

A BEAUTIFUL TRUE STORY OF TESHUVA AND FORGIVENESS

"Hi. My name is Shmuel, and I am 28 years old.

Most of the people who know me simply call me "Shmuly."

I am not used to telling stories. I'm the kind of guy who does better with action. That is why it took me some time to put together all the parts of my personal story and write it down so that I can share it with you.

My story began about eighteen years ago.

I was ten years old, a pretty regular kid, just like everyone else...except in one area.

I had a really hard time sitting in one place for a prolonged period of time.

And when I say "time," I don't mean what you probably think. My concept of time is different than most people's. "Too much time," for me, means a few seconds.

Yeah, I'm a "spring," if you will. If this would be today, I would surely get a diagnosis comprised of a string of initials (along with a pill or two), but in those days there weren't that many interpretations, so the nickname given to me was short and friendly, "Shmuly the Spring."

Honestly, I didn't mind. I knew that it was true, and I could actually relate to the imagery.

Baruch Hashem, I had no complaints. I had incredible rabbeim who didn't make a big issue out of my hyperactivity. Everyone in my class was already used to the fact that Shmuly the Spring is the one who is sent to bring the rebbe coffee in middle of class, and other such jobs, basically keeping me busy.

And truthfully, I liked the arrangement, too. I would sit in front of the rebbe and try hard to listen and understand what he was teaching. Then, when I couldn't focus anymore (usually after a few minutes), I would look for something to do. At that point I would hear the rebbe's voice calling to me, "Shmuly, please get us some more chalk." I would happily get up and run to perform the chore. That was basically what my life in school was like.

One morning, as we waited for our rebbe to enter the classroom, the principal walked in instead. He stood behind the rebbe's desk and asked for silence. "I'm sorry to share this with you," he said, "but your rebbe has suddenly fallen ill and had to undergo emergency surgery last night. He will not be coming back for the next few weeks." We were in shock. We loved our rebbe and were really worried about him. The principal continued, "Now, boys, let's say some Tehillim for his recovery." We said some Tehillim with extra kavanah for our rebbe's speedy recovery.

That day, the principal taught us, but the following day he walked into our classroom with a man we didn't know. "Boys," the principal said, "this is Rabbi Substitute. He is going to be your substitute rebbe until your regular rebbe gets better, be'ezras Hashem." Rabbi Substitute walked over to the rebbe's desk, and the principal left the classroom. I'm not sure what made me immediately realize that my life was not going to be easy with Rabbi Substitute. Maybe it was the stern look on his face, or the hoarse voice with which he addressed us, but something told me there was going to be trouble soon.

I was right. It was only a few minutes later when I sensed a heavy shadow over me. I looked up and found Rabbi Substitute staring angrily down at me through his somewhat-dirty glasses. "What are you busy with over there?" he thundered. I dropped the beautiful paper airplane I had just completed. The stunning plane did not have a chance inside Rabbi Substitute's clenched fist, and I felt my heart tearing inside me along with it. I found myself standing shamefacedly in the principal's office. After recess was over, I returned to the classroom. This scenario repeated itself over and over again in different variations.

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After a few days of mounting frustration on all sides, my parents were called to the school. "In my class, all students must learn," Rabbi Substitute told them firmly. "What do you think he's going to grow up to be like if he doesn't use his brain?" He refused to allow me to perform the various tasks that had been my lifeline until then. Every day, I would be punished and sent out of the classroom in humiliation. I began to feel disappointed and disgusted with myself. I always knew that I was not exactly a typical child, I knew that I was better with my hands than with my head, but I always managed somehow, thanks to the energy that Hashem endowed me with and the fact that I loved to help people. For Rabbi Substitute, however, these qualities meant nothing.

One day, Rabbi Substitute decided to call an emergency meeting to discuss my problems. My parents and I were both called in for a long, painful lecture. I remember my father trying to say something like, "Our Shmuly has other qualities... Maybe his head is less at work but he has amazing hands...", but Rabbi Substitute didn't allow my father to say a word. And here, I remember how Rabbi Substitute's face reddened. He pointed a finger at me and shouted, "If you don't start using your head, you'll amount to nothing! Nothing!" Then he added under his breath, "Good hands will make you a good plumber, nothing more."

The days passed, somehow, and finally, finally, our regular rebbe recovered and returned to the classroom. I never saw Rabbi Substitute again. With time, I even managed to forget his hurtful words. Most of the time. Sometimes, unexpectedly, I would hear his words playing in my head and shrink into myself with humiliation. When that happened, I would feel like an absolute nothing. Is that all I could ever hope to amount to? A plumber? Could I really do nothing more? Was I truly worth nothing?! I admit, though, that this did not happen often. Most of the time, I was busy performing the countless chores and tasks that my rabbeim came up with to keep me busy and confident.

I grew up, finished cheder, and then yeshivah ketanah. I was accepted to a good yeshivah gedolah thanks to my many other talents. So maybe I was not the brightest boy in the class, but I had other things going for me. The many small jobs I did in yeshivah helped me tremendously. The yeshivah and summer camps were where I felt proud and happy.

When I started shidduchim, I knew more or less what kind of girl I wanted to marry. A short while later, I met my wife who wanted me just as I was. We got married, and I began my married life in kollel. Of course, at the same time, I was searching for some action to fill up my day too; something that would keep me busy and allow me to feel good about myself. I found that in Israel's medical emergency response team, a job that saves me from myself. I do many shifts, am always first at the scene and the last to leave it. Some people might make a face hearing that, but I love the drama and the action, and more than anything else – the tremendous chessed that I can perform for people in the most critical moments of their lives.

Slowly, I started climbing up the ranks. I did further training. At some point, MADA became my second home. One night, I woke up to the sound of the dispatcher calling all nearby volunteers to rush to an emergency nearby. Apparently, someone had lost consciousness and needed help. The address was nowhere nearby, but for some reason I decided to rush to the scene anyway. I figured that there were not many volunteers in that area, and the late hour would make it even less likely that

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someone could get there quickly. MADA's headquarters were also too far from the scene. I jumped into my car and quickly drove over to the address the dispatcher had announced. As soon as I arrived, I realized that I had indeed arrived first. I grabbed my first-aid kit and rushed up the stairs. The panicked voices and the light coming from the apartment led me directly to an elderly man lying on the living room floor. A woman stood next to him – his wife, I presumed – crying hysterically. I quickly began checking his vitals and performing CPR. Things were not looking good... No pulse. No breathing.

As I worked, a Hatzalah volunteer arrived at the scene and began working alongside me. "No pulse or breathing," I reported to the station. "Send MICU urgently." The Hatzalah volunteer and I continued working furiously. This guy doesn't have much of a chance, I thought. Who knows how long he's been lying like this, in this condition. But I'm used to leaving my thoughts for my own pillow... for when I try to fall asleep at night. Right now, I had to focus on what I needed to do – and do it. The ambulance arrived and with it, more advanced equipment. The full team and I continued to do our best, but...nothing. The guy wouldn't wake up. The team gave up, but I refused to. I continued to put in every bit of strength I could muster, without thinking. Yair, a fellow paramedic, placed his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were telling me, Forget it, this is a lost cause.

But I kept going.

The other guys knew me already. They weren't going to try explaining to me for the umpteenth time that I was too naïve. I pushed. I pushed again. And then suddenly I felt something change. I checked carefully and began screaming like a madman, "There's a pulse! There's a pulse!" The paramedics looked at the patient and immediately realized that I was right. They all began working feverishly again. Somehow, they managed to stabilize him and rushed him to the nearest hospital together with his tearful wife.

Honestly, I was very emotional as I watched them go. I've been in this field for years, but it is still rare to succeed in performing a successful resuscitation - especially in such a case, where the man had been lying unconscious for so long. I gathered my things and headed back home.

A month passed, and I nearly forgot the incident. One morning, my phone rang.

"Hi, is this Shmuly, from MADA?"

"Yes, who am I speaking with?"

The young man on the other end of the line told me that he was this elderly man's grandson. My thoughts went back to that fateful night, and I asked him with some hesitation, "How is he?" I wasn't sure what I was going to hear. I knew that not many people survive after being deprived of oxygen for so long, and even those who do survive are generally badly crippled as a result.

"You have no idea," the grandson told me with obvious emotion. "You gave us our grandfather back!"

I was so moved that I could hardly get any words out of my mouth.

The young man told me that they had been searching all week long for the phone number of the "angel who saved their grandfather" – that was how he described me. He told me that his grandfather had been discharged and is completely back to his usual self. "We would love to have you join us at the seudas hodaya that we are making in honor of this miracle!"

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I could not refuse. I still remembered the address, so I just asked him for the date and time. On the day of the seudah, I came to the house again. The apartment was filled with family members and tables laden with cakes and candy. They all welcomed me with hugs and joyful greetings. I have never met these people before, but it seemed that to them I was like family. I was given a seat at the head of the table, next to a dignified-looking man with a white beard. His face looked familiar...but now I was seeing his face with a healthy coloring.

When he saw me, he stood up and enveloped me in a warm hug. I felt his tears wetting my shoulder, and then my own tears coursing down my cheeks.

He murmured words of thanks, and it was obvious that he was very, very emotional.

I myself was feeling my own storm of emotions – and not only because of the opportunity I had been given to save another man's life. With shocking clarity, I suddenly realized that this man who was now looking at me with such gratitude-filled eyes was none other than my childhood teacher, Rabbi Substitute. It must have been his voice that made all the memories surface, but I had no doubt about it. I gently asked him about his life and where he was from. Yes, it was him...

He did not seem to recognize me, but that was understandable. Unlike him, my own appearance had changed drastically since I was ten years old...It was difficult for me to contain myself. I felt an unexplainable urge to tell him who I was. I asked one of his sons, who was sitting next to me, to allow me to speak to his father privately. He looked at me in surprise, but apparently, my status as the "savior" helped ward off questions. He stood up and whispered into his father's ear. I saw Rabbi Substitute's eyes looking at me, and then his head nodding in agreement.

We were led to a side room. After we both settled on the day bed in the room and the door closed behind us, I burst into uncontrollable tears. I had planned to talk to him, but the wave of emotions was stronger than me. I myself had not realized, until that moment, just how deeply he had hurt me. I felt his hands on my head, and then heard his soothing words trying to calm me. He obviously could not understand what was happening to me.

After I calmed down somewhat, I raised red-rimmed eyes and began to tell him who I was. It took a few moments for him to recall. "You're Shmuly?" he pointed a shaking finger at me. I saw understanding dawn, and his face suddenly became very white. I felt a pang of panic. I had already seen his face looking like that. Slowly, however, his color returned. And then it was his turn to cry.

We did not exchange more than a few words, but to me it seemed like we had spent hours in deep conversation. We simply didn't need any words. The tears said everything. The deep hurt...the frustration and the pain...the insidious effect of his behavior toward me in the classroom... and also, his regret, his remorse...

He hugged me again, and I returned the hug, feeling forgiveness wash over me. A huge rock was lifted from my chest. "And I told you that you'll amount to nothing," he whispered, his voice filled with indescribable regret. He asked for my forgiveness again and again, and I told him I was fully mochel. We walked back into the living room, both of us with red-rimmed eyes and blotchy faces. People looked at us in bewilderment.

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When Rabbi Substitute reached his seat, he motioned for me to sit on the adjacent chair, but he himself remained standing. He told everyone that he wanted to say a few words. Within seconds, everyone fell silent. It was clear that they all wanted to know what had happened.

Rabbi Substitute first began by praising me for saving his life. He especially emphasized the illogical efforts I had put in despite the fact that realistically, there was no longer any hope. He focused on the main point, in his opinion, which was that I worked against all odds and used my heart, not my head.

Then he told everyone who I was and where we had first met. He told them everything. He repeated the words he had used then, at the fateful meeting with my parents, and the things he said about me in front of the entire class. At this point, people were crying unabashedly. In a broken voice he turned to me and asked for my forgiveness again. I could not speak. I only nodded my consent, my own throat choked with tears.

Then, Rabbi Substitute ended in a heartfelt statement. "Twenty years ago, I told you that you do not use your head. Yet what saved me now was precisely the fact that you did not follow your head – but your heart. Years ago, I thought you had a problem and were not thinking enough. Now I know that what you have is actually a huge heart." He hugged me again, and I returned the hug.

That is my story.

It was not easy for me to write it all. You must have realized by now that I am not the sort of person who can easily sit and write things down. But I did it anyway, because I want you to always remember: There are some kids who have a great head. There are kids who have a great heart.

And they are all Hashem's children."