**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas shoftim 5775**

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**Me, the Office Rabbi**

**By** [**Lori Holzman**](http://www.aish.com/authors/169452896.html)

When I was hired at a publishing company in Dumbo, Brooklyn I decided that I was not going to discuss my religious beliefs with my co-workers. It’s not that I’m ashamed of my religious beliefs, far from it. It’s just that the office is a place for work, not theological discussions. And I didn’t want to come across as a fanatic who is always talking about my religion.

But word got out that I was religious. Maybe it’s the long-sleeves I wear, or the fact that I leave early on Fridays, or that I never go with my co-workers to non-kosher restaurants after work. And now all my co-workers want to talk about is religion. A Buddhist co-worker asks me why we Jews have so many Torahs in thier synagogues. “Isn’t it kind of showing off?” she asks.

“Why does a rabbi have to bless food before you can eat it?” another co-worker asks.

“What’s the deal with Purim?” my friend Teri wonders. “Isn’t it just a Jewish Halloween?”

Usually I just reply, “That’s a good question,” and kind of shrug my shoulders. I feel frustrated. I want to answer my co-workers questions but just like there’s a separation between church and state I’ve made a separation between talking about my religious beliefs and my office.

**Dwayne, the Atheist**

Dwayne, a computer programmer in our office, asks me out. He’s not Jewish. He’s from Tennessee and doesn’t know what Mazal Tov means. I explain to him that I can’t date him because I’m Jewish. He’s disappointed; he’s already been turned down by a Southern Baptist and a Mormon, and now by a Jew.

Dwayne is an atheist. I call him an evangelical atheist because he’s always trying to convert me to atheism. He’s a nice guy, but he assumes that I’m religious out of ignorance. “The best defense for atheism is reading the Bible,” he tells me.

He assumes that I haven’t wrestled with my faith. That I haven’t carefully considered the arguments against God and chosen to be religious anyway. But I say none of this to Dwayne. I just smile and thank him for giving me food for thought.

People also come to me when they’re going through a religious crisis. “My daughter is planning on marrying a non-Jew,” a Jewish co-worker relates. “I feel like I failed. I should have raised her with more religion.”

I don’t know what to say. I want to reach out to her. I want to tell her that it’s never too late. I feel terrible for not helping her, but what am I supposed to do? My co-workers expect me to be the office Rabbi. They expect me to answer their questions, debate their arguments, and comfort them when they’re having religious difficulties, but I didn’t sign up for any of this!

**The Non-Kosher Restaurant**

My resolve to keep my religious beliefs private is tested one day when I’m invited out to lunch with our CEO, the head of my department, and a bigwig in the publishing industry. The lunch is in a non-kosher restaurant. “No problem,” a fellow religious co-worker explains to me. “What you do is order a salad and pretend to eat it while secretly slipping it into your napkin.”

What is this? The Spanish Inquisition? I call my Rabbi and he says that won’t work. It’s considered *maris ayin*—the appearance of wrong doing. If I order a salad other people will think it’s kosher and they might order it as well. “You can order a coke,” he says, “but that’s it.”

As the meeting draws near I’m not sure what to do. Everyone makes their order and then the waiter comes to me. “What would you like?” he asks.

“Just a coke,” I say.

“That’s it? Nothing to eat?”

“Yes, that will be all,” I reply. “Thank you.”

Everyone looks at me. “You can’t eat anything?” my department head asks me.

“I keep kosher,” I explain.

“Can’t you just have a salad?” the publishing bigwig asks.

The blood is rushing to my face. I’m embarrassed and uncomfortable, but I explain that the Talmud states that the vegetables in a salad could have been cut with a knife that cut non-kosher meat.

“Oh, the Talmud,” my department head says, nodding. The Talmud is a is a large, weighty collection of books and in the publishing industry if there’s one thing we respect it’s books. They start discussing the Talmud before drifting back to the purpose of our meeting.

It was terribly awkward, but once it was done it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest. I’m a religious person and everyone knows it. I can’t hide it and you know what? I don’t want to.

That restaurant lunch was a watershed event for me. I still don’t bring up religion at work, but when someone wants to discuss it with me I’m up for it. Now I take the time to answer my co-workers questions. I comfort them when their having spiritual problems and even get drawn into the rare, friendly debate. I’ve been surprised by the thirst my co-workers have for religious knowledge.

Armies need chaplains, and I guess a publishing company needs a friendly office Rabbi as well.

*Reprinted in the recent email of Aish.com*

**Roving Rabbis' Spread Across Montana on Kosher Mission**

**By Matt Volz, Associated Press**

HELENA, Mont. — Aug 2, 2015, 3:17 PM ET

Two young Orthodox rabbis have traded their studies in Brooklyn for the back roads of [Montana](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/montana.htm), where they are teaching the far-flung faithful how to keep kosher in Big Sky Country.

Eli Chaikin, 23, and Dovid Lepkivker, 25, call themselves the roving rabbis. Their mission is to reach as many of the state's approximately 3,000 Jews as they can in a month.

Their message is a gentle one — more of a nudge than a push — in what are at best loosely organized Jewish communities where relatively few people strictly follow the dietary laws.

"Any step you take is a positive step," Chaikin said. "It's not all or nothing."

Chaikin and Lepkivker are affiliated with Chabad-Lubavich movement. Chabad's Bozeman-based rabbi, Chaim Bruk, said he invited them to help him honor the 40th anniversary of a worldwide campaign to promote observance of the kosher laws by the influential Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, known by his followers as the Rebbe.

"We're celebrating a 40-year milestone when the Rebbe started this idea," Bruk said. "I decided to rock Montana with that."

The roving rabbis have visited more than 60 homes in Montana since July 7, many of them cold-calls to people they had only learned about by asking around town or from someone the next town over.

On a recent visit to Helena, they sat in Beth Pagel's living room as she told them about the traditional meals and snacks she prepares for her grandson's classmates on Jewish holidays. She said she hasn't made many Jewish friends since moving to Montana's capital city from [Florida](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/florida.htm) seven years ago, but she was delighted to find two doctors in town who are Jewish.

Pagel readily offered that she is not kosher but told them that she knows the rules: "I'm not going to offer you a cheeseburger," she said.

The rabbis were polite, never disagreeing with their host, but they kept on message.

"I would venture to say you're much more kosher than you think," Lepkivker said.

The rabbis handed her a pamphlet on keeping kosher and pointed out the listing of all the certification symbols found on food products. They ventured into the kitchen, where the rabbis scrutinized everything, the spices, bread, wine and the canned goods.

Then they delivered their request: Just change one non-kosher brand she regularly buys to a kosher one.

Pagel nodded agreeably, but later shook her head no when a reporter asked if she would change anything as a result of the rabbis' visit.

Chaikin and Lepkivker said they aren't discouraged when their message seems to fall on deaf ears. After all, change doesn't come overnight, Lepkivker said.

After another home visit, the rabbis headed to a grocery store to meet a family for a lesson in kosher shopping.

Karen Semple greeted the rabbis with two grandchildren in tow, 12-year-old Ashlie Weitner and her infant brother Levi. Semple told them Ashlie moved to Montana earlier this year and was eager to learn how to keep kosher in her new home.

The group walked aisle by aisle, as the rabbis pulled products to point out all the different labels.

"Dairy's going to be a little bit complicated." Chaikin said.

"All the meat is going to be a problem," he said in another section.

Then they made a good discovery. "Here's our kosher ice cream," he said, holding up a container of Breyer's vanilla.

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| In this July 27, 2015 photo, orthodox Jewish rabbis Dovid Lepkivker, right, and Eli Chaikin, center, inspect packages of bagels with Mary Semple, left, and her grandson Levi Weitner in a grocery store in Helena, Mont. Lepkivker and Chaikin are on a mission to reach as many Montana Jews as they can in a month to teach them how to keep kosher. (AP Photo/Matt Volz) |

* **Roving Rabbis Eli Chaikkin and Dovid Lepkivker showing Karen Semple a container of kosher Breyer’s vanilla ice cream.**

At the end of the half-hour tour, Lepkivker drove the lesson home. "How much did we see here that wasn't kosher, except for regular dairy and meat?"

Chaikin answered for him: "Probably 80 percent of what we saw is OK."

They said their goodbyes, and Chaikin and Lepkivker climbed back into their sport-utility vehicle with freshly pressed spare white shirts and black trousers in the back seat, ready for their next destination: Montana's farming communities and American Indian reservations near the Canadian border.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Eivev 5775 email of Daas by Betzalel Bassman. The article printed by the Associated Press was distributed to hundreds of subscribing newspapers across the United States.*

**The Baal Shem Tov and the Power of the Prayers of Thieves**

Imagine a regular day. You are burdened by the daily pressures of earning a livelihood and raising a family. In addition you carry the weight of so many silent psychological obstacles, you feel like you're drowning.  Know that within these challenges lie great sparks and opportunities, for there is a deep light contained within our darkness that when extracted is infinitely greater than any ordinary light.

They tell the story of a young widow who once came crying to the Baal Shem Tov. “I recently lost my husband. Now my young child, my only child, is lying gravely ill. The doctors have given up hope. Please, Baal Shem Tov, please do something to save my child.”

The Baal Shem Tov, whose heart was always open especially to the needy and oppressed, soothed and reassured her saying that she should go home and her child will be fine. He then proceeded to gather together ten of his holy hidden Tzaddikim, to pray for the child’s welfare and immediate healing.

But to no avail. As much as they tried opening their souls and in turn opening the gates of heaven, they sadly were unsuccessful. The Baal Shem Tov sensed that the decree in heaven was sealed and could not be reversed by the Tzaddikim’s prayers.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, was not one to take no for an answer and give up. He fell upon an idea. He asked his wagon driver to prepare the wagon and the horses. They were going for a trip to the forest. He directed the driver to go to a particular spot, which surprised the driver, being that this was known to be a dangerous area where thieves lurked, and everyone would avoid.

Upon their arrival, the Baal Shem Tov climbed off the wagon, and within a few moment to the chagrin of the driver, they were surrounded by several thieves. When the head of the band of thieves saw that it was the Baal Shem Tov, he put down his weapon and with wonder and astonishment asked: “Baal Shem Tov, what are you doing here in the wild?”

The Baal Shem Tov replied: “Listen, I need to speak with you. I need your help.”

All of them wondered what  could the Baal Shem Tov possibly need from lowly thieves. The Baal Shem Tov continued speaking to the band leader: “I need you to gather ten of your thieves and come with me to pray for a sick child.”

The head thief didn’t understand, but since the Baal Shem Tov was requesting he complied. He gathered a minyan of his partners in crime, and they prayed with the Baal Shem Tov. The child miraculously recovered.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his surprised students, “how were you able to accomplish with ten thieves more than you could have accomplished with ten Tzaddikim?!” the Baal Shem Tov replied: “Simple. I saw that all the gates in heaven were locked. And I needed someone to break in.”

There is a profound message here. We are all thieves in our own way. Now once a person has transgressed, he has the power not only to correct his ways, but his very crimes can teach him and all of us new ways to break in and reach heights that honest people can never reach.

This teaches us a double lesson: In our own lives we must celebrate rather than despair over our confrontation with our struggles and challenges.  As leaders, parents, and educators, we must not run or shun those afflicted by the challenges of life.  Like Moses, our greatest  wealth will come when we discover and extract the sparks hidden in the chips of the human soul. There are many.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5775 email of Chabad of Great Neck, NY.*

**Author of Lekha Dodi**

**By Rabbi Yosef Bitton**

Rabbi Shelomo haLevi Alqabets was born in Salonica, Greece, in the year 1500. His father was Moshe halevi Alqabets, a refugee from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

Rabbi Shelomo studied Tora, and particularly Qabbala, under Rabbi Yosef Taitatsaq. In 1529 he married the daughter of the philanthropist Isaac Cohen. Soon after their wedding, he and his wife determined to settle in Erets Israel.

In a speech that he delivered before he left the city he said that once we have the possibility of living n Israel, even if the conditions there are far from ideal, it is the duty of every Jew to return to Israel to help building the Bet haMiqdash, to study Tora and serve HaShem with passion.

**Brief Stay in Adrianapolis**

On his way to Israel he stayed for two years in the city of Adrianapolis (today Edirne, in Turkey), The townsmen begged him to instruct them in his ways of serving HaShem. He refused to stay saying that only in the Holy Land one could fathom the secrets of Tora.  He agreed, however, to write for them several works while in town. One of these books was Berit HaLevi, an explanation of the Hagada of Pesah, dedicated to his disciples inAdrianapolis.

Rabbi Shlomo arrived to Safed around 1535. Rabbi Alqabets' passion for Israel inspired many of his community members from Salonica and Adrianopolis to come with him to Israel. Among the people who came with him was his brother in law, the famous rabbi Moshe Cordobero (1522-1570). Rabbi Moshe Cordobero, was probably the most important qabbalist of his time, until the Ari haQadosh.

He had a great respect and admiration for Rabbi Alqabets, and even though he was married to his sister,  he always addressed him as his teacher. Rabbi Alqabets was indeed his first teacher. But over the time, Rabbi Cordobero grew immensely in his learning and fame as a qabbalist and talmudist. Rabbi Alqabets read his writings and learned from him and addressed Rabbi Cordobero as his teacher, a testimony to Rabbi Alqabets great humility. Rabbi Alqabets and Rabbi Cordobero created a circle of pious men dedicated to study Tora and in Tsefat.

On his way to Erets Israel rabbi Alqabets met also with Rabbi Yosef Caro, who was also on his way to Erets Israel. They became good friends and shared many years together. It is said that it was Rabbi Alqabets who inspired Maran Rabbi Yosef Caro to establish the Tiqun Lel Shabu'ot, a long Tora study session which takes place during the entire night of Shabu'ot.

With Rabbi Alqabets and Rabbi Cordobero in town, the city of Safed became the center of Qabbala. And with the presence of Rabbi Yosef Caro and his teacher, Rabbi Yaaqob Berab, Safed was also the city of Halakha.

Rabbi Alqabets was a very charismatic speaker, a great teacher, and a fantastic community leader and mentor to his students. He made taqanot, internal rules, for his students. He established for example, that the students should behave with humbleness one to another.  And when a student sees one of his peers doing something wrong he should approach his friend discreetly and explain him his mistake. The one who was rebuked, should not refute or say anything in his own defense before three days have passed, so he has time to reflect dispassionately on his own actions.

**BOOKS**

Rabbi Alqabets wrote many books, mostly commentaries on books of the Bible and many books on Qabbala. Some of them are: Manot HaLevi, on the Book of Esther. Ayelet Ahabim, on Song of Songs. Shoresh Yishai, on the Book of Ruth. Or Tzadikim, a book of sermons

Despite the many books he wrote and the great influence he exerted on many prominent rabbis, Rabbi Alqabets is famous for his liturgical poem Lekha Dodi, an hymn sung at the inauguration of the Shabbat. Lekha Dodi was composed according to qabbalistic teachings, expressing the yearning for the final redemption. He based the theme, "Come my beloved to meet the bride" on the Talmudic description in Shabbat 119a "Rabbi Hanina robed himself and stood at sunset of Sabbath eve [and] exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the queen Shabbat.'

Rabbi Shelomo Alqabets passed on in 1580.

*Reprinted from the August 12, 2015 Halacha of the Day email from the Shebar Sephardic Center.*

**Judaism in the Eyes**

**Of a Non-Jew**

**By Bernice Go**



**A Non-Jew Accidentally Discovers the Meaning and Wisdom of Torah.**

It all started as mild curiosity two and a half years ago, a few months after my 22nd birthday. I had made an Orthodox Jewish friend online (in a Harry Potter fan community, of all places) who one Friday had offhandedly said to me, “I can’t chat with you tomorrow because it’s Shabbos.”

“What’s Shabbos?” I asked.

Little did I know that that one question would be the first of thousands. My questions at first were all basic things: questions about holidays, keeping kosher and other traditions. I thought it was phenomenally interesting, learning about a whole different culture and belief system that I had never encountered before, the Philippines being home only to a handful of Jews.

Everything was going nice and smoothly until one day I thought to myself: None of this will mean anything to me until I try them out for myself.

So I started with a “small” thing. What would it feel like to say *brachos*, blessings? I picked one to experiment with:*Asher yatzar*, the blessing one says after going to the bathroom. I promised myself that from this day on, every time I left the bathroom and washed my hands, I would say this blessing. It felt silly at first. But slowly, it began to sink in and eventually I started reciting the blessing with a smile on my face. *Hey, my body is working! Thank you, G-d!*

I started to learn more blessings, sticking to the simpler, more “general” ones and those that I felt comfortable saying as a non-Jew. I said *Modeh Ani* first thing in the morning as I opened my eyes, and delighted saying each of the morning blessings that were applicable to me. I recited the bedtime Shema with as much intention as I could muster. Eventually I just started thanking G-d for everything, including every time my car would start properly. The Jewish blessings were – ARE amazing. I was suddenly noticing all the little things I was doing throughout the day. They made me realize just how many blessings I received every single moment – let alone every single day! And it just drove home the fact that all of this came from the Almighty. All I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you, Hashem.

Then I thought that maybe I was just lucky that I happened to pick blessings to start to put into practice. It was time to select another mitzvah to try out. I experimented and had my own “pseudo Shabbos” which simply consisted of me shutting my cellphone off for one night a week. After several weeks, I couldn’t believe how much those few disconnected hours affected me psychologically and emotionally. I actually began to look forward to that one night of mine.

It also taught me focus. It became easier to be productive during the week, knowing I had a set time later on that I could spend focusing solely on recharging, reconnecting with myself and G-d, and enjoying my family.

That same thinking eventually spread to other parts of my life also. For example, I became less impatient with my little niece and instead of counting down the time until I could send her back to her mom, I began being more present and enjoying our time together.

I began to appreciate the amazing impact these simple actions were having on my life. It was crazy and intense and I wanted more. So I began squeezing in learning Torah every spare moment of the day and sometimes stayed up an extra hour or two into the night. I read reams of articles on Aish.com and I listened to Torah classes from Torah Anytime in the car while driving and managed to listen to two to three classes a week. I actually started hoping to get stuck in traffic.

I learned about the concept of *tikkun olam*, gained a deeper understanding of free will, and studied *lashon hara*(gossip) and its effects on the world. I slowly adjusted my attitude towards happiness, deciding to be happy right now instead of “when so and so happens.” I decided I should start wearing skirts more often and to make sure I didn’t back out on my promise, I picked out nearly all of my jeans out of my closet and donated them away. I started hanging out at the local Chabad house where I’d have conversations with the rebbetzin about Noahide laws.



I was reading Psalms, giving *tzedakah*, and actively looking out for daily opportunities to do *chessed*(acts of kindness). I started to understand that I live in G-d’s world; He makes the rules, not me. And I continued experimenting: I tried my best not to listen to music during the Three Weeks leading up to Tisha B’Av, I did some soul searching during Elul and drew up a list of resolutions for Rosh Hashanah. I also began exercising more regularly, being more careful about what I ate. By this time I knew that as important as it was to grow spiritually, it was also important to stay physically healthy. In short, I began doing things purposefully.

I began to understand that I am my choices, that I am whatever cannot be taken away from me. As one speaker put it, “The only thing that is truly mine is that which I gave away.” That concept turned my priorities upside down and over time, I went from looking for what I could get to looking for what I could give. I learned that G-d controls absolutely everything, and every single encounter and experience I have every single day is a message from Him. Related to that is the fact that all I can control are my reactions to these events.

These lessons made me a much calmer person and I spent more time studying and analyzing what G-d could possibly be trying to tell me, my reactions, and what I could improve within myself – rather than dwelling on how annoying that other person was. I learned that if it’s not painful, you aren’t growing. So I began to push myself more frequently out of my comfort zone, looking for people who could give me constructive criticism and solid advice as opposed to people who would simply compliment me. I slowly began going for the harder choice because I knew they would pay off more in the long run.

Sometimes I can’t believe that I discovered the power of Torah by playing an online Harry Potter game. I am constantly thanking Hashem for giving me the opportunity to go through this journey.

My journey has been made up of hundreds of baby steps spread out over weeks, months, and years. It isn’t as black and white as this narrative makes it sound. There were countless times I took one step forward and two steps back. But I have learned that the most important thing in a spiritual journey is not strength or intelligence, but persistence.

I do not know where I am headed or where all this will end. I am currently opting to still remain a non-Jew. All I am truly certain of is that my life has become so much more meaningful since I began taking Torah seriously and that I don’t ever want to stop learning it. Torah has taught me to open my eyes and see what's really important, to stop wasting my time, money, and energy on things that simply do not and will not ever matter because they are only fleeting. The Torah isn’t only meant to be learned, it is meant to be lived. And the absolute best part about it is that it works. Don’t take my word for it. Try it yourself.

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank the many Rabbis and Rebbetzins at Aish.com, TorahAnytime.com, the Accidental Talmudist page on Facebook, and Chabad Manila. May the Almighty continue to bless you all!

*Reprinted from last week’s email of Aish.com*

**Pearls of Wisdom… A Word for the Ages**

**The Arizal and the Danger of Ignoring a Poor Man’s Plight**

A story is told that the Arizal was once sitting in a field near Tzefas, teaching the secrets of the Torah to a select group of students. Suddenly, he stopped his lecture and declared, “I hear an announcement resounding throughout all the heavens! A decree has been cast upon Tzefas. A huge swarm of locusts will descend upon it and will devour every bit of vegetation, all because of one poor man, Yaakov Eltaratz. His neighbors have not helped him, and he is complaining right now about the ways of Hashem! We must hurry to collect some money and give it to him. Perhaps that will calm the Divine anger!”

Immediately, they collected the money they had on them and sent it with Rabbi Yitzchok HaKohen, who ran to Yaakov's home, where he found the poor man crying.

Rabbi Yitzchok asked, “Why are you crying?”

Yaakov moaned, “How can I not cry? It is not enough that I am poor, but my water jug just broke, and I have no money for another one. So I am crying before Hashem, ‘Master of the world! Why must I suffer? Am I a bigger rasha than other people?’”

Rabbi Yitzchok then told him, “Your words have caused a terrible decree in Shamayim!” and he explained about how the Arizal had sent him. Yaakov was shocked to hear what the Arizal said, and he begged Hashem to forgive him and his neighbors and rescind the decree.

When Rabbi Yitzchok returned to the field, the Arizal said, “Because of all of you, the decree has been overturned!” He then continued to teach, as if nothing had happened.

Suddenly, a huge cloud of locusts appeared and the sky darkened. The students became frightened but the Arizal calmed them and said, “Don't worry! Yaakov has been forgiven and the decree is annulled!”

A powerful wind abruptly sprang up, caught the enormous swarm, and carried it into the sea! From that day onwards, the people of Tzefas were very careful to provide the poor with all their needs, and Yaakov devoted all his time to learning Torah and was soon so successful that he was eventually appointed as the Rav of a nearby town!

*Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5775 email of “Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Insights” compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*

**L’Maaseh… A Tale to Remember**

**Rav Aharon Kotler and**

**The Boy on the Kibbutz**

A few years ago, the great Mashgiach from Eretz Yisroel, Rav Don Segal, visited America and addressed a group of high school boys who were struggling with their Yiddishkeit. He spoke encouragingly to them, telling them that they each had the potential to become great in the world of Torah if they made the effort to do so.

To illustrate his point, he related a short story about Rav Aharon Kotler. Years ago, on a visit to Eretz Yisroel, Rav Aharon gave shiurim in various locations around the country.

One day, he went to a Kibbutz to give a shiur. Among those in the shiur was a young boy who lived on the Kibbutz. At one point, this boy raised his hand to ask Rav Aharon a question.

Rav Aharon responded, “That is a very good question.” Turning to the little boy, he asked, “Do you go to Yeshivah?”

The young boy told him that he did not attend Yeshivah. Rav Aharon Kotler said, “A boy who asks such good questions belongs in a Yeshivah!” Rav Aharon’s words motivated this little boy to insist that his parents send him to Yeshivah to learn Torah.

“Do you know who that young boy on the Kibbutz was?” Rav Segal asked the high school boys he was addressing. “That boy was me. Rav Aharon saw that I had great potential, and the truth is, we all have great potential. We just have to make the effort to tap into that potential, and then we can achieve great things in life!”

*Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5775 email of “Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Insights” compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*

**From Kaifeng to the Kotel: Chinese Jews in Jerusalem**

**By Michael Freund**

What made Li, Fan and Xue’s journey so unique was the history they were making, as they became the first group of Chinese Jews to join Israeli army since the modern rebirth of the Jewish state.

On a brisk winter day seven months ago, three young men from Jerusalem named Moshe Li, Gideon Fan and Yonatan Xue showed up at the military induction center in Tel Hashomer to formally enlist in the IDF. Along with thousands of other young people, they were going through an Israeli rite of passage early that morning, setting aside some of the best years of their lives to protect and defend the Jewish people.

The usual mix of excitement, angst and patriotism was in the air, as parents hugged children and friends embraced one another, cognizant of the weighty step they were all about to take. Ostensibly, though, there was nothing out of the ordinary about the scene, which repeats itself a number of times throughout the year.

But what made Li, Fan and Xue’s journey so unique was the history they were making, as they became the first group of Chinese Jews to don the olivegreen uniform of the Israeli army since the modern rebirth of the Jewish state.

The trio all hail from Kaifeng, China, and are descendants of the city’s Jewish community, which flourished for over a millennium before assimilation and intermarriage brought about its collective demise in the 19th century.

They had traveled a long way, geographically and Jewishly, to reclaim their roots and rejoin the nation of Israel.

And what’s more, these three young men, all of whom were 25 at the time, would have been forgiven had they not served, as the Israeli military has a decided preference for young and impressionable 18-year-olds.

But ever since coming on aliya in 2009 thanks to Shavei Israel, the organization that I head, they were insistent: We want to contribute to our country and our people.

After enduring some prolonged bureaucratic nightmares which might have broken lesser men, they completed their formal conversions back to Judaism along with four other Kaifeng Jewish descendants, and then set about the task of learning Hebrew and becoming Israeli.

Simultaneously, they all approached the IDF conscription office and submitted the same, plaintive request to serve. And the answer they received was slow in coming but adamant: Thanks, but no thanks.

For months, Li, Fan and Xue persisted, refusing to accept no as an answer, in the process clearly demonstrating that they had imbibed some of our local Israeli customs rather well.

Finally, thanks to the intervention of former IDF chief rabbi Brig.-Gen. (res.) Avichai Rontzki, the young Chinese Jews saw their dream fulfilled as the army relented and agreed to accept them into its fold.

Upon receiving the news, I met with the three of them to offer my congratulations and best wishes as they embarked on a new chapter in their lives.

But when I asked Li why he was so insistent on serving, his answer struck me like a Zionist thunderbolt. Looking me straight in the eye, and without a drop of cynicism or sarcasm in his voice, he declared: “My ancestors lived in China for over 1,000 years before assimilating, so they didn’t do anything for Israel and the Jewish people. I want to make up for that. I want to do something.”

The symbolism of that moment, as well as Li’s dedication to Israel, is powerful and highly emotive, embodying in a microcosm the tentative rebirth that is taking place among the remnants of Chinese Jewry.

Jews are believed to have first settled in Kaifeng, which was one of China’s imperial capitals, in the eighth century during the Song Dynasty, or perhaps even earlier. Scholars say that they were Sephardi Jewish merchants from Persia or Iraq who made their way eastward along the Silk Route and settled in Kaifeng with the blessing of the Chinese emperor. The Jews quickly established themselves in the city, where they found an environment of tolerance and acceptance, in sharp contrast to much of the rest of the Diaspora.

In 1163, Kaifeng’s Jews built a large and beautiful synagogue, which was subsequently renovated and rebuilt on numerous occasions throughout the centuries. At its peak, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Kaifeng Jewish community may have numbered as many as 5,000.

By the 17th century, a number of Chinese Jews had attained high ranks in the Chinese civil service, but along with success came the blight of assimilation – which took an increasingly heavy toll on the community and its cohesion. As a result, by the mid-1800s, the Chinese Jews’ knowledge and practice of Judaism had largely faded away.

The last rabbi of the community is believed to have died in the early part of the 19th century, and the synagogue building was all but destroyed by a series of floods that struck the city in the 1840s and thereafter.

Nevertheless, against all odds, Kaifeng’s Jews struggled to preserve their Jewish identity, passing down whatever little they knew to their progeny.

In the 1920s, a Chinese scholar named Chen Yuan wrote a series of treatises on religion in China, including “A study of the Israelite religion in Kaifeng.” Yuan noted the decline the community had endured but took pains to recall that the remaining descendants still tried as best they could to observe various customs and rituals, including that of Yom Kippur.

“Although the Kaifeng Jews today no longer have a temple where they can observe this holy day,” Yuan wrote, “they still fast and mourn without fail on the 10th day of the month.”

Nowadays, in this city of over 4.5 million, there are still several hundred people – perhaps a thousand at most – who are descendants of the Jewish community.

A decade ago, on a visit to the city, I came to meet dozens of young Chinese Jewish descendants, all of whom were clamoring to learn more about their heritage and reconnect with Israel. Since then, Shavei Israel has brought more than a dozen on aliya, most of whom now live in Jerusalem, forming the nascent core of a Chinese Jewish community in the capital.

One young Chinese Jew, Yaakov Wang, dreams of going to yeshiva to study for the rabbinate, which would make him the first Chinese rabbi from Kaifeng in more than 200 years. Others have completed the tour guide course offered by the Tourism Ministry, and now work with the growing numbers of Chinese tourists visiting our shores.

But whatever the future may hold for them, these young pioneers from Kaifeng are grateful to be in Zion, which their ancestors had always dreamed of. As Xue once told me, “Michael, when you brought us to Israel in October 2009, you took us straight to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and when I stood there I was very excited.

“I felt that I was at home,” he continued, “I said the Shema prayer, and my deep Jewish soul was elevated. G-d gave me a very big present.”

And, I would add, He gave us all one, too. What made Li, Fan and Xue’s journey so unique was the history they were making, as they became the first group of Chinese Jews to join Israeli army since the modern rebirth of the Jewish state

*Reprinted from the August 12, 2015 email of the Canadian B’nei Brith Media Scan. The article is reprinted from The Jerusalem Post.*

**Short Story of the Week**

**How Rav Avigdor Miller Taught Himself To Better Appreciate the Gift of Breathing**

As seen in Feature Insights, Rav Avigdor Miller, of blessed memory, was famous for his emphasis on appreciating the wonders and beauty of nature and the vast wisdom of the world that Hashem created among a multitude of other qualities from which we can learn so much.

The following classic story epitomizes his constant focus on appreciation for Hashem. Once, a grandchild visited Rav Miller at home and was puzzled to see his grandfather with his face in the sink filled with water. After a few minutes, Rav Miller stood up, and breathed deeply. "The air is so wonderful," he said.

His grandchild asked, "Why was your face in the water for so long that you couldn't even breathe properly?"

Rav Miller replied, "On my way home, someone started talking to me and commented that lately, the air has been polluted. I didn't want my appreciation of Hashem's air to lessen, so I decided to deepen my appreciation of air. After depriving myself of air for just a short while, I now am even more thankful to Hashem for providing us with such wonderful air.”

(Story told by Rav Shmuel Brog)

**Comment:** It is a sad reality that we only appreciate something once it's gone. A close one is appreciated after he or she dies. Success is truly appreciated after one falls from grace. This is why Rabbi Miller's act of "pretending" to lose something to really be grateful is a genius trick.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5775 email of IVORT sent out by Reb Mendel Berlin.*