

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's Parsha Pinchas, we read about how Pinchas was rewarded for his act of bravery which we read about in last week's Parsha. When Pinchas saw that Hashem's honor was being violated, he took bold action and he was rewarded for his deeds. We see from here the importance of being bold and not bashful in the service of Hashem. The Rema comments on the first law in the Shulchan Aruch, that one must not be ashamed to do mitzvahs even when people make fun of him. The following true story told in the first person, illustrates the power of doing mitzvahs, in public, without shame.

For most people long distance flights are a boring necessity of life but for me flights are often the ideal opportunity to put Tefillin (Two small black leather boxes containing four Torah parchments that are fastened to the head and to the arm by long black leather straps) on Jews. All I have to do is take out my Tefillin, get out of my seat and go down the aisle asking Jewish men if they want to put them on. And I never cease to be amazed at how many of them happily do so. I have been doing this for about twenty years and have many unusual stories to tell but one of the most unforgettable occurred just recently.

It was a flight from Eretz Yisroel to New York on El Al. I began at the back of the plane with my Tefillin and worked my way forward with fairly good results; some fifteen men agreed to put them on so far and that was only one half of the plane. That was when I met Jacob. He was sitting in the aisle seat five rows from the front, next to two sleeping passengers. He was reading a magazine and, although he was neatly dressed, he looked unmistakably like someone from the previous generation; short, compact, well into his seventies, clean shaven, bald-headed with an open shirt and a golden 'chai' pendant dangling from his neck on a thin gold chain. He noticed me standing over him, looked up from the magazine and I did what I had done to all the other passengers before him: I held out the Tefillin and asked him if he would like to put them on. But he didn't say a word. He just kept looking at me blankly, almost as though he didn't understand English, so I repeated the question in Hebrew but still no reaction. He just stared like a zombie.

At this point I just wanted to walk away; maybe he wasn't normal, or maybe he wasn't Jewish (both of which did certainly not seem to be the case) but I figured I'd give it one more chance anyway, so I asked him in Russian (I know about ten words) te' chochesh s'dielat Mitzvah? But when he didn't react to that either, I just kept smiling, nodded bye bye and turned to continue to the next row. Suddenly he said in English with a strong European accent, "I'm not going to put on Tefillin! I'm not going to do it! No way!" But it was as though he was speaking to himself as well as to me. I turned to him. He continued, "Nothing against you Rabbi, but I'm not putting them on. You can ask anyone in Holon (city in central Eretz Yisroel), where I live. Even the chief Rabbi there they will tell you who Yaakov P. is. Why the Rabbi, when he sees me on the street he crosses the street to shake my hand. I help people. That's right. I help people - a lot of people. But I'm not putting on Tefillin! Not me! After what I saw in the camps, in Auschwitz in Birkenau. I made a vow I would never put on Tefillin again. Never!" (Incidentally, a vow not to do a mitzvah is arguably invalid.)

He said it with such conviction that I began to see in his eyes what he must have been through and, to tell the truth, it was a bit too much for me to take. I just tried to keep smiling as tears began to form in my eyes, told him that I didn't mean to upset him and wished him a good trip. "Nothing personal" he assured me once again. We shook hands, I went on to the next person who stood up and happily put on Tefillin and I forgot the whole episode.

Finally I got to the front row where there was sitting an elderly couple. I asked them if they were Jewish and when the answer was affirmative I asked the man if he would like to put on Tefillin. He immediately smiled and said "No thanks" and then turned to his wife, smiled and added, "I think the last time I did that was when I was bar Mitzvah! About sixty years ago." She looked at me, looked at him, then at the Tefillin and finally at him again and said, "So why don't you do it now again, Max." I added jokingly, "after all, you don't have anything better to do, right? And it doesn't cost any money!"

He shook his head no a few times more and looked at his wife again. She tilted her head to the side and raised her eyebrows as though to say 'why not' and finally he stood up, feigning defeat, and said, "All right, what do I have to do?" Moments later he had finished and was removing the Tefillin and thanking me profusely. It was the first time in sixty years he did it and he liked it!

Suddenly his wife said, "Hey! Why don't you put on Jake! Did you ask Jake? Did you see him? He's sitting back there. Oh! Here he is!" I didn't know exactly who they were talking about until Jacob, the holocaust survivor that had refused me earlier, appeared behind them. "Oh, hi Jake!" she said, "Hey, do you know what Max just did?" she said motioning to her husband. "This Rabbi just put Tefillin on him and he liked it! Why don't you do it too?!"

Then she turned to me as to introduce us. "Rabbi, this is Jake, he and us went through the camps together. We're good friends." Meanwhile Jake was in an inner turmoil mumbling to himself, "I'm not going to do it! Tefillin? Max put 'em on eh? But not me, not me!! Why should I? I'm not doing it! Tefillin?" "Come on!" She said to him with a smile, "Forget all that! Look, Max enjoyed it what do you care? Look at this nice Rabbi. Do it for him!" "Sure," I butted in "After all, I came all the way from Kfar Chabad just to put Tefillin on you!"

Jake was really churning inside now, "But I said I'd never do it! Never! I made a vow!" He said a bit louder. It was the moment of truth. He looked at the Tefillin as though he wished they'd go away, but they didn't. He kept staring until finally he spoke quietly not taking his eyes off the Tefillin as he stuck out his arm and said.... "Alright," I put the Tefillin on him, gave him the page with the 'Shema Yisroel' prayer on it and tried not to look at his face as he began to read. Sure enough, after a few seconds I heard him crying and sniffing a bit as he haltingly read the ancient Hebrew words until finally he was silently sobbing away. Meanwhile his friends just stood there and didn't seem effected at all; they had been crying for sixty years and were 'used' to it. He took out a handkerchief, blew his nose, motioned for me to remove the Tefillin and when they were off the lady looked at her husband and at Jake and said: "Today was like a bar-Mitzvah. I think you should be happy!" And she looked at me. I got the hint and began singing a well-known lively tune called "Am Yisroel Chai" (which means 'The Jewish people are alive') and took the hands of the two 'bar-mitzvah boys' and began dancing while she clapped her hands to the rhythm. There was hardly room to move but we bounced around at the front of the plane accompanied by the drone of the motors for about a half-minute until Max stopped and gave me a warm handshake and Jake gave me a hug and a kiss. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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