous Emperor Rudolf, in his great kindness, invited Hagaon Harav Liva bar Bezalel and he welcomed him beautifully, and spoke to him face to face, as one would talk to his friend. The content and account of what was discussed at the visit are sealed and hidden. This took place in Prague, Sunday, the third of Adar 5352 (1592).”

**The Following Story is One Version of that Meeting**

There are numerous speculations about that meeting and the following story is believed by some and discounted by others. It goes as follows: Although the Emperor had never actually met the Maharal, both Jews and non-Jews knew that he was a holy man and they respected him greatly. The Emperor was predisposed to deal kindly with the Jews. However, this upset the courtiers of the Emperor who planned to drive the Rabbi out of Prague and send him and his flock into exile. Knowing that the Emperor would not immediately agree to anything of the sort, they enlisted the help of the Empress, who promised to induce the Emperor to carry out the plan. That evening, the Empress handed papers containing the harsh decree to her husband and demanded that he sign them at once. He told her he would “sleep on it,” and deal with the papers in the morning.

That night, the Emperor had a strange dream. He was waging war, but was captured and placed in prison. For many years the Emperor remained in prison, living on bread and water, no one believing who he was or taking any interest in him.

One day an old Jew passed the prison. The Emperor called out to him. The old man stopped and looked at the prisoner behind the bars. “I am the Emperor,” the prisoner exclaimed. “Don’t you recognize me?"

“You have changed, Sire,” the old man replied.

“I swear to you that I am Emperor Rudolph. Please get me out of here,” the prisoner begged desperately.

**Knocks on the Prison Wall with His Cane**

The old man knocked at the prison wall with his cane, and immediately there appeared a passage in the wall. The Emperor walked out and went with the old man to his home.

“You cannot return to the palace in this state,” the old man told him, “for no one will recognize you. I will send for a barber and a tailor to groom you and to prepare royal robes for you. In the meantime, lie down and rest.”

With tremendous gratitude, the Emperor asked, “How can I ever thank you?"

The Emperor awoke and his thoughts turned to his strange dream. “Only the great Rabbi Loewy, whom I’ve heard so much about, could explain the meaning of my dream,” the Emperor thought. “Request Chief Rabbi Loewy for an audience immediately!” the Emperor called to his Royal Chamberlain. This is the backdrop to that fateful meeting in February.

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**Ladislav Šaloun's statue of the Maharal at the**

**New City Hall of Prague in the Czech Republic.**

As soon as the Maharal entered the royal chamber, the Emperor recognized him as the old man he had seen in his dream. He was shocked. “Please tell me about my dream,” the Emperor said, challenging the Maharal.

Instead, the Maharal smiled and replied, “What do you have under your pillow?” The Emperor now remembered that the Empress had placed a decree against the Jewish community under his pillow, to be ready for his signature first thing in the morning.

Awed by the presence and insight of the Maharal, Emperor Rudolph announced, “I promise you no harm will befall the Jews of Prague.” He sent for the papers and immediately tore them, shredding the cruel decree.

“You spared my brethren much suffering,” the Maharal said cryptically, “but you have spared yourself even greater pain.”

*Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5781 email of Rabbi Dovid Hoffman’s Torah Tavlin.*

**‘For Forgiveness is with You…’**

**By A.B.S.**

Mazel Tov, we gave birth to our sixth son and our joy was great. Right before we were to be discharged from the hospital, the baby began to spasm. After a thorough examination, it was revealed that the baby had internal convulsions even though there were no external signs.

The doctors began to treat with medication that really did not work. I saw that the doctors were greatly embarrassed, and they did not know how to help the baby.

**Someone Had a Grudge Against Me**

I went to Rabbanim for berachos until I came to one Tzaddik who told me that all the problems were because someone had a grudge against me. I tried to think who I might have harmed as this is not my nature to do something like that. I began to call friends past and present, but no one remembered my doing anything to them. I was completely broken.

On the one hand I was exhausted from running to the hospital and taking care of the rest of the family. On the other hand, I was trying to find the person I had harmed. I went to another Tzaddik to ask for a yeshua. As I approached the Tzaddik’s home, someone signaled me to lower my window. I opened the window and he asked me how to get to the Tzaddik’s house.

I starting explaining, but he said, “Is this you?! I do not want anything from you!!!” and he left angry. I recognized him. He used to learn with me many years ago, but I did not remember what I had done to him. I parked the car on the side of the road, ran after him to appease him, but he ran and would not hear a word. I saw there was no reason to chase him since he also wanted to see the Tzaddik.

**My Wife Remained in the Car**

I decided to wait for him in the waiting room to try to appease him. My wife was in the car and saw all that happened and prayed that I would be able to appease him. In the courtyard, I went to him as he sat calmly. I approached him with tears and beseeching, but he started shouting for me to leave him alone. Despite his screams, I tearfully begged him to have mercy on me and my family, but it was no use.

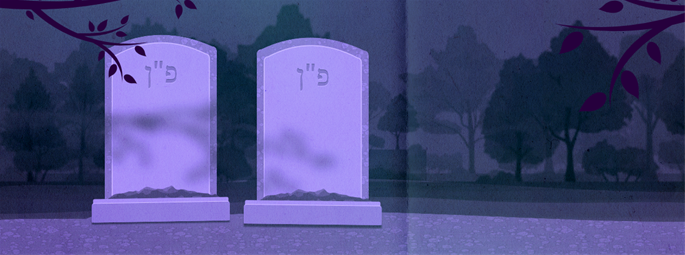
Ultimately, my wife approached crying, and begging him for her sake and the sake of the baby, that it was definitely his grudge that was causing this distress, and it has been many years and what can he gain, when he can save a Jewish baby? He relented and agreed to forgive. We took his phone number, and it was my turn to go into the Tzaddik and I brought the petek. He smiled and said, “I see everything has been settled.”

Two days later, the man called me to apologize for embarrassing me, and of course we forgave him, and we were glad we found him. On Sunday, the baby was scheduled for surgery. But instead the doctors decided to try to stop all medication. Within two weeks all seizures stopped, and the situation changed. With thanks and prayers for a refuah shleimah and a geulah shleimah. .ש.ב.א

*Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5781 email of Tiv Hakehila.*

**Promises Fulfilled: Buried Near the Shaagas Aryeh**

**By**[**Hillel Baron**](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/24128/jewish/Baron-Hillel.htm)



The assistant of the famed Torah scholar, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Ginzburg, better known as the Shaagas Aryeh[1](javascript:doFootnote('1a5168611');) (1695-1785), was about to pass away. He turned to his master and said, “I served you loyally without ever asking for any reward. But now I would like to request that you look after my young son. Please ensure that he receives a proper education and grows up to be a [Torah](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2126/jewish/What-Is-the-Torah.htm) scholar.” The rabbi gave his word.

The man passed away, and the [Shaagas Aryeh](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112502/jewish/Shaagas-Aryeh.htm) took his promise very seriously. He took the boy into his home and learned with him every day. But a short while later, the boy simply vanished.

They looked for him high and low, but the young orphan could not be found. The rabbi began a regimen of prayer, and with tears in his eyes, he fell asleep. He dreamt that he saw the missing child, hidden in a nearby monastery. He understood that the boy had been kidnapped to be brought up outside of his religion by someone who thought they could get away with it because he was an orphan.

**He Dreamed that the Boy**

**Had Been Kidnapped**

The Shaagas Aryeh called for a tailor whose business brought him in contact with leaders of the church, and who was familiar with their centers. The Shaagas Aryeh described what he had seen in his dream, and the man said that he recognized the monastery the rabbi had envisioned, and knew where it was located.

The rabbi then turned to the tailor and asked, “Since you are familiar with the place, and you can go there without raising suspicion, can you please take upon himself the dangerous job of rescuing the boy, and returning him to his people?” The tailor agreed.

The Shaagas Aryeh asked how he could reward him for risking his life. The tailor replied that he did not need payment. The rabbi promised him a very long life, and that he would be buried immediately adjacent to him as a reward for this dangerous mission. The man accepted this proposal.

**The Boy was Taken to a Jewish Farmer**

He went ahead with the plan and managed to smuggle the boy out of the monastery, and bring him to a Jewish farmer who lived far from town. The Shaagas Aryeh would send the boy letters, keeping up with him, and helping him advance in his studies.

In time, the Shaagas Aryeh passed away and was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Metz, the community he had served faithfully for many years. Sometime later, a younger rabbi from a nearby town passed away, and was buried to one side of the Shaagas Aryeh’s resting place. Most did not know who he was, for he had changed his name, but he was actually the young orphan the Shaagas Aryeh had promised to take care of, then rescued, and brought up to be a true Torah scholar.

Years went by and the tailor, who had rescued the boy and had lived to a very old age, was on his deathbed. He called for the members of the burial society, and told them that he had the word of the Shaagas Aryeh that he would merit to be buried near him. He asked that they follow through. The men of the *chevra kadisha* were not inclined to believe him, and did not plan to honor his request.

On the day that the tailor’s soul left his body, torrential rains fell on the town and its surroundings, to the extent that visibility was significantly impaired. The burial society barely made it to the cemetery, and once there, they could not tell where in it they were. After hurried discussions, they decided that they would bury the man right where they stood.

When they arrived the next day, they found that they had buried him immediately near the Shaagas Aryeh, in the one available spot immediately adjacent to him. They understood that undoubtedly, this was the Shaagas Aryeh’s will, which had been fulfilled, with their cooperation or without.

*How far do we go to keep our word? Let us think: Has it occurred that Hashem has helped us keep a word of ours—when it was with positive intent?*

(Source: Tzaddikim Lemofet)

**FOOTNOTES**

[1.](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5168611/jewish/Promises-Fulfilled-Buried-Near-the-Shaagas-Aryeh.htm" \l "footnoteRef1a5168611) After his monumental work.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Pinchas 5781 email of Chabad.Org Magazine.*

**A Very Unlikely Messenger, in a Very Unlikely Place**



**A forest of birch trees in front of a home in Yobito, Japan**

On an island in northern Japan, at the foot of a low mountain chain, sits the tiny village of Yobito, Hokkaido. It’s home to several hundred people who eke out a living as fishermen and farmers, and is centered around a small Buddhist temple. It’s not the most common place for a Jew to find Hashem, but for Jason Katz\*, the words of the local Buddhist priest sent him on a mission to return to his roots   
 Jason went to Japan as an exchange student during high school and lived with a family in Yobito. His host father Mitsuo Kiyosu is a 49th generation Buddhist priest and the spiritual leader of the village. Jason developed a deep rapport with him and over the years has had many deep conversations with him. He has always been impressed by the priest's wisdom, his understanding of the purpose of life and his respect for all people.

**His Host Had Studied with Both a Christian Minister and a Rabbi**

Years earlier during his training to become a priest, Mitsuo Kiyosu had studied with a Christian minister and a Rabbi. He therefore had some understanding of each religion, but never pushed Jason towards any particular observance.   
 After college Jason lived in Japan for seven years and frequently visited the Kiyosu family. It was finally time to return to the United States but before leaving he paid one more visit to see them.

For Jason it was a time of great soul searching as he was trying to figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

While sitting together with his host father in the kitchen sipping green tea, Jason unburdened the challenges he was facing. The conversation turned from his job search to his larger search for direction in his life.

“My host father realized that I was searching not only for a job, but for spirituality,” Jason said. “He told me that when he dies 'there will be such and such spirit in the next world who will save me. I live this life with confidence because I know I will be saved when I die. On the other hand, a Christian person has Jesus. A Christian person has Jesus, who is a bridge to the Jewish G-d. That's how he will be saved when he dies.'”

**But You Have a Direct Connection to the Jewish G-d**

“'But you, you are a Jew. You have a direct connection to the Jewish G-d. What more are you searching for?'”

That comment opened Jason's eyes. He grew up hearing about G-d as the Judeo-Christian G-d, but he had only ever heard Christians speak about G-d. His host father said No! It is not Christianity that has a direct connection to G-d, and not even Buddhism. It is the Jewish people who have a direct conduit to G-d.   
   
 “He woke me up to the fact that I have a unique place in this world as a Jew and an intrinsic relationship to G-d,” Jason said. “G-d had been just a philosophical concept to me and the last thing I was searching for.”

While Jason didn't initially recognize it, something had changed inside him.   
 “At that time I still knew virtually nothing about G-d, nothing about Torah, but my heart was different, like a seed was planted inside,” Jason said.

**Returned to Florida and Started Attending**

**A Class Given by a Local Rabbi**

Jason returned to Florida and a few months later a family friend recommended a class given by a local Rabbi. He soon began going each week. The class focused on the weekly Torah portion in particular and the Jewish perspective on life in general. Jason was stunned by what he heard.   
 “It was so profound, so deep,” Jason said. “I had been searching my whole life around the world. I had been to missionary camps, spoke to Buddhist priests and Hare Krishnas. I had no idea that there were such depths in Judaism.”   
 Over the next two years the Rabbi spoke often about G-d and G-d's relationship to the Jewish people, and it gave new life to that seed inside Jason. The class helped Jason acknowledge his personal connection to G-d, which gave him the reason to begin keeping mitzvot and delving into Jewish learning.    
 Throughout Jason's journey the seed planted by the Buddhist priest was forever in him, pushing him forward to find the truth.   
 How does one take such a path? How does one find traditional Judaism through the direction of a Buddhist priest? Hashem put in every Jew an innate desire to look for spirituality and connect with larger truths. He hopes we'll use this desire to find our place in Judaism, but sadly, scores of unaffiliated Jews find spiritual fulfillment in other religions. Out of the masses that try other religions, a small number find their way back to Judaism through the experience. 

**This Trend is Actually Predicted in the Torah**

This trend is actually predicted in the Torah. Before his death Moses reminded the Jews of the blessings and curses that would befall them based on their future behavior:

“And it will be that when all these things come to pass – the blessing and the curse, which I have placed before you, then you will return to your heart in the midst of all the nations where G-d your G-d dispersed you.” (Devarim 30:1)   
 The Sforno biblical commentary, written 500 years ago, has an amazing explanation of these words. As explained by Rabbi Ezriel Tauber in the book Days Are Coming, the Sforno writes that Jews will join other nations and religions, and will eventually find their way from there to Judaism:

“You are going to probe and research the destructive nature [of the lifestyle of those nations amongst whom you live], and you will reflect and be struck by the sharp contrast between truth and falsehood. And with this you will perceive how far you are from G-d and you will be lifted up [out] of the knowledge and practices that are not according to His Torah.”

The Torah predicts that there will be a mass return of Jews to Judaism, and many of them will find their way back through other religions. That's precisely what happened with Jason. G-d knows what catalyst each of us needs to start us on our journey home, and He sends the right person in exactly the right time. The irony with Jason's story is the perfect person was a Buddist priest halfway around the world.

Excerpted from the book Homeward Bound: Inspiring Stories of Return (Feldheim Distribution) by Rabbi Michoel Gros, a collection of dramatic and uplifting stories of Jews returning to their roots and discovering hidden strengths (available in local bookstores or online at <http://www.feldheim.com/homeward-bound.html>)

*Reprinted from the website of Hidabroot.com*

**Irving Epstein, the Fresser …**



Irving Epstein is what they call a “fresser.” He just loves to overeat and his favorites are all of the high calorie Jewish foods: cholent and kishke and kugel and rugelach.

At his annual checkup, his doctor had some stern words for him. “You are not in good physical condition Mr. Epstein,” said Dr. Rosenberg. "The best thing for you to do is to give up the cholent and the kishke and the l’chaims and all of those other high calorie foods.”

Irving thought about it for a second and said, “OK, doctor, what’s the next best thing?”

*Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5781 email of Lekavod Shabbos Magazine.*