



An Uplifting Story

Dear friends,

Recently I spoke with you about an inspiring story concerning Hagbah, the lifting of the Torah. So many of you enjoyed this. I thought you would like to see it in print, especially, if you were unable to be with us when it was shared.

I know that you will enjoy this wonderful story!

IT AIN'T HEAVY; IT'S MY TORAH

By Abe Rosenberg

“I know, I know. Hagbah isn't the big aliyah. Haven't we all seen a gabbai struggle to persuade someone to accept it? Usually he scans the synagogue for someone healthy looking. The six-footer. The Macho Man. The guy who goes to Gold's gym.

Zooming in on his unsuspecting target, he gestures with a two handed lifting motion, embellished with a slight shrug, as if to say, “Would you mind?” The “victim” often responds with a downward glance, a slight shake of the head and a shrug of his own, “Oh, all right.”

Incredible. The Talmud says this lucky honoree earns a reward equal to all the aliyot that preceded him. But does that mollify the fellow who wanted shlishi, the third aliyah and got the heavy lifting instead? Tell the truth. Nobody sits in shul hoping for Hagbah. Nobody pledges thousands of dollars or helps erect entire synagogue edifices for it.

Up to a point, I understand. Hagbah is, after all, different. You don't get to make a blessing. No portion of the Torah is read in your presence. The fleeting moment isn't even yours alone. You have to share it with gelilah! I mean, this ain't maftir.

That's OK, I'll take it. Anytime. I love Hagbah. It's my absolute favorite honor. It beats davening at the amud, chatan bereshit, even sitting next to the president on Appeal Shabbat (not that I could afford that one). Nothing compares. Nothing gives me the rush that Hagbah generates, and nothing ever will.

Crazy you say? Stuck in the back pew too long? A few bulbs missing on the ol' wall plaque? Nope. Experienced. I love Hagbah because I remember how it felt when I couldn't lift anything.

Three years ago, my left shoulder began to ache. In a short while the ache turned to agony, and it didn't go away. I could not hail a taxi, put on a jacket or even scratch my head without feeling that sharp jab. This lifelong softball nut could no longer swing a bat or throw a ball. Swimming was impossible. Turning over in bed was excruciating. Worst of all, when my tiny nephews and nieces wanted to be picked up, I couldn't do it. That hurt more than the shoulder.

One doctor said torn rotator cuff. Another tried physical therapy. A third injected cortisone. It still hurt. Several months and two MRI's later, we found the cause. A bone spur and muscle damage. Surgery would fix everything, they promised. Minimal invasion, a one-hour procedure. I could go home the next morning. Nothing to worry about. I was terrified.

I checked into Lenox Hill Hospital early Thursday morning. Soon I was on a gurney outside the operating room. A nun in green scrubs offered to pray for me. I politely declined. “In that case,” she said, “I'll just wish you a refuah shelemah. Speedy recovery.”

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Rabbi's message continued

They wheeled me in. A technician asked me, "Is it the left shoulder?" reminding me of Jackie Mason's line when a traffic judge asks him, guilty or not guilty? "He don't know, why should I tell him?" They injected me, stuck a mask over my face, and I was out.

I woke four hours later in the recovery room, my left arm in a sling. The operation was a success. Of course, they don't tell you about post-op pain, pre-op! Now my shoulder hurt more than ever, but I knew that every bit of movement, every exercise, every stretch, no matter how painful, would be one more step toward full recovery. That kind of pain was much easier to take. It was an optimistic pain, and I welcomed it.

After so many months of discomfort and frustration, I felt so happy and relieved. I wanted to say thank you, not just to my doctors, but to the Ultimate Doctor. I truly believed Hashem had guided the medical team and given them the knowledge to fix what was wrong. A verbal expression of gratitude, no matter how heartfelt, would not be enough. A physical change had taken place. There had to be a physical way to offer G-d a yasher koach while reassuring my worried friends, and myself, that everything was working again. It had to be Hagbah.

First I needed the surgeon's permission. Dr. Francis Mendoza had never heard of Hagbah, so I described it to him, watching his bemused expression. The good doc gave his okay. Should I watch out for anything? I asked. "Don't drop it on your foot," he said.

I left the hospital Friday morning, bandaged, medicated, still in plenty of pain. A short 24 hours later I was in the synagogue, walking up to the bimah. It was Shabbat. Lech Lecha, the anniversary of my bar mitzvah, which I thought wouldn't be such a big deal until I realized 99 percent of the Sefer Torah would be rolled up on the left side. The left side???" The LEFT

SIDE????!!!!

I recited the blessing to thank G-d for surviving the anesthesia. That surprised some people who didn't know about the surgery. My friends must have done some quick whispering, because I then heard a collective gasp rise from the seats behind me. ("He's gonna do what??!!")

I was sweating. My heart hadn't raced like this since my real bar mitzvah. Instinctively I began the familiar procedure. Open the Sefer three columns... pull it toward you... press down... bend your knees... brace tight... balance... straighten up... hoist it high. "And this is the Torah!" It didn't hurt.

All I remember after that is sitting on the bimah, hugging the Torah, grinning my dopey grin, and crying a little. It would be many more weeks before the shoulder was back to normal. But the healing began on Shabbat.

Ever since, whenever I'm lucky enough to receive Hagbah, I don't shrug. I jump. Maybe the gabbai wonders why no arm-twisting was necessary. He doesn't know the secret. He doesn't know I've discovered the true meaning of Hagbah. For me, anyway, it's the purest, the simplest, the most powerful and personal message one can deliver to Hashem. To have the privilege of using my healthy, intact body, repaired by His wisdom, to raise His Torah – my Torah – is a feeling impossible to put into words adequately.

It wells up from a very deep place and radiates to the heart, the mind and every limb. Especially the two strong arms reaching for the heavens. No wonder Hagbah has no bracha. What could you possibly say? What could you possibly say?