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Punished for Keeping a Mitzvah

By Naomi Brudner



Tomer was a secular young man in Eretz Yisrael, who was in the army. One day when he was on leave, he happened to meet a religious man, David Levi while waiting on line somewhere. The man engaged him in very pleasant, respectful conversation and ended up inviting Tomer to his home for Shabbat.

Tomer thanked him but said it wasn't for him because he isn't at all religious, he never kept Shabbat, and he's not 'into' that kind of thing. On Shabbat he'd rather

hang out with his friends. Mr. Levi was extremely nice and told him that one Shabbat without hanging out wouldn't be so terrible, especially since his wife is a great cook, his kids are adorable and funny, and he'll have a great time. He told Tomer that he'll have his own room, he won't have to do anything special that he doesn't want to, he'll just be there and enjoy it.

Tomer still didn't jump at the offer so Mr. Levi said, very nicely: "Are you open-minded?"

Tomer answered as quick as can be: "Yeah, sure." To which Mr. Levi responded: "So be open-minded about this, too."

Tomer was taken off guard and after thinking about what Mr. Levi said, realized that he didn't have a great excuse now not to come, I mean if he's open-minded, then he has to be open not only to foreign ideas. If he's really open-minded he has to be open also to his own people and religion. Plus, this Levi guy was so nice, so easy-going and sincere, that Tomer finally said: "Okay... thanks." And so it was that the next day he found himself for the first time ever in a religious home for Shabbat!

When he arrived, in uniform, he got a grand welcome from the whole family, including really cute kids, and was given a room where he unpacked his duffle bag. He noticed that there were several beds in the room and saw from what was on the walls and some other stuff that this was a kids' room. He wondered if he would have to sleep with them but found out soon enough that they would be in another room, squeezed in with others siblings so that Tomer could have his privacy.

It was getting close to Shabbat, and things were speeding up in the Levi household, lots of energy as last minute things were taken care of. In the middle of all that Tomer was given with smiles coffee, cake, kugel, a schnitzel, and then before he knew it the atmosphere somehow became totally different, extremely calm and peaceful mode as his hostess began to light Shabbat candles.

Since his host and his sons were all leaving for shul, though Tomer wasn't so interested in going, he figured it would be better than staying in the apartment with Mrs. Levi and the girls, and so he went to shul with his host and his sons. It was actually pretty nice with a very lively Lecha Dodi (song welcoming Shabbat), and the prayers weren't too long, and then before he knew it, in the middle of many Shabbat Shalom and Good Shabbos wishes among the congregants, he was on his way back to the Levi home, wondering what in the world it would be like.

Once back in the apartment, Tomer was extremely pleasantly surprised by what he saw and experienced. From when he walked in until the end of Shabbat it was actually pretty nice, in fact it was a bit amazing – so different from anything he had ever experienced. It was a totally unusual but great atmosphere. No phones, great food, singing, talking, lots of interesting things about Torah, and the kids had a lot to say with all kinds of written material from their schools. He couldn't not notice

that, there were great interactions in the family – between David Levi and his wife, between them and their kids and even among the kids. Much more quiet and respectful than what he was used to. And at the same time there was lots and lots of positive energy, including some great jokes – most of them spontaneous!

It was really a very nice experience in fact he even admitted that it was more than nice. It was special. After havdala, separating Shabbat from the upcoming week, Tomer packed up his bag and came to part from his host and hostess and the whole family.

And then his host casually took Tomer to the side for some privacy and asked him if he enjoyed Shabbat with them, and Tomer's eyes lit up as he said, spontaneously 'Yeah, it was great! Todah rabbah! Thank you very much! And then Mr. Levi asked him, "Would you like to learn more about Judaism, maybe some classes or books or something." Tomer politely said that that sounded really interesting but he was in the army now and that kept him busy enough, he didn't really have time for other stuff.

"I can understand that," Mr. Levi said. And then he said: "Maybe you'd like to just take on something small, a mitzvah that's easy to keep. What do you think?"

Tomer thought and then said, "The truth is that I realize now after this Shabbat that Judaism is really something very serious and real. I'm not ready to make a commitment now, but I am ready to take on one small, easy mitzvah. Something really easy, especially since I'll be in the army and I don't want to make waves or stand out or anything."

Mr. Levi thought for a minute and then said: "I have an idea – an easy mitzvah that no one will even know that you're keeping."

"Great, what is it?"

And to Tomer's amazement Mr. Levi said, "When you get dressed in the morning, put on your right boot first and then your left boot. And then tie your left boot first and then your right boot."

There was a silence as Tomer thought about what he had just heard. "You're serious?" he asked. "Judaism tells you things like that?"

"Yes," said Mr. Levi and gave Tomer a short explanation of why we put on our shoes like that. "Okay," said Tomer, "I'll do it. You're sure that means that I'm doing a mitzvah? Because that's what I want to do. I want to do a mitzvah."

"Yes," said Mr. Levi, "that's a mitzvah. Do that, and you'll have the credit of doing a mitzvah every day."

"Okay," said Tomer, "it's a deal. I'll do it." And shortly after, he put his pack on his back, got a great goodbye from the whole family, plus some terrific cake to take with him and he was on his way.

Before long Tomer was back in his army base and life continued as usual for him – except for one thing. He always put on his right boot before his left boot and

always tied his left boot before his right boot. No one noticed, of course, and he was happy that he was fulfilling his promise to that terrific guy who hosted him so nicely, and also opened his eyes to a world he never knew. Though once in a while Tomer thought about his experiences on that special Shabbat, he made no other changes in his lifestyle – only the boots.

One day when his unit was resting, they were suddenly awakened and told that they had to carry out an important mission immediately. They all jumped up as quick as can be and started to race to their destination. And then somehow Tomer suddenly thought of his boots! He hadn't put them on the way he promised to. He hesitated, not knowing what to do, and then he suddenly stopped, went to the side, took off his boots and then quickly put them back on the way he was taught to, thinking to himself, a promise is a promise and it'll only take me a minute, I can surely do this without any problems!

But as a result, he arrived a minute or two late to where the others already were. They were quickly boarding a helicopter but Tomer's commander told him that he was being punished for coming late and he was not going on the mission with the rest of his unit.

As all his comrades took off in the helicopter, Tomer was standing there just watching them, wishing that he too, could have been with them to fulfill his task as a soldier of the Israel Defense Forces. And he thought to himself, "is that how Judaism works? When you do the right thing, even if it's hard, you get punished?"

His mind and heart were filled with questions because of the seeming injustice. And then very soon, he heard the terrible news – something went wrong and the helicopter that he wasn't allowed to be on... crashed and burst into flames. All the soldiers in his unit were aboard that helicopter, and they were all killed.

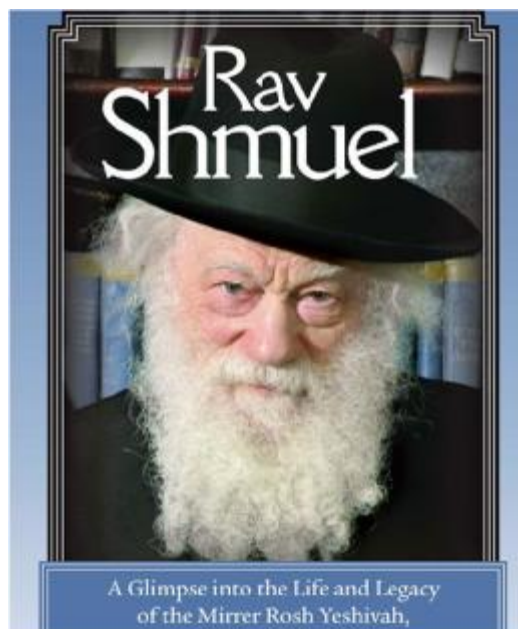
Sometimes when things seem to go wrong in our lives, we can't figure out the reason, or discern any goodness that might be part of, or a reason for the events or the suffering. And often, in this world, we never find out the reason. And we're left with questions, including questions about faith, emunah. Sometimes we never get those questions answered, not in this world – though emunah means believing that everything is from Hashem for the good.

And sometimes we do get to see the reason and goodness within the pain, as Tomer did. And when we don't see the goodness or justice, then, too, we must believe that this, too, is for the good.

Reprinted from the May 25, 2025 edition of The Jewish Press.

The Hidden Power of Shared Suffering

By Rabbi Elchonon Jacobowitz



Maintaining genuine feelings for others was of paramount importance to R' Shmuel Barenbaum. To him, the imperative to feel another's pain was twofold. First, it was essential for preserving and refining one's own middos. But beyond that, there was a benefit for the person who was suffering as well. Not only does a person's anguish lessen when he knows his pain is shared, but in R' Shmuel's view, the very act of empathy could serve as a vehicle for his yeshuah.

When R' Shmuel's beloved son, R' Leibel, was unwell, R' Shmuel remarked that simply feeling pain over another's suffering could itself improve the chances of recovery. Hashem, he explained, doesn't only weigh whether the suffering of the individual is justified, but also considers whether the agony felt by others because of that suffering is warranted. If enough people are distressed by one person's illness, the total suffering may exceed what is deserved—and Hashem, in His mercy, would not allow that to continue.

In this way, feeling another's pain becomes more than a noble trait—it becomes a source for a yeshuah. Strengthening oneself in the merit of the ill is powerful; truly sharing in his burden is even more so. But for R' Shmuel, empathy

was only the beginning. Whether or not he had the means, he would often extend tangible help—sometimes in astonishing proportions.

Long before he had access to large funds for tzedakah, he would borrow money to help Yidden in financial distress. The situation didn't need to be tragic or dramatic. Even to help another marry off a child, he would quietly take out loans of thousands of dollars, which he would personally repay over time. A talmid who was in a shaky financial situation recalled R' Shmuel discreetly handing him wads of cash— without saying a single word. (Rav Shmuel)

Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5785 email of The Weekly Vort. Excerpted from the Feldheim book – “Rav Shmuel” by Rabbi Elchonon Jacobowitz.

Is it Just a Job?



The Tzadik of Yerushalayim, Rav Aryeh Levin, zt”l, used to visit various jails to spend some time with the prisoners, offering them Chizuk and encouragement, and brightening their bleak lives. One Shabbos, Rav Aryeh arrived at the gates of a certain jail, only to find that the British guard on duty would not allow him to enter. The guard told Rav Aryeh, “There’s a curfew on today. You are not allowed to be out on the streets now. Make your way home immediately!”

A Jewish policeman standing nearby pleaded with the British guard to make an exception for Rav Aryeh, and said, “Why prevent an elderly man from performing an act of kindness? It must be very difficult for a man his age to walk all the way

over here, but Rav Aryeh does it every week, on a purely voluntary basis, to gladden the hearts of the prisoners.”

The guard could not believe this. The old Rabbi volunteered to visit prisoners? How could that be? The guard shook his head and said, “No, that is impossible.” He was sure Rav Aryeh received some type of compensation for his work. And if that was the case, he thought, he had better find himself a different line of work!

While the British guard and the Jewish policeman were arguing, Rav Aryeh made his way around the building, checking for an opening of some sort in the wall surrounding the jail. Maybe he could find a foothold that he could use to help him climb in. Finally, he found what he was looking for. There was a small protruding rock that was sticking out of the smooth wall, and like a young man, Rav Aryeh used it to help him climb to the top of the gate. He then jumped inside to the prison grounds.

The British guard saw what had happened and he said to the Jewish policeman, “You are right. This Rabbi must be a volunteer. A man who did this job for pay would never go to such lengths to get inside the jail. This man is determined to visit the prisoners no matter what!”

Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5785 email of Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg’s Torah U’Tefilah.

You Are Not Forgotten!

Leah* was thirty-two years old, and her emunah was as strong as her yearning. A deeply spiritual person with a quiet, refined nature, Leah had always been beloved by her students in the girls’ high school where she taught. She never said no when asked to help—baking for a neighbor’s simchah, tutoring struggling girls, sending handwritten notes of encouragement.

Yet her own life seemed suspended in time. Friends married, built homes, and sent their children off to school. Leah remained in the same small apartment, walking the same path to the same job, davening the same heartfelt tefillos that this might be the year her zivug would come.

Shidduch after shidduch passed. Still, Leah never gave in to despair. She clung to the guidance of her Rav and the support of a close friend who often reminded her: Hashem doesn’t forget a single tear. Every moment of waiting is building something for your future.

One day, a young woman named Devora* came to Leah's school to drop off a package for her niece. She stopped in her tracks. "Leah! You were my counselor in camp when I was a teen—you probably don't remember me."

Leah smiled, "Actually, I do. Devora Friedman, right?" Devora's eyes lit up. "Wow. That was years ago. I never forgot how you helped me that summer. My parents were getting divorced, and you were the only adult who really listened."

They caught up briefly, exchanged warm words, and Leah returned to her day. But Devora couldn't stop thinking about her. That night, she mentioned Leah to her husband. "She's not married. I don't know why, but I just feel like we should think of someone."

Her husband thought for a moment. "There's someone I know. Aryeh*. He's older—low-key, serious learner. Comes from a great family. He had a tough medical diagnosis a few years back and took a break from shidduchim. He's doing really well now, but honestly, I think people forgot about him."

Aryeh had also been waiting for years, davening with quiet hope. After spending much of his twenties immersed in learning in Eretz Yisrael, his health challenge had pushed pause on his future. He never stopped believing, but names stopped being suggested. Somehow, his name slipped off the radar—just as Leah's had.

Devora made the call. Aryeh's family said yes. Leah's Rav encouraged her to give it a try. By the third date, something began to click. Aryeh shared a vort he had heard from Rav Moshe Shapiro zt"l, the Lubliner Rav—how the Kodesh HaKodashim was completely silent, because the deepest truths are beyond words. "I don't need noise," he said simply. "I just want to build something real."

Leah realized: this was the answer to all her tefillos. When Aryeh met Leah's Rav, he said, "I feel like I've been walking through a maze—and every turn brought me closer to her, even when I didn't know it."

At the chasunah, Leah's students surrounded her with overflowing joy. At sheva brachos, Aryeh stood up and shared something that stunned everyone. "You know how Devora introduced us? My mother told me something right after we got engaged. Years ago—fifteen years ago, maybe more—she invited Leah's family to my older brother's vort as they knew the family somehow. I don't think they came. Maybe the invitation got lost. But she remembered the name.

"When Devora mentioned Leah, my mother said, 'Leah? I know that name. She was meant to come to our simchah once.' It's like the invitation was always there... just waiting to be opened."

Today, Leah and Aryeh's home is one of warmth, chessed, and Torah. And every so often, Leah speaks at events for single girls—not just to inspire, but to remind them from the depths of her heart: You are not forgotten. Hashem sees every

moment and collects every tear. The story is already unfolding, even if you don't yet see the pages turning.

Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5785 email of The Weekly Vort.

Praising His Beloved People

By Aharon Spetner



Illustrated by Miri Weinreb

“Come boys,” Totty said. “We’re going to be late for Mincha.”

As the Friedmans hurried down the street, they heard the sound of loud music.

“What’s that?” asked Dovid.

“Look!” said Moishy, as they turned the corner. “That looks like Mayor McGillicuddy!”

Ahead, the entire street appeared blocked off. Hundreds of mostly empty seats had been set up, and on the stage stood none-other than the recently reelected mayor of University City, PJ McGillicuddy.

“My fellow Americans,” the mayor boomed, his voice echoing through the loudspeakers. “It is my pleasure to once again be elected to be the best mayor you have ever had.”

McGillicuddy paused as Cameron, the mayor’s aide, applauded vigorously.

“Over the years, I have led the city of University City to prosperity. Why even I myself have become incredibly wealthy during my time in office. I founded the University City Zoo, and animal attacks on visitors have dropped almost five percent in the past six months. I oversaw the recapture of some of the violent prisoners who escaped after the prison guard I hired accidentally let them loose. And I am steadfastly committed to my promise to create the University City space program and to send local astronauts to Jupiter by the end of the year!”

Cameron clapped again, as several of the attendees seemed to be drifting off to sleep.

“Now, there are some people I need to thank for my immense success. First of all, there is one person without whom none of this would be possible. Someone who is more devoted to this city than anyone I know. And that person is me. Without me, I could never have done all that I have for our community.”

“He’s meshuga in kupp!” laughed Dovid, as the Friedmans walked past the loudspeakers.

“But almost as important, I also would like to mention the Jewish community of University City. The Jews of our town have shown tremendous loyalty to me and my campaign. Whenever I demand to speak in their synagogue, their rabbi, Rabbi Greenblatt, always allows me to do so. And they are such special people! Their children have such respect for their parents, they are law-abiding citizens, and they even pray for my dog, Cuddles, whenever he gets sick.”

The mayor’s voice grew fainter as the Friedmans headed away from the ceremony and approached the shul.

“Boys,” Totty said. “I think we can learn something from what we heard of Mayor McGillicuddy’s speech just now.”

“What?” asked Moishy. “That it’s okay if wild zoo animals attack people?”

“Or that we should daven for sick dogs?” offered Dovid.

“No, no,” Totty laughed. “That’s not what I meant. I meant the nice things that he said about Yidden.”

“But we already know those things,” Moishy said.

“Yes, of course we do,” said Totty. “But I meant the very fact that he said nice things about Yidden. We should learn from that.”

“We should praise ourselves?” asked Dovid.

“Think about the recent Parsha Balak. Look at all of the wonderful things that Bilaam said about Klal Yisroel.”

“But Bilaam was a goy, just like the mayor,” Dovid said.

“Okay, but did you know that the Gemara tells us that they originally wanted to include Parshas Balak in Krias Shema?”

“Wow, davening would be so long if they did that,” said Moishy.

“And that’s exactly why the Gemara says they didn’t do it. But why would we want to include this Parsha in Shema? And the reason is because it says such wonderful things about Klal Yisroel. And it is important for Jews to say good things about Klal Yisroel.s

“Look at all of the people, just like us, running into shul to daven. That’s amazing! And over there is Rabbi Elefant - he and his wife run a bakery out of their house for all of the Yidden in our town who want to buy Pas Yisroel baked goods. Everywhere we look we can see how amazing Hashem’s people are!”

“So, we are supposed to say things that we already know?” asked Moishy, still not getting it.

“Yes!” Totty said, as they walked into the shul. “It makes Hashem so happy to hear wonderful things being said about His people. And it’s one thing if a goy says it. But Hashem cares so much more about the words of Yidden. So, it’s way more valuable to Hashem when we, His children, say wonderful things about Klal Yisroel!”

Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5785 email of Toras Avigdor Junior based on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Avigdor Miller, zt”l.

Is it Ever Too Late?

A young man who had once been a rising star in yeshivah, learning diligently and committed in all areas of avodah and gemillas chassadim, for some reason slowly began to drift away from his spiritual growth. Torah achievement is not static; one either rises or he falters – with the descent most often quicker than his earlier ascent.

He himself did not know what was the cause of his abandoning Torah, but it went on for decades, as he distanced himself to the point which he thought was the point of no return. Nonetheless, the Pintele Yid within him yearned to return. He was convinced, however, that, after so many years, teshuvah was an impossible dream. He had strayed too far, for too long.

When he was in the yeshivah, he had established a close relationship with the Rosh Yeshivah, whose heart he had broken when he left, but a true Rebbe never gives up on a talmid. He went to visit him. He was no longer a teenager, and his Rosh Yeshivah was already sporting a grey beard. He pleaded his case, explaining that, while he would like to reconnect, he felt it was impossible.

“Do you believe in Hashem?” the Rosh Yeshivah asked. He nodded affirmatively.

“And do you believe that Hashem is Infinite?” Again, he nodded.

“If so, why are you placing limitations on Hashem’s capacity for forgiveness? If Hashem is truly Infinite – as you claim to believe – then His love and compassion is also Infinite. No matter how far a person has strayed, Hashem waits with open arms for him to return.”

The words hit home, penetrating through years of neglect and even anger. He realized that his Rebbe was right – he would not allow his past to define his future. It did not happen overnight, but, slowly, he began taking baby steps – shiurim, one mitzvah at a time, eventually, once again discovering the inherent joy in being an observant Jew.

Teshuvah is not about undoing the past, but about transforming the present, so that we will have a Jewish future.

Reprinted from the Parshas Balak 5785 edition of Peninim on the Torah compiled by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum.

An elderly woman from Europe once approached the grandchildren of Rav Avraham Shag, ZT”L, asking to be taken to his kever on Har HaZeisim. Puzzled, the grandchildren asked her how she knew their grandfather. She responded with the following story:

“Many years ago, your grandfather was learning as usual, very immersed in his sefer, and somebody stopped by asking if he could leave a rather large sum of money with him to watch for a couple of days. The Rav said, “Yes.” However, since he was so immersed in his learning, he buried the envelope in one of his drawers and must have forgotten where he put it.

A few days later, the man returned asking for the money. Rav Shag looked and looked, but to no avail. Having lost the money, he felt awful and told the man to come back in a few days. Wondering what could’ve happened to it, he realized that nobody else had access to the room except for the maid who came in to clean. He thought that the culprit was most likely her. “But...” he thought, “how can I accuse a fellow Jew? No, I cannot do it!” Rav Shag then decided that he was going to take a loan and repay it little by little so the man could receive his money back on time. Since it was an enormous sum, he spent multiple years repaying it.

To his surprise, during Pesach cleaning, years after it was repaid, he was going through his drawer and found the long-lost envelope. Right away, he reached for the phone and called up the former maid. He told her, “I want to apologize to you. I thought negatively about you. I thought you took the envelope,” he said.

She responded, “Please, Rav... you went out of your way to borrow a lot of money and spent years stretching yourself financially to repay it just not to cause me shame. You don't need my forgiveness.”

“No! No!” he said, “I shouldn’t have blamed you in my mind; it could’ve destroyed your entire career had I said something about it.”

She responded, “Ok, I’ll forgive you. But...on one condition. I’m an older woman already and have not yet merited to have children. If you bless me to have a child, I’ll forgive you.”

Happily, the Rav blessed her, and they both parted ways. The old woman then looked her grandchildren in their eyes and said, “I am that child.”

Reprinted for the Parshas Balak 5785 email of Torah Sweets.

The Klausenberger Rebbe and General Eisenhower



There’s a famous story that Rabbi Shlomo Diamond told us about when General Eisenhower visited the displacement camps after the United States liberated the Jews from the concentration camps.

He saw the Jewish people suffering from disease and malnutrition and asked, “Pease tell me, what can the U.S. government get for you? Please tell me what you need!”

The Klausenberger Rebbe acted as the liaison for the people, and said, “It’s getting close to the time of our holiday of Sukkot. Can you please get us lulavim and etrogim so we can do our mitzvah?”

The general was shocked at this request. He thought they would ask for food, clothing, or things to make them more comfortable. But a Jew needs his mitzvot to survive in this world! That’s what connects us to Hashem, the true source of life.

Reprinted from the Parashat Chukat 5785 email of Jack E. Rahmey based on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Amram Sananes.