

Avraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slaughter his son. (22:10)

A dear friend who became observant late in life, after raising his children to be devoutly secular Jews with little or no Jewish identity, was told by his daughter, “What bothers me most about your commitment to Orthodoxy is that you care more about G-d than you do about me!” A powerful accusation – if one is not Orthodox. One whose life is wholly regulated by the Torah understands that it is all about G-d. He comes first. This does not in any way suggest that *frum* people do not have feelings for family. If anything, they place a higher premium on family. It is just that Hashem is first in their lives.

Chazal express this idea in the *Midrash Rabbah* (56) commentary to this *parshah*, “When Avraham *Avinu* stretched out his hand to take the knife (to slaughter Yitzchak *Avinu*), tears streamed down his face onto the eyes of Yitzchak, the result of his fatherly love for his (only) son. Nonetheless, he went joyfully to perform Hashem’s will.” This teaches us that while Avraham acquiesced to carrying out Hashem’s command, he did so without negating his feelings of fatherly love and compassion. He loved his son as only a father could who, at an advanced age, finally had a son, an heir, a successor, someone who could carry on his legacy. His love for his son was boundless – His love for Hashem was greater. Thus, he went out joyfully to execute Hashem’s will, despite eyes filled with tears of love and compassion for his son.

When Moshe *Rabbeinu* called out, *Mi l’Hashem eilai*, “Who is for Hashem, join me” (*Shemos* 32:26), *Shevet Levi* came forward en masse, prepared to mete out punishment for those who had perpetrated the sin of the Golden Calf. They were prepared to take action against family members, because their love for Hashem superseded their love of family. This is part of the *mitzvah* of love of Hashem which we recite thrice daily in *Krias Shema*, *V’Ahavta es Hashem Elokecha b’chol levavchah u’b’chol nafeshecha u’b’chol meodecha*; “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all of your resources” (*Devarim* 6:5).

A *frum* Jew who has been born and nurtured in faith takes his relationship with Hashem for granted. What is the question? Hashem is my Heavenly Father. His mandate precedes and transcends everything. *Shabbos* is holy; kosher is part of Jewish life; *Bris Milah* is Jewish identity. It is not a choice; it is who we are. What can we expect of the individual who was not so fortunate, who grew up in a Jewish world devoid of Judaism, who was clueless to the meaning of religion, a world in which *Shabbos*, *kashrus*, *Bris Milah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Pesach* were historical rituals of a now defunct religion? We pray for such Jews, that one day they be blessed and that their lives become illuminated. Until that time, however, we should not be shocked by such questions as, “How can you put G-d before your family?”

Regardless of a person’s emotional and spiritual distance from Torah Judaism, it by no means defines his/her ability to return to the religion of his/her ancestors. Another myth that has been

concocted by those who seek a way out, is that Orthodox Jews have no interest in anyone who does not serve the same G-d as they do. (This pejorative claim applies across the board to anyone who is less than fully practicing, whose *hashkafah*, outlook on Judaism/Orthodoxy veers from the mainstream.) This is absolutely not true. Many successful outreach organizers are individuals who are not judgmental and are all-embracing, who go out of their way to reach out and help anyone of Jewish extraction, to guide them on their way back. We will always “keep the door open and the light on” for our brothers and sisters, who, in most cases, never have had the opportunity to know a true Torah life.

We know of literally thousands of *kiruv*, outreach, and *teshuvah* stories of return. Most of us have our own stories, meaningful events in our lives, during which we have reached out to someone, making the vital difference at a crucial time in their lives. Each and every Jew is a source of infinite value to his/her Father in Heaven, and anyone who guides them – or plays a supporting role in their return home – will be justly awarded. The following story is special to me. Indeed, it has served as a tremendous source of inspiration. Sadly, it is not one of those “feel good” stories that have a good ending. I should not say that, because the ending (as all endings orchestrated by Hashem) is good. We just do not always see it.

Shuvu is an educational network in *Eretz Yisrael*, founded through the vision of *Horav Avraham Pam, zl*, and supported by his devoted students and Jews throughout the spectrum of Judaism who are committed to providing a Torah education to children of the former Soviet Union. These are children who grew up in a world in which religion was an anathema, and Judaism the most reviled of all. The truth will always have its detractors. This is the story about a young teenager, sixteen-year-old Michael Sharshevsky, a truly gifted student in a *Shuvu* school, a boy who was wholly committed to growing in Torah and *mitzvos*. Michael excelled in every subject; nonetheless, he was modest, quiet and unassuming, sensitive and caring. As a result, he was loved by his teachers and peers alike.

Michael would often give up his recess to learn with a weaker student. At night, he would study on the phone for hours in order to explain a difficult concept to a classmate who just could not maintain the pace of learning in the class. Michael was a gift.

This was Michael’s third year in a *frum* school, having first been enrolled in a secular school upon his arrival from Russia. What did his parents know? Jewish is Jewish, and it was certainly better than what he had experienced in Russia. Michael, however, was a delicate soul, and the unruly atmosphere that bred disrespect and contempt for authority was too much for him to digest. He made up his mind to attend a *yeshivah* High School. His parents were supportive of his decision, and, in order to facilitate his enrollment in a *Shuvu* High School, they even moved to Yerushalayim.

Michael gravitated to *yeshivah* like a fish to water. The *kedushah*, sanctity, that permeated the halls had a profound effect on him. Every day of exposure to Torah and *mitzvos* was a day of paradise, the intense joy captivating him spiritually and giving meaning to him emotionally. Every *mitzvah*

was a breath of fresh air, a challenge to fulfill with perfection. He sought to fulfill all of the *halachic* requirements of a *mitzvah*, including the proper *kavanos*, intentions/devotions, that are intrinsic to it. It was well-known that when Michael took on a *mitzvah*, he devoted himself completely to it, never letting it go, for fear of losing a most precious treasure.

Michael loved to do things in a calm, organized fashion. Rushing was not his thing, and he considered it to be disrespectful of whatever endeavor he was taking on. While other boys would make it to school by the last bell, Michael arose early in the morning in order to take the early-morning bus, so that he would be in the *shul* with enough time to don his *Tefillin* with proper *kavanah* and be able to recite the *tefillah* without rushing. He came so early that the key to the school was entrusted to him.

One early November morning, Michael left home, key in hand, to perform his daily routine of opening the building and prepare for *davening*. That morning, however, was different, because that morning Michael would not make it. A suicide bomber boarded the number 21 bus and blew himself up, claiming the lives of eleven *kedoshim*, martyrs, among them our beloved Michael and his dear mother. Michael died holding the key to the building in his hand. When Michael's body was discovered among the wreckage, the first responders were surprised that his *yarmulke* was still on his head. The *mitzvah* for which he cared so much stayed with him until the end.

Meanwhile, the students of *Shuvu* High School in Yerushalayim continued to wait for Michael's arrival. Classes commenced – but no Michael. Something was obviously wrong. Michael never missed school. Torah learning was too much a part of him. Suddenly, an hour after classes had begun, a loud wrenching noise broke the silence. The heavy iron security gate, which Michael had opened daily, came crashing down. It had broken off from its hinges and fallen to the ground. Nothing had been wrong with the gate. It was as if the gate itself was protesting that, from now on, someone else would hold its key.