

SHABBOS STORIES FOR PARSHAS ZOS HABERACHA 5779

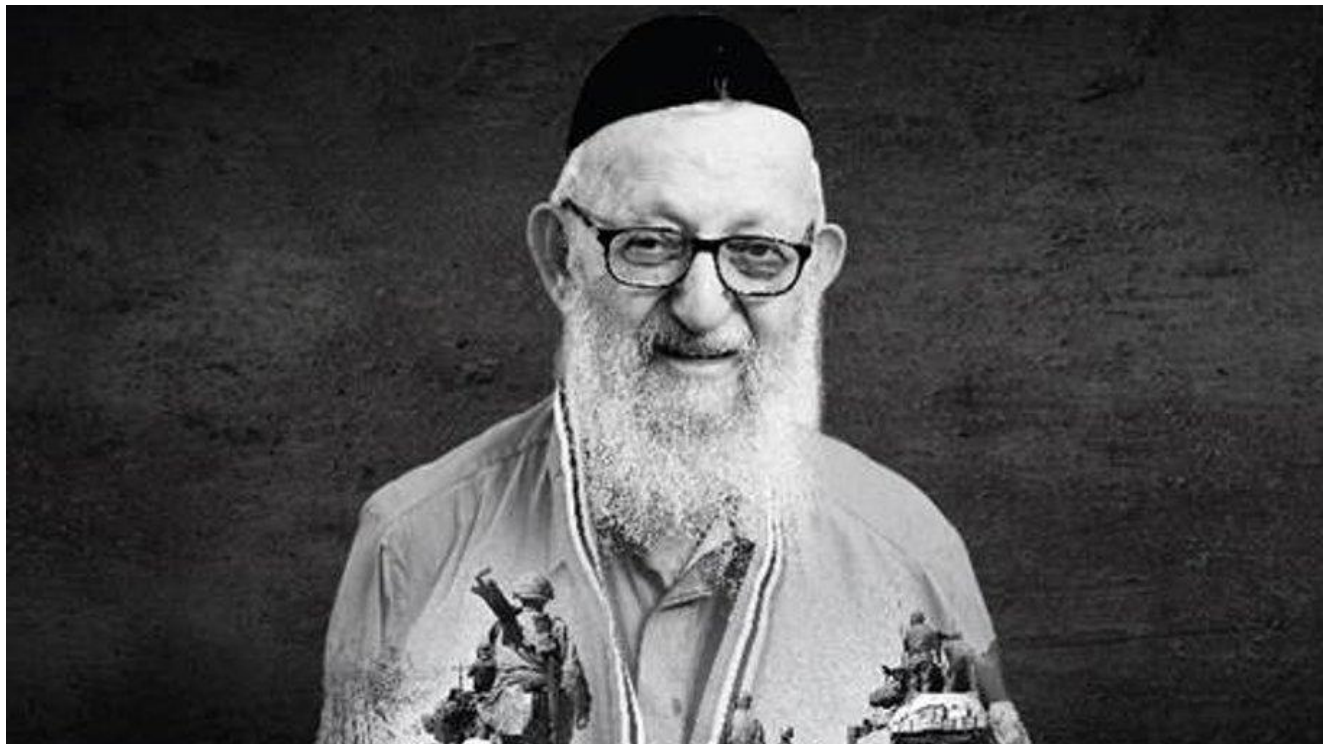
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My Bargain with G-d in North Korea POW Camp

By Shlomi Gil



Leonard Wisper's heroic return to Judaism.

Back in 1951, American draftee Leonard Wisper lay critically injured in a North Korean POW camp. With chances of survival minimal, he made a bargain with G-d that if he'd survive, he'd start keeping mitzvot.

The Korean War, which lasted from June 1950 to July 1953, began when communist-backed North Korea – aided by China and the Soviet Union – invaded South Korea. The United Nations, with the US providing 90 percent of the military personnel, came to South Korea's defense.



Leonard Wisper in U.S. military uniform during the Korean War

After the first two months of war, South Korean and dispatched US forces were forced back to a small area in the south known as the Pusan Perimeter. A counter offensive saw the UN forces beginning to advance, only to be cut off again by a million-strong Chinese army who joined with the North Koreans. During these reversals of fortune, South Korea's capital city of Seoul changed hands four times. The fighting ended three years after it began, incurring a death toll of 2.5 million people.

Wisper, who was 21 in 1950, didn't dream he'd be shipped out to join the forces on the Korean Peninsula. He grew up in Chicago to a Jewish family that had immigrated to the US from Poland so that his grandfather wouldn't be drafted to the Polish army.

"The *Zeide* was an observant Jew," says Wisper, "but when he came to America, the challenges of keeping mitzvot properly were too daunting, and so he went back to Poland, where he was later murdered in the Holocaust along with most of the family that remained there. My father stayed in America, though, but within a few years, his mitzvah observance dropped."

Wisper says the store where his father found a job required him to work on Shabbos, and like many others, "he felt he had no choice. He had to support us. The next generation, my siblings and me, grew up in a home where we would go to shul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and didn't eat *chametz* on Pesach, but that was about it."

Lenny Wisper was in college and holding down a good job in auto repair – with no desire to serve in the military – when the draft notice came in the summer of 1951. "Army service was not part of my dreams," he says. "I had suffered from a spinal injury and was sure they wouldn't take me."

But the US, still reeling from World War II just a few years before, was under tremendous pressure and needed manpower. "At first they sent the American forces who'd remained in Japan to fight in Korea," he says, "but a few months after the war broke out they began to call up thousands of soldiers, especially since the Chinese, with their million-man army, joined North Koreans. So although I was far from perfectly fit, I was shipped out."

We didn't know much about Judaism, but when you're on your way to war at the other end of the world, who wouldn't want to pray?

Lenny was sent for basic training, and a few days before Yom Kippur, he boarded a military ship headed for Japan, along with 1,500 other soldiers trying to battle their seasickness on the way. "There was a religious soldier, maybe he even served as a rabbi, who gathered the Jewish soldiers to *daven* on Yom Kippur. We *davened*, even though we didn't know much about Judaism, and most of us were not religious at all. But when you're on your way to war at the other end of the world, who wouldn't want to pray?"

When the ship docked on Japanese shores, the fighters debarked and were sent to another training course before being deployed to the front. "At the time," recalls Wisper, "the only automatic weapons we had were some submachine guns left over from World War Two and that's what we used for training. Those guns had long bayonets, and they taught us how to attack first with the bayonets in order to stab the enemy before using the bullets."

Then the soldiers departed on small boats to Pusan, the large port city in South Korea that became its temporary capital during the war. The biggest shock for the thousands of soldiers coming from the mighty United States, he says, was the discovery that fighting against the North Koreans and their Chinese communist allies was an extremely complicated and painful endeavor.

“There was a lot of frustration,” Wisper, who worked as a machine gunner, says. “It was sort of like a ping pong game, but with bodies as the score card. Sometimes it was North Korea that captured territory and we liberated it and then they captured it again. Other times, we captured territory, the North Koreans liberated it, and we captured it again. This went on over and over again. In every such round, thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed.

Wisper realized that every day he was still alive was something of a miracle. “One of my jobs was to bring back the American soldiers who fell in these battles. The scenes were indescribably gruesome. Some of these men were my friends, they were in my unit. The South Koreans weren’t prepared for the invasion, and we, the American soldiers, needed time to mobilize against the intensity of the North Korean and Chinese forces. One time we got to a field where I saw some American soldiers lying on the ground. At first I thought they were resting, but then I realized they’d been killed by shelling.”

Split-Second Salvation

A few months into battle, Wisper realized that every day he was still alive was something of a miracle. And then came the direct hit to his outpost in the middle of the night.

“My partner was killed instantly, and I was knocked unconscious,” he says, replaying the scene he’s relived thousands of times over the last six decades. “When I came to, I heard the voices of Chinese and North Korean soldiers, but I couldn’t move. The pain was excruciating. I didn’t feel my legs, and one of my eyes was badly injured. It took me a few seconds to realize I was surrounded by enemy soldiers.”

When he was finally able to raise his head, he saw his friends, the other soldiers in his unit, lying sprawled all around. Most of them were dead; a few were critically wounded. “I also realized that I was going to be taken into captivity and we’d all heard the horrifying rumors about what happened to Americans taken prisoner by the North Koreans. I was in agony, but I forced myself not to moan or make a sound, hoping the enemy troops would leave the area without noticing I was alive – maybe that way I’d survive.”

It might have been a good plan, but a few minutes later, another injured soldier lying nearby began to groan in pain. The Chinese captors quickly came

over, realizing they had a prize – living, wounded Americans. Seconds later, Wisper and the others still among the living were dragged to a hiding place.

“I was thrown into a small bunker in the area,” he remembers. “The Chinese would build makeshift bunkers on all the battlefronts, and the one they dragged me into was already occupied by three frightened, injured Americans. To his credit, the Chinese soldier who had captured me pulled out a rice ball that was probably meant for him, and tossed it in my direction.

It was pretty clear that only a miracle could save me – but how to pray to G-d who I had basically ignored my entire life up to then?

“Still, I was pretty sure I was dead meat,” he continues. “For the Chinese, I was a burden because I was injured. This was just a holding bunker and they were going to march us to a bigger detention center, but since I couldn’t walk and I’d hold up the convoy, I assumed they’d just shoot me and finish me off.

“At that point it was pretty clear that only a miracle could save me – but how to pray to G-d who I had basically ignored my entire life up to then? So I focused and said, with every fiber of Jewishness I could muster up into my consciousness, ‘Merciful Father, if You help me get out of here I will return to You.’ I didn’t know the words of the prayers or Psalms then. I just spoke to G-d in my language, in my own words. I promised that I would begin to keep Torah and mitzvot if I emerged from there alive.”

After half a day in the bunker, bleeding and wounded, Wisper heard shelling and soldiers shouting in English. He realized that American troops had come to rescue them.

That split second, I got the strength to leap over, grab the grenade before it detonated and throw it back out of the bunker.

“An hour later, one of the Chinese guards peeked into the bunker, looked in my direction, and emitted a string of curses as he pulled out a grenade. That’s when I realized we were really finished. In a few seconds he’d toss the grenade into the bunker and we’d be blown to smithereens.

“I watched as he pulled the pin and threw the thing in – and somehow, in that split second, I got the strength to leap over, grab it before it detonated and throw it back out of the bunker, where it exploded in a blast of smoke and fire. The soldiers who were with me hugged me with a joy that’s hard to describe. ‘You saved our lives!’ they shouted. A few minutes later, American soldiers came and rescued us.

“They put me on a military jeep and took me to a field hospital, where they began to extract the shrapnel from my body. The shrapnel was embedded all over and it took hours to get the pieces out. One piece was a millimeter from my eye – only a miracle saved my vision.” Wisper was later sent to a hospital in northern Japan for recovery, and then returned to the US.

The Promise

The war raged on for another two years; with the cease-fire in 1953, Wisper was discharged from the army, but the memory of that oath in the bunker loomed large. “When I promised to do *teshuvah* (return to Jewish observance), I didn’t really understand what it meant,” he admits, “but when I returned home I discovered that it wasn’t so simple. There was no *teshuvah* movement then, no Aish and no Jewish outreach, but I knew I had to change my life.”



Aryeh (Leonard) Wisper with the South Korean ambassador.

He began to seek out Jewish centers in Chicago, but, he says, “In those days, even the religious rabbis in Chicago were pretty liberal by today’s standards. So I began to go to *shul* on Shabbos and to keep a few mitzvot, but I didn’t have the fire – I felt somehow that I wasn’t really fulfilling my promise.”

In the summer of 1957, Wisper made his first visit to Israel. It was a time when everyone had to dig in their heels – it was toward the end of the Austerity period when staple foods and supplies were rationed, and when Jordanian snipers

and infiltrators were a threat to daily life – but Wisper was unfazed. Something inside shifted, and when he returned to Chicago, he began wearing a *yarmulke* in public and had become fully mitzvah-observant.

At the time, a religious Israeli girl who worked at the Israeli consulate in Chicago was suggested as a match for him, and they were married soon after.

The Wispers made *aliyah* in 1965 with their two daughters. They first lived in Jerusalem, where they had a son, and soon afterward, they moved to Bnei Brak, right across the street from the great Rav Aharon Leib Steinman *ztz"l*.



Aryeh Leibish Wisper's "Ambassador for

“He was our special neighbor,” says Wisper. “I was still pretty new to Judaism, and for years I’d go in and ask him every halachic question I had. That was before he was ‘discovered,’ before tens of thousands of Jews would converge on his little, dilapidated apartment. But the Rosh Yeshivah never changed. Even as the leader of Orthodox Jewry, he always treated me the same way he did in the earlier years, and that’s how he treated everyone else as well.”

Wisper didn't think too much about his Korean adventures until 2011, when he heard that Korean ambassador to Israel, Ma Young-sam, was looking for Jewish soldiers who had fought in the Korean War, so that his government could express its gratitude. South Korean embassies annually honor veterans in the 16 countries that fought the North under the United Nations banner.

While Israel, a two-year-old struggling country at the time, didn't send soldiers to fight in the Korean War, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion did support America's pro-South efforts against the Soviet Union-backed North, and also sent \$100,000 in food items to South Korea – a substantial gift at the time, especially considering Israel's own precarious situation.

The Korean envoy spent several years tracking Jewish war veterans and discovered that about 4,000 Jewish soldiers were dispatched to South Korea. In Israel, he discovered seven veterans, Wisper among them.

Sixty years after Wisper saved his American comrades in that enemy bunker, he received a medal of honor from the South Korean ambassador.

Sixty years after Wisper saved his American comrades in that enemy bunker, he received a medal of honor from the South Korean ambassador, and – accompanied by his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, some of whom probably never even heard of the Korean War – delivered an emotional speech in which he eulogized the Jewish soldiers who had lost their lives in the region.

Wisper has been attending the South Korean embassy's ceremony every year since, and has developed a warm relationship with the embassy staff. The South Korean ambassador even visited Yeshiva Nesivos Olam to learn about its Torah learning methods. Wisper was his personal tour guide.

“Afterwards,” says Aryeh Leibish Wisper, “we sat down at a festive banquet held in his honor and he related his dream to include Talmud studies in the South Korean study curriculum. We've all heard in the last few years how the South Koreans are fascinated by the Talmud and how it's being studied there, and for the ambassador to sit in a *beis medrash* in Israel, it was a special honor for him. For me, it was like coming full circle – my promise fulfilled in a way I would have never imagined.”

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contributed to this report. Photos: Ezra Trabelsi.*

An ADHD Success Story

Hi. My name is Shmuel, and I am 28 years old.
Most of the people who know me simply call me Shmuly.

I am not used to telling stories. I'm the kind of guy who does better with action.

That is why it took me some time to put together all the parts of my personal story and write it down so that I can share it with you.

My story began about eighteen years ago.

I was ten years old, a pretty regular kid, just like everyone else except in one area - I had a really hard time sitting in one place for a prolonged period of time.

And when I say time, I don't mean what you probably think. My concept of time is different than most people's.

Too much time, for me, means a few seconds.

Yeah, I'm a spring, if you will.

If this would be today, I would surely get a diagnosis comprised of a string of initials (along with a pill or two), but in those days there weren't that many interpretations, so the nickname given to me was short and friendly, Shmuly the Spring.

Honestly, I didn't mind. I knew that it was true, and I could actually relate to the imagery.

Baruch Hashem, I had no complaints. I had incredible rabbeim who didn't make a big issue out of my hyperactivity.

Everyone in my class was already used to the fact that Shmuly the Spring is the one who is sent to bring the rebbe coffee in middle of class, and other such jobs, basically keeping me busy.

And truthfully, I liked the arrangement, too.

I would sit in front of the rebbe and try hard to listen and understand what he was teaching.

Then, when I couldn't focus anymore (usually after a few minutes), I would look for something to do.

At that point I would hear the rebbe's voice calling to me, Shmuly, please get us some more chalk. I would happily get up and run to perform the chore.

That was basically what my life in school was like.

One morning, as we waited for our rebbe to enter the classroom, the principal walked in instead. He stood behind the rebbe's desk and asked for silence.

I'm sorry to share this with you, he said, but your rebbe has suddenly fallen ill and had to undergo emergency surgery last night.

He will not be coming back for the next few weeks.

We were in shock. We loved our rebbe and were really worried about him.

The principal continued, Now, boys, let's say some Tehillim for his recovery.

We said some Tehillim with extra kavanah for our rebbe's speedy recovery.

That day, the principal taught us, but the following day he walked into our classroom with a man we didn't know.

Boys, the principal said, this is Rabbi Substitute. He is going to be your substitute rebbe until your regular rebbe gets better, be'ezras Hashem.

Rabbi Substitute walked over to the rebbe's desk, and the principal left the classroom.

I'm not sure what made me immediately realize that my life was not going to be easy with Rabbi Substitute.

Maybe it was the stern look on his face, or the hoarse voice with which he addressed us, but something told me there was going to be trouble soon.

I was right. It was only a few minutes later when I sensed a heavy shadow over me.

I looked up and found Rabbi Substitute staring angrily down at me through his somewhat-dirty glasses.

What are you busy with over there? he thundered.

I dropped the beautiful paper airplane I had just completed. The stunning plane did not have a chance inside Rabbi Substitute's clenched fist, and I felt my heart tearing inside me along with it.

I found myself standing shamefacedly in the principal's office.

After recess was over, I returned to the classroom. But this scenario repeated itself over and over again in different variations.

After a few days of mounting frustration on all sides, my parents were called to the school.

In my class, all students must learn, Rabbi Substitute told them firmly. What do you think he's going to grow up to be like if he doesn't use his brain?

He refused to allow me to perform the various tasks that had been my lifeline until then.

Every day, I would be punished and sent out of the classroom in humiliation. I began to feel disappointed and disgusted with myself.

I always knew that I was not exactly a typical child.

I knew that I was better with my hands than with my head, but I always managed somehow, thanks to the energy that Hashem endowed me with and the fact that I loved to help people.

For Rabbi Substitute, however, these qualities meant nothing.

One day, Rabbi Substitute decided to call an emergency meeting to discuss my problems. My parents and I were both called in for a long, painful lecture.

I remember my father trying to say something like, Our Shmuly has other qualities. Maybe his head is less at work but he has amazing hands, but Rabbi Substitute didn't allow my father to say a word.

And here, I remember how Rabbi Substitute's face reddened. He pointed a finger at me and shouted, If you don't start using your head, you'll amount to nothing! Nothing!

Then he added under his breath, Good hands will make you a good plumber, nothing more.

The days passed, somehow, and finally, finally, our regular rebbe recovered and returned to the classroom.

I never saw Rabbi Substitute again.

With time, I even managed to forget his hurtful words. Most of the time.

Sometimes, unexpectedly, I would hear his words playing in my head and shrink into myself with humiliation.

When that happened, I would feel like an absolute nothing.

Is that all I could ever hope to amount to? A plumber? Could I really do nothing more? Was I truly worth nothing?!

I admit, though, that this did not happen often. Most of the time, I was busy performing the countless chores and tasks that my rabbeim came up with to keep me busy and confident.

I grew up, finished cheder, and then yeshivah ketanah. I was accepted to a good yeshivah gedolah thanks to my many other talents.

So maybe I was not the brightest boy in the class, but I had other things going for me.

The many small jobs I did in yeshivah helped me tremendously. The yeshivah and summer camps were where I felt proud and happy.

When I started shidduchim, I knew more or less what kind of girl I wanted to marry. A short while later, I met my wife who wanted me just as I was.

We got married, and I began my married life in kollel.

Of course, at the same time, I was searching for some action to fill up my day too; something that would keep me busy and allow me to feel good about myself.

I found that in Israel's medical emergency response team, a job that saves me from myself.

I do many shifts, am always first at the scene and the last to leave it.

Some people might make a face hearing that, but I love the drama and the action, and "more than anything else the tremendous chessed that I can perform for people in the most critical moments of their lives.

Slowly, I started climbing up the ranks. I did further training. At some point, MADA (Magen David Adam) became my second home.

One night, I woke up to the sound of the dispatcher calling all nearby volunteers to rush to an emergency nearby.

Apparently, someone had lost consciousness and needed help.

The address was nowhere nearby, but for some reason I decided to rush to the scene anyway.

I figured that there were not many volunteers in that area, and the late hour would make it even less likely that someone could get there quickly.

MADA's headquarters were also too far from the scene.

I jumped into my car and quickly drove over to the address the dispatcher had announced.

As soon as I arrived, I realized that I had indeed arrived first. I grabbed my first-aid kit and rushed up the stairs.

The panicked voices and the light coming from the apartment led me directly to an elderly man lying on the living room floor.

A woman stood next to him his wife, I presumed crying hysterically.

I quickly began checking his vitals and performing CPR. Things were not looking good.

No pulse. No breathing.

As I worked, a Hatzalah volunteer arrived at the scene and began working alongside me.

No pulse or breathing I reported to the station. Send MICU urgently. The Hatzalah volunteer and I continued working furiously.

This guy doesn't have much of a chance, I thought. Who knows how long he's been lying like this, in this condition.

But I'm used to leaving my thoughts for my own pillow for when I try to fall asleep at night. Right now, I had to focus on what I needed to do and do it.

The ambulance arrived and with it, more advanced equipment.

The full team and I continued to do our best, but nothing. The guy wouldn't wake up.

The team gave up, but I refused to. I continued to put in every bit of strength I could muster, without thinking.

Yair, a fellow paramedic, placed his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were telling me, Forget it, this is a lost cause.

But I kept going.

The other guys knew me already. They weren't going to try explaining to me for the umpteenth time that I was too naive.

I pushed. I pushed again. And then suddenly I felt something change.

I checked carefully and began screaming like a madman, There's a pulse! There's a pulse!

The paramedics looked at the patient and immediately realized that I was right. They all began working feverishly again.

Somehow, they managed to stabilize him and rushed him to the nearest hospital together with his tearful wife.

Honestly, I was very emotional as I watched them go.

I've been in this field for years, but it is still rare to succeed in performing a successful resuscitation - especially in such a case, where the man had been lying unconscious for so long.

I gathered my things and headed back home.

A month passed, and I nearly forgot the incident.

One morning, my phone rang. Hi, is this Shmuly, from MADA?

Yes, who am I speaking with?

The young man on the other end of the line told me that he was this elderly man's grandson.

My thoughts went back to that fateful night, and I asked him with some hesitation, "How is he?"

I wasn't sure what I was going to hear. I knew that not many people survive after being deprived of oxygen for so long, and even those who do survive are generally badly crippled as a result.

You have no idea, the grandson told me with obvious emotion. You gave us our grandfather back!

I was so moved that I could hardly get any words out of my mouth.

The young man told me that they had been searching all week long for the phone number of the angel who saved their grandfather. That was how he described me.

He told me that his grandfather had been discharged and is completely back to his usual self.

We would love to have you join us at the seudas hodaya that we are making in honor of this miracle!

I could not refuse. I still remembered the address, so I just asked him for the date and time.

On the day of the seudah, I came to the house again. The apartment was filled with family members and tables laden with cakes and candy.

They all welcomed me with hugs and joyful greetings. I have never met these people before, but it seemed that to them I was like family.

I was given a seat at the head of the table, next to a dignified-looking man with a white beard.

His face looked familiar but now I was seeing his face with a healthy coloring.

When he saw me, he stood up and enveloped me in a warm hug. I felt his tears wetting my shoulder, and then my own tears coursing down my cheeks.

He murmured words of thanks, and it was obvious that he was very, very emotional.

I myself was feeling my own storm of emotions and not only because of the opportunity I had been given to save another man's life.

With shocking clarity, I suddenly realized that this man who was now looking at me with such gratitude-filled eyes was none other than my childhood teacher, Rabbi Substitute.

It must have been his voice that made all the memories surface, but I had no doubt about it.

I gently asked him about his life and where he was from. Yes, it was him!

He did not seem to recognize me, but that was understandable. Unlike him, my own appearance had changed drastically since I was ten years old.

I was difficult for me to contain myself. I felt an unexplainable urge to tell him who I was.

I asked one of his sons, who was sitting next to me, to allow me to speak to his father privately.

He looked at me in surprise, but apparently, my status as the savior helped ward off questions.

He stood up and whispered into his father's ear.

I saw Rabbi Substitute's eyes looking at me, and then his head nodding in agreement.

We were led to a side room. After we both settled on the day bed in the room and the door closed behind us, I burst into uncontrollable tears.

I had planned to talk to him, but the wave of emotions was stronger than me. I myself had not realized, until that moment, just how deeply he had hurt me.

I felt his hands on my head, and then heard his soothing words trying to calm me. He obviously could not understand what was happening to me.

After I calmed down somewhat, I raised red-rimmed eyes and began to tell him who I was.

It took a few moments for him to recall.

You're Shmuly? he pointed a shaking finger at me. I saw understanding dawn, and his face suddenly became very white.

I felt a pang of panic. I had already seen his face looking like that. Slowly, however, his color returned. And then it was his turn to cry.

We did not exchange more than a few words, but to me it seemed like we had spent hours in deep conversation.

We simply didn't need any words. The tears said everything.

The deep hurt the frustration and the pain|the insidious effect of his behavior toward me in the classroom and also, his regret, his remorse.

He hugged me again, and I returned the hug, feeling forgiveness wash over me. A huge rock was lifted from my chest.

And I told you that you'll amount to nothing, he whispered, his voice filled with indescribable regret.

He asked for my forgiveness again and again, and I told him I was fully mochel.

We walked back into the living room, both of us with red-rimmed eyes and blotchy faces. People looked at us in bewilderment.

When Rabbi Substitute reached his seat, he motioned for me to sit on the adjacent chair, but he himself remained standing.

He told everyone that he wanted to say a few words.

Within seconds, everyone fell silent. It was clear that they all wanted to know what had happened.

Rabbi Substitute first began by praising me for saving his life.

He especially emphasized the illogical efforts I had put in despite the fact that realistically, there was no longer any hope.

He focused on the main point, in his opinion, which was that I worked against all odds and used my heart, not my head.

Then he told everyone who I was and where we had first met.

He told them everything.

He repeated the words he had used then, at the fateful meeting with my parents, and the things he said about me in front of the entire class.

At this point, people were crying unabashedly.

In a broken voice he turned to me and asked for my forgiveness again.

I could not speak. I only nodded my consent, my own throat choked with tears.

Then, Rabbi Substitute ended in a heartfelt statement.

Twenty years ago, I told you that you do not use your head. Yet what saved me now was precisely the fact that you did not follow your head but your heart. Years ago, I thought you had a problem and were not thinking enough. Now I know that what you have is actually a huge heart.

He hugged me again, and I returned the hug.

That is my story.

It was not easy for me to write it all. You must have realized by now that I am not the sort of person who can easily sit and write things down.

But I did it anyway, because I want you to always remember:

There are some kids who have a great head.

There are kids who have a great heart.

And they are all Hashem's children.

This powerful story was emailed to me by two of the subscribers to our weekly email. I am not sure where the story was originally published.