

Command Aharon and his sons, saying: “This is the law of the Elevation /Burnt offering.” (6:2)

When a commandment regarding the *korbanos*, offerings, was presented to the nation/*Kohanim*/Priests, it was introduced with the word *v’amarta*, “and you shall say,” or *dabeir*, “speak.” This is the first time that the emphatic term *tzav*, command, is employed. *Chazal* teach, that in circumstances which involve a loss of money greater urgency is required, so that the *Kohanim* act zealously in the performance of their duties and that they transmit this urgency and need for zealousness to the ensuing generations. (The commentators render a number of explanations which shed light on the monetary loss associated with the *Korban Olah*, Burnt-Offering. For our purpose, we will simply leave it as: When demands are made on our material possessions, we must exhibit greater zealousness and commitment. Our value must be such that we realize and acknowledge by our actions that spiritual ascendancy takes precedence over material comfort, etc.)

One of the primary areas in which our value system is put to the test (in my opinion) is tuition for our children. People express various attitudes concerning this expenditure, and every story has two sides. Certain givens, however, should be recognized. Schools cannot function without material support. It is not the school’s obligation to provide for the student if it is economically challenging to the school. Parents must do their part. It becomes an issue when a parent does all that he can physically do, and a school has likewise done everything to exhaust every penny that is available to them. This is where sponsors and fundraising can help. Obviously, when a student shows great promise, the school does everything it can to enroll him/her into their program. What about the boy/girl who is average or below, who hails from a home in which money is at a premium, or in which parents place a greater premium on physical comforts more than on spiritual necessities? These issues and challenges confront educators and administrators every day. They usually are seated between a rock and a hard place and have very little chance of emerging successful, unscathed. It is usually not a win/win situation. With this backdrop, I relate the following story.

“Yanko” was the name by which he was called in the neighborhood in which he grew up. Everyone knew him as Yanko. His mother, however, called him “my

Yankele.” His late father called him Yaakov. He was a religious boy, albeit not particularly knowledgeable in Jewish laws. He attended *shul* every *Shabbos* and *davened* what he could. After *davening*, he would return home, recite *Kiddush* for his lonely, widowed mother, and the two would sit and enjoy their meal in the camaraderie that a widowed mother could have with her orphaned son. They had no friends. *Shabbos* was a solemn, almost lonely, day.

The weekdays were different, because Yanko went to school, and, at school, he had friends. Unfortunately, his friends were not Jewish, because he attended public school because his mother could not afford even the reduced tuition that the Jewish day school asked her to pay. (I must add

that her inability to pay would, in most cases, not be a factor in providing for her son's Jewish education. No decent, bonafide *frum* school would turn away a Jewish child due to lack of funds. This mother was very proud and refused to accept what she perceived to be charity.) As a result, Yanko's relationship with *Yiddishkeit* was tenuous. He knew he was religious, and he did everything in his power to maintain his commitment, but, when one does not learn, one does not know, and, when one does not know, it is difficult to maintain a status quo, let alone grow in *Yiddishkeit*. Whenever Yanko's mother observed her son hanging out with his gentile friends it hurt her, but what could she do? She was a poor widow, attempting to make ends meet. She tried to provide experiences that would enhance and elevate her son's attachment to *Yiddishkeit*, but they were few and far between.

Bar Mitzvah was rapidly approaching. This meant that her son would become a Jewish adult – a man. A Jewish adult had to find his place in a *frum* society. This would not occur if he were to continue to spend his days with *goyim*. She spoke to her *rav*. "Rabbi," she began, "I have a pair of *Tefillin* for Yanko from my late husband. I am prepared to do whatever it takes to establish my son in a *frum* Jewish environment. Can you help me get him into school?" The *rav* agreed. He asked her one question, "What about Yanko? Is he ready for the change, the enormous work involved?" "He will be," she replied.

Convincing Yanko was not difficult, as he was already fed up with the behavior which his gentile friends exhibited. He was more than ready to make the transition. The *rav*, however, came up against a number of obstacles. No one was particularly interested in enrolling a boy who could hardly read Hebrew into an eighth grade that spent most of their day on the intricacies of Talmud and its commentaries. Despite receiving a number of "no's, the *rav* trudged on, leaving no stone unturned, no principal unvisited, until he found one sensitive, kind-hearted fellow who, albeit not committing himself, was willing to interview Yanko. The meeting was arranged for two weeks later, during which Yanko, his mother and the *rav* had much work to do to prepare Yanko for the interview.

Yanko was ready, excited, enthusiastic about the opportunity to join a school that taught Torah. For the first time in his thirteen years, he would finally now be like everyone else. He introduced himself to the principal as Yaakov – Yanko was gone, out, finished. The principal asked, "Yaakov, where did you learn today?" Yaakov replied with the truth, "Public school." "Have you ever studied a *blatt Gemorah*?" the principal asked. "No" was the immediate answer. "What about *Mishnayos*?" Once again, Yaakov had to say, "No."

The principal mused to himself: What was he to do with a boy who had never studied *Mishnayos* and who, despite his lack of background, wanted to learn Torah? "Yaakov," the principal asked, "What do you know?" "I can *daven* well," Yaakov replied. "That is wonderful," the principal said. "But our students are studying *Gemorah*. Your level of proficiency is equal to that of a second grader." "So what?" Yaakov countered. "I am prepared to attend a second-grade class just so that I can learn Torah."

The principal knew better. Yaakov was a sweet boy, but he was no Rabbi Akiva (who at the age of forty began his Torah journey and became *Klal Yisrael's* quintessential *Rebbe*). “Yaakov,” the principal began in an apologetic tone, “I appreciate and value your drive and attitude towards Torah. It just will not work. You are unable to study with other boys your age, and we have no room in the younger classes. I am very sorry.”

“I am willing to tour the building with you and visit each classroom to see whether I can possibly find a place where I can put a desk, so that I could learn Torah,” Yanko pleaded. The principal wanted to end the conversation, because, as far as he was concerned, it was going nowhere. He felt that he had to put a stop to this. It was becoming absurd. No young boy was going to take a tour of his school to determine whether he could find a place for himself to be a student. He said, “I am very sorry, but I cannot disturb the students during their lessons. You will have to accept my word that when I say we have no room, we have no room! I have tried; I have been patient; I have listened; I just am unable to provide you with a place in our school.”

Yaakov didn't give up, “I understand. If this is the case, I ask that you give me a signed note saying: ‘There is no room in my *yeshivah* for Yaakov.’” “What will you do with this piece of paper?” the principal asked. “What good is it to you?”

“I want this signed note,” Yaakov explained, “for when my time to leave this world arrives, and my Father in Heaven and my earthly father will ask me why I did not learn Torah, and why I did not follow in the traditions forged by my ancestors, I will be able to reply, ‘I tried; I did everything that I could, but there was no place for me. In fact, I even have written and signed proof that I was not accepted.’”

When the principal heard these innocent words, spoken with such profound sincerity, tears welled up in his eyes. He immediately stretched out his hand to Yaakov and declared, “Welcome to our school. I will find a place for you to learn Torah. You have no need for that note.”

Indeed, Yaakov spent time learning Torah, at first with the second graders. Then, in short time, he progressed to the eighth grade where he became a star pupil. He went on to *yeshivah* and *kollel*. Today, he is a distinguished *rebbe* in the school that gave him his first chance.

I write this story in tribute to the “Yaakovs” everywhere who understand the urgency of Torah study, and in the hope that those who do not have his zealousness for Torah somehow meet an administrator or principal that has the sensitivity and compassion to give them a chance.