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# Re'ei

## The Wrestling Rabbi

In the 1950s, a new Jewish star appeared on the American scene. He came from Vienna by way of the young State of Israel. The newspapers called him "the Wrestling Rabbi." His name was Rafael Halperin.

Rafael Halperin had been born in Vienna in 1924. When he was seven years old, he was walking down the street and was asked by a stranger if he's Jewish. When he answered in the affirmative, the stranger called him a "dirty Jew" and gave him a good slap in the face.

Little Rafael came home crying and swore to himself that he would never again let anyone hit him because he was Jewish.

That same boy made aliyah to the Holy Land with his family in the 1930s.

When he was around 20, he felt he was wasting his life. So he asked himself what he was going to contribute to the Jewish People. At that time, a magazine on health, fitness, sports and body building fell into his hands, and Rafael Halperin decided that he was going to train as a wrestler. And so a new chapter began in his life.

Rafael became very successful as a wrestler in pre- and post-independence Israel and Europe, and in 1950, he decided to go to the United States and prove his talent there.

Now picture the scene: It's just a few years after the Holocaust, the Jewish Nation is bruised, wounded and downtrodden, and suddenly, there appears from Israel a young wrestler who succeeds in defeating famous wrestlers—for a lot of people, it was simply a miracle: they felt that here had come someone to raise the pride of the Jewish Nation. Finally there was a Jew who also had the muscle to stand up to others.

In those years, Halperin fought in staged matches in what would later come to be known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) run by Vince McMahon, Sr. In those matches, it would be decided beforehand who would win. It was not real wrestling but, as it's called today, sports entertainment.

So Rafael Halperin participated in simulated matches in which he embodied the Jewish warrior, and in these matches, he always won. (Some say that one of the reasons he always won was because he refused to listen to the managers and fake a loss.)

And so he went from town to town across the U.S. Jews could not contain themselves at the sight of the Jewish lad with the Star of David on his boxing shorts "defeating" all those mighty wrestlers. And so Rafael Halperin traveled from coast to coast.

Now when this young phenomenon first visited the United States, he merited a private audience with Rabbi Joseph Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, who had come to Brooklyn from Europe just after WWII broke out.

The Rebbe told him that he was bringing a "Kiddush Hashem," or "Sanctification of G-d's Name" (in plain English, anything that enhances the reputation of Jews and Judaism), to America.

The Rebbe then added: "You're not just roaming around the world—Heaven has an eye on you." And indeed, in all the years that he fought, he always kept Shabbos, ate kosher and so on, and thus caused a mighty Kiddush Hashem in that a young man who kept the mitzvos could also succeed in the world.

After "conquering" the United States, Rafael Halperin traveled to South Africa, where the Jewish community threw a reception for him attended by the Chief Rabbi and South Africa's wealthiest Jews. But at the reception, someone came up to him and said: "Listen here. I've got a personal zoo. If you are really as bold as you say you are, would you also be prepared to literally enter a lion's den?"

To the man's surprise, Rafael Halperin answered, "Why not?" So the man asked him again, "Are you really ready to go into a cage together with lions?" Halperin said yes.

Now we have to backtrack here and point out that Mr. Halperin here was not suicidal and about to throw away his life for no good reason. Even in the famous Tanach story of the prophet Daniel in the lion's den, Daniel didn't leap into the den willingly. Rather, he was thrown in by force.

So in Rafael Halperin's case, there were other circumstances too. The zoo owner had a group of men stand around the outside of the cage with tranquilizer guns so that at the minute anything started going wrong, they'd immediately knock out the lions. But still, I don't know too many people who are ready to jump into a lion's den, even if there are safety measures outside.

So Rafael made a deal with the zoo owner that if he couldn't stay in the cage for five minutes, he would have to pay him 100 pound sterling. But if he pulled off the stunt, he would get a live lion cub as a gift.

On the appointed day, a crowd gathered to witness the spectacle. Rafael Halperin showed up carrying a sturdy stick in his hand. The cage door was opened and he entered.

The very moment he entered, the lion and lioness got up from their crouch, but Halperin stood quietly and very calmly, not moving. Slowly but surely, the lions calmed down and lay back down.

Then Rafael Halperin fixed them with a strong gaze. He later explained that when a human stares at an animal, he projects strength, which dominates the animal—and that's exactly what he did.

And so, while he was still staring strongly at both animals, he began moving toward the lioness, bit by bit and step by step. Finally, he picked up his stick and poked the lioness in the nose. The lioness lifted one paw to wipe her nose, but didn't move.

Rafael then slowly backed away from the lioness without letting his eyes down for a minute. He then approached the lion. Step after step, and all while staring intently at him, he poked the stick right into the lion's face.

The lion, however, was a bit more prepared—and he gave the stick a good swipe that sent it almost flying out of Rafael's hand.

At that point, Rafael began slowly backing away. At the same time, he heard them say, "Your time is up!" He walked slowly backwards to the gate—and at the last minute, just as the gate was opened and he stepped out, the two lions jumped at him. He escaped their teeth at the last second.

Later in life, he decided to learn martial arts. He traveled to Japan to study karate under the biggest experts. Once he was there, he would train for 12 hours a day. Eventually he got to the highest level in the particular form of martial arts that he studied.

But then, something happened to him that changed his life.

He traveled to India, where he visited a Buddhist monastery. There, he saw how a Buddhist monk just sat in one place and didn't move. He didn't even notice when Rafael had entered the room. After a few minutes, he realized that the monk was so concentrated on his idol worship that he had no perception of whatever was happening around him.

At that moment, Rafael Halperin said to himself: "If this monk could be so concentrated on his false gods, how can I, who has a living G-d, not devote my entire existence to Him?" At that moment a resolution formed in his heart to leave it all behind and dedicate his life to G-d and the Jewish Nation.

So Rafael Halperin went back to Israel, studied a lot of Torah, and dedicated his life to serving others. If someone's house burned down, he would help him rebuild it and help him get new furniture, etc. During the Yom Kippur War, he went around military bases organizing martial arts shows for the soldiers to boost their morale. He would break dozens of bricks with karate blows. He also opened fitness centers where young Israelis could train and get strong so that they could stand against all their enemies.

Rafael Halperin passed away in August of 2011.

In a newspaper interview several years ago, Mr. Halperin was asked whether there was anything he did in his life that he regretted. And he answered no: He said that throughout his life, he felt and he saw how G-d was constantly leading him.

And that, of course, brings us to this week's Parshah.

This week's Torah portion is Re'ei—a Hebrew action verb for "see."

Two weeks ago, we read the famous passage of "Shema Yisrael," "Hear O Israel." This time, however, G-d says to us, "See!"

And, of course, there is a huge difference between hearing and seeing. When a person hears something, he's not sure about it. For example, if a person hears the sound of a small plane flying overhead, he figures it's a plane. But if he's told that the sound really came from a radioblasting static or a buzzing noise, then he wouldn't be so sure. However, if he saw the plane with his own eyes, it wouldn't make a difference how much someone tried to disprove that the noise came from the plane—he would not succeed in getting him to change his mind, since he actually saw it with his very eyes.

And it's the same thing with faith in G-d too.

We all "heard" about G-d. Our parents may have taught us that there is a Creator to the universe. But that's in the category of "hearing"; we "heard" about it. But the goal is that in the course of one's life, one's faith in G-d should evolve from "hearing" to "seeing."

It's like when a person tries to explain something to his friend and says to him, "You see what I'm saying?" The person obviously doesn't mean that his friend should see those words with his physical eyes. It's just an expression that means that the subject has been made clear enough that they can be seen with the eyes of the mind. So too must a Jew try to get to the level of sight when it comes to faith in G-d—that he should "see" with the mind's eyes G-d's Hand, in everywhere he goes and everything that he does.

One of the ways to get to this level is for a person to contemplate his life story over all the years that have passed, from when he was a young person to this very day. In doing so, he will discover how much G-d guided him along, step by step, getting him out of all sorts of unpleasant situations.

He then will be able to "see" the Hand of G-d.

He will not need to rely on faith in G-d but rather, he will simply "see" G-d's Divine Providence—and he will open a much deeper relationship with G-d.