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How Far Would You Go For Your Father?

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Vayakhel- Pikudei

How Far Would You Go For Your Father?

With the Oscars not too far behind us, I would be remiss to not talk about this major event.

Because, after all, the Academy Awards are very important to a lot of Americans and even others throughout the world. In 2012, it was important even to Israel, and thus Jews here and everywhere had a special connection to the event.

By Divine Providence, it was the very two countries that the world worries the most about—Israel and Iran—that competed at the Oscars for the best Foreign Language Film. As it turned out, Hollywood passed on *Footnote*, by Israeli director Joseph Cedar, instead selecting *A Separation* by Iranian director Asghar Farhadi

Footnote is the story of a father and son, Eliezer and Uriel Skolnik. Eliezer researches different editions of the Jerusalem Talmud; his son Uriel is also a Talmud scholar. Both are professors at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

However, while Uriel has lots of popularity, academic recognition and is a speaker in demand, his father has no such fortune. Eliezer gets no recognition and gets more disappointed with each passing year that he doesn't get the Israel Prize. Skolnik Senior feels profound frustration at the changes in research methods which have left his research style and work outdated and out of demand. Prof. Skolnik feels distant from virtually everyone surrounding him—primarily his own son Uriel, a true representative of the new school of thought.

So one day, Eliezer Skolnik gets a call from the Ministry of Education notifying him that this year, he's finally won the Israel Prize. And there's a small story about it in the paper the next day.

However, that same morning, Uriel Skolnik is summoned to a frantic meeting with the Israel Prize committee, where he is told that there's been a mistake—in reality, *he's* the one chosen by the committee to get the prize, but they accidentally called the wrong Skolnik. And now, the committee wants to figure out how to correct its mistake.

But Uriel is fiercely opposed to that idea. He tries to convince the committee that his father really does deserve the Prize and that correcting the mistake would gravely wound his father. But the committee chairman is just as equally opposed to that idea, which defies the truth. The verbal confrontation between Uriel and the chairman heats up to the point that it gets physical. Uriel apologizes for hitting the chairman and tells the committee that he'll break the bitter news to his father.

So off Uriel goes to tell his father the facts. He goes to the National Library to find his father—but finds his father and his colleagues raising glasses and toasting each other at the special occasion. Uriel finds himself forced to join them in celebration.

Later, he meets with the committee chairman again—this time succeeding in convincing him to give the prize to his father. The chairman agrees—with two conditions: First, that Uriel must write the recommendation for the bestowal of the prize and the chairman will only sign, and second, that he, Uriel, must never be considered as a candidate for the Israel Prize.

So Uriel writes the introduction for the giving of the prize to his father out of great indecision and notable care in choosing the desired words. But at the same time, his father gets interviewed by a newspaper—and in the interview he conveys sharp criticism of the scientific skills of his son's research work. And when the interview gets published, Uriel suffers great humiliation, but continues to guard the secret of the mistake and to do everything he can so that his father gets the prize.

The movie doesn't tell you the end of the story. But what's interesting here is the sacrifice that a son is prepared to make for his father. The nature of the world is normally that a parent is prepared to sacrifice everything for a child—but it's quite rare that a son should sacrifice his entire career and give up on the greatest award in his life for the sake of his father.

But so much for movies—a similar, and true, story happened over 130 years ago. But that story wasn't about a father and son but rather, a Chasid and his Rebbe. This story happened in Russia in the city of Staradov, where there lived a large community of Chabad Chasidim led by Rabbi Zalman Neimark.

In the year 1881, a Jew snitched to the authorities that the Chabad rabbi and community of Staradov were engaging in illegal methods so as to obtain exemptions from military service for themselves and their community members. And so eighty Jews, including the rabbi, were detained in prison while an investigation leading up to the trial carried on for over two years.

During that time, the Staradov community was demoralized beyond description—because the Jewish community, and the Chasidic community in particular, had been accused by the informer of serious crimes and forgeries. The community felt that it was on the edge of a bottomless pit.

But why would Jews want to engage in forgery so as to get out of military service?

It was only a few years earlier that the Czarist government had decreed that everyone was obligated to do military service—and the Jews knew that the physical and spiritual conditions of prolonged military service were disastrous for them, especially for Torah-observant Jews. Not only that, but the Jews then suffered from much open anti-Semitism. And so, with no other choice, the Jews were forced to do whatever they could to evade military service.

So the libel case proceeded, and the informer “explained” to the authorities that this is not a local development but rather, a plot involving the entire Chabad community across Russia, and all led by the Rebbe himself.

And so the authorities came to the house of Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, the Rebbe Maharash (the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe), seeking forged materials. They even considered transporting him to Staradov to stand trial.

Word of the libel case spread across Russian Jewry, with even Jewish newspapers throughout the world extensively covering the case.

Throughout the entire investigation, the authorities tried to squeeze a confession out of Rabbi Neimark that the Rebbe was involved in the entire story—if Rabbi Neimark would break, the Rebbe would go to prison. But Rabbi Neimark preferred to take full responsibility for the forgeries upon himself, primarily to prevent any problem from occurring for the Rebbe.

At the time, Rabbi Neimark said that one hour of the Rebbe’s time is worth more than anything else. And so he took all the blame upon himself.

In turn, the Rebbe sent him a letter of blessing, in which he wrote: “Concerning the matter of your court case, you have nothing to fear at all.” And indeed, after two years of investigation, Rabbi Neimark was declared innocent in court.

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Vayakhel-Pekudei, Moshe Rabbeinu comes down from Mt. Sinai on Yom Kippur carrying the second Luchos, the Two Tablets. The following day, he gathers all the people, as the verse tells us: “And Moshe gathered the entire congregation of the Sons of Israel... This is the thing that G-d has commanded... take from yourselves a donation to G-d, all moved to give by their heart shall bring the donation to G-d.”

In plain English, G-d wanted them to bring contributions—and he specified a long list. On top of that, G-d demanded that they drop all their business and come help build the Mishkan.

But for some reason, Moshe Rabbeinu doesn’t offer any reason or explanation why they needed to build a Mishkan.

In Parshas Terumah, when G-d gave Moshe the command to build the Mishkan, G-d told him right from the start: “And you shall make Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them”—build me a temple so that I can dwell among the Jews.

But a person who never read Parshas Terumah and reads this week’s Torah portion for the first time will not understand what a Mishkan is needed for—Moshe doesn’t provide any explanation for the Mishkan’s need! And what’s interesting is that the Jewish Nation not only doesn’t ask any questions about the need for the Mishkan but rather, all donated everything needed for the building of the Mishkan within

days—and happily so. So much so that Moshe had to make sure that an announcement was made in the camp that they already have enough and that they should stop bringing donations.

Anyone who's ever done fundraising for a communal institution—a synagogue, a school, etc.—knows how hard it can be to get our fellow Jews to part with their money. When it comes to money, a lot of people get separation anxiety.

Yet here, without being given any explanation by Moshe for the need to build a Mishkan (except, "G-d said!"), the Jews went ahead and donated everything! What's going on here?

But the answer is simple, my friends.

Everyone is familiar with the Avinu Malkeinu prayers from the High Holidays. And indeed, G-d is our Father. And so, just like a father is already ready to sacrifice for his children regardless of what they've done, and will always love them, so too when we stand in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, we remind G-d that He is our Father and that He therefore needs to forgive us and present us with a good new year.

But let's not forget the other side of the coin here: If G-d is the father, then we are the children. And children have a natural love for their parents.

In Chapter 46 of Likutei Amarim , the Alter Rebbe explains this love, quoting the Zohar which states that this love is "like a son who strives for and worries for his father and mother because he loves them more than his essence and soul and spirit."

With this love, a son can sacrifice everything for his parents—and that's the other side of the coin.

True, He is our Father and is prepared to do everything for us. But we are His Children—and children are prepared to sacrifice a lot for their parents.

And so when Moshe came along and said that father—our Father in Heaven—asks that we build a Mishkan, the Jewish Nation didn't need any explanations or reasons. For Dad? Anything!

And so, my friends, the next time we face the choice of doing a mitzvah or doing something else, we need only remember that "Dad" asked us to do it.

And what wouldn't we children do to make Dad proud of us?