

Pulling an All-Nighter  
Yom Kippur 5784<sup>1</sup>

If you had passed Adolfo Kaminsky on the street in his modest Paris neighborhood, you would probably not think too much of him. Perhaps you would have noted his impressive beard, the kind more typically associated with a Rosh Yeshiva. You might have noticed his professorial tweed, which gave him a more than passing resemblance to Sigmund Freud. You would never know from looking that, long before his passing on January 9 of this year at the age of 97, he led a harrowing, epic life. He was born in Argentina to Russian Jewish parents, who ended up there because they were kicked out of Russia and France; later, they were permitted to return after obtaining the correct visas. As he put it, “from a young age, I knew the importance of papers.” In order to support his family, he learned how to remove stains from clothing by working at a dry cleaner, and worked at a local dairy on weekends in exchange for butter. In 1943, when he was 18 years old, he was sent to the Drancy internment camp. As Argentines were being deported, he went underground. His father sent him to obtain false papers for the family from a Parisian Jewish resistance group, but there was a technical difficulty. The agent told him they could not remove a certain blue ink from the document, which would have certainly given away its forged nature. Adolfo replied that all they had to do was treat the paper with lactic acid, a technique he learned from his childhood

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

experiences in the dry cleaner and the dairy. Within no time, he joined the resistance and became a master forger. Historians estimate that his work alone resulted in the rescue of **14,000 Jews**. The biography about his life titled “A Forger’s Life” records a period in which he stayed awake for 48 hours straight, filling an enormous rush order of passports for children who were about to be sent to Drancy, and then to death or deportation.

*“It’s a simple calculation: In one hour I can make 30 blank documents; if I sleep for an hour, 30 people will die.”<sup>2</sup>”*

However, Adolfo Kaminsky was not the first young Jew to pull an all-nighter when life and death hung in the balance.

The mishna (Yoma 1:7) teaches that the Kohen Gadol was required to stay awake for the entire night of Yom Kippur, out of concern that his falling asleep would lead to him becoming impure. To ensure that he was able to do so, the young Kohanim, known as the Pirchei Kehunah, would keep him alert by snapping their fingers, urging him to keep his feet on the cold tiles of the Temple floor, and interacting with him until the morning:

בְּקֶשׁ לְהִתְנַמְנֵם,

פְּרָחִי כְּהֵנָּה מִכֵּין לְפָנָיו בְּאֶצְבַּע צְרָדָה, וְאוֹמְרִים לוֹ:

אִישִׁי כֹהֵן גָּדוֹל,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/opinion/sunday/if-i-sleep-for-an-hour-30-people-will-die.html>

עמד וְהִפָּג אַחַת עַל הַרְצָפָה.

וּמַעֲסִיקִין אוֹתוֹ עַד שְׁיִגִיעַ זְמַן הַשְּׁחִיטָה:

We can readily appreciate that this is a vital task; after all, the fate of the entire ישראל depends upon this one man staying awake! Why then would we rely upon a bunch of unseasoned and callow juveniles? If they want to practice being *kohanim*, let them join their fathers for *duchening*. Don't give them the most important job of the year!

I'd like to suggest three possible lessons that we may learn from the involvement of the Pirchei Kehuna.

First, the Pirchei Kehuna were blessed to interact with the holiest Jew in the most sacred space at the most solemn time of the year. Can you imagine what an impression that left on them? Perhaps one day, one of them would become the Kohen Gadol and their memories would guide them when they, too, carried out the *Avodah*. But even if not, they would certainly regale their own children and grandchildren and anyone who would listen with their recollections for the rest of their lives. In the past, I have shared with you recollections of my elementary school Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Pearlman, who lives in Baltimore now but was the Chief Rabbi of Ireland after serving for many years as a community Rabbi and teacher in Rochester. Rabbi Pearlman was my first exposure to serious Torah study, and to Torah personalities. I still recall how he described the time when he was a young student in the Lakewood Yeshiva and served a glass of tea to

the saintly Rav Aharon Kotler, its revered founding Rosh Yeshiva. A mundane action was elevated by its holy recipient, and the awe Rabbi Pearlman felt in performing it was akin to a young Kohen assisting the Kohen Gadol. Having outstanding religious role models is a necessity at every stage in life, for boys and girls, men and women- particularly during formative years. In the recent past, I have spoken quite a bit about the contemporary crisis in chinuch and religious leadership. During the Catskills trip I referenced on Rosh Hashanah, my family and I davened on Shabbos morning at the minyan in the Post Hill Acres bungalow colony, made up of Satmar chassidim from Williamsburg, Brooklyn. My father decided it would be a good idea to let the gabbaim know that I'm a Rabbi from Texas, and before I knew it, I was asked to speak at Kiddush. One of the *mitpalelim* joked that the Rov of the colony should be nervous- maybe I would pose a threat to his job. The Rov, whose name is Rav Berish Meisels, said "No, no- Klal Yisroel is understaffed!" He's right. One of the tragedies associated with this is that if no one is going into education, we have fewer such exemplars for our children. Often, educators must be imported from Israel, and while they may be inspiring and talented educators who make a lasting impression, they are also usually here temporarily. Our sons and daughters need role models that can inspire them with their sophisticated Torah study, rigorous halachic commitment, love of God, compassion and dynamism. Who will be there to teach the Pirchei Kehuna if our best and brightest are only going into finance and real estate?

Larry Brown was a young pre-teen living in Memphis in the 1940s, he came from a traditional, yet not-observant home. Shabbos for him was a non-event. He would often spend time with some of his friends who were more observant and thus he came to cross paths with the legendary Rav Nota Greenblatt zt"l (who was such an integral part of Dallas Jewish life for six decades). Rav Nota asked Larry why he doesn't come to shul on Shabbos, to which Larry responded that he had a newspaper delivery route to which he had recently committed. For those who are under 25 or so, a newspaper is a printed version of the news that comes out daily...Rav Nota asked him how much he had earned on that route, and he responded \$1.50 (by today's standards that would be roughly \$30). Rav Nota asked Larry whether he would quit his route and come to shul instead, if Rav Nota paid him the \$1.50 weekly instead. Larry readily agreed and began attending shul on Shabbos (no word on whether the young men who were already coming to shul without payment knew about this arrangement...). Time went by and Larry gradually became more observant, ultimately marrying and building a God-fearing, Torah observant home. Larry's three daughters are not only observant-they are educators themselves and are married to educators and rabbis of considerable renown. The man who traded in his Shabbos paper route for a \$1.50 bribe and a warm relationship with a tzaddik now has children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren that teach and study Torah literally all over the world. Of course, it's not enough to identify and connect to religious role models in our formative years; it's critical to have

them, or find them, in our adult years as well. Rav Nota remained Larry Brown's spiritual mentor, and that of his extended family, for seven decades! One of the defining features of the modern Chareidi community worldwide today is the concept of *Daas Torah*, the idea that the Torah learning and living of a revered Rabbinic figure or spiritual leader invests within them a special wisdom for other areas of life as well. In chassidic and Yeshivish communities, major and minor life decisions are often undertaken with the advice of people considered *gedolim*. Modern Orthodoxy has largely (and often vehemently) eschewed this kind of deference, but I fear that in doing so, we have gone too far in the other direction. An absence of religious leaders in our lives creates an atmosphere of cynicism, and breeds spiritual and religious stagnation. We- and by we, I mean Rabbis too- need people in our lives that we can turn to for halachic guidance, for counsel and for inspiration.

The second lesson of the Pirchei Kehunah is that, in the same way the young Kohanim saw the Kohen Gadol remain awake all night, kids need to grow up seeing adults lose sleep over important matters. Our children have certainly witnessed us get worked up over *narishkeit* like politics and sports. They need to see us lose sleep over the matters that are described as *Kodesh HaKedoshim*, the holiest matters of all: their character, their Torah education, the fate of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Today marks the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. In Yeshivat Har Etzion, as

in the several other Hesder Yeshivot at the time, the *talmidim* were called to the front lines during the Yom Kippur davening. It is told that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, who was ineligible for the draft, still wanted to participate in some way... he was seen running after his talmidim in his kittel, carrying rolls of toilet paper and other supplies to send with them to the theater of battle. Eight of these Talmidim never returned; six perished in the first few days of fighting. Rav Yehuda Amital, the other Rosh Yeshiva, took the loss of his talmidim especially hard. A talmid<sup>3</sup> who spent Sukkot in the Amital home later recounted that in the early hours of one Sukkot morning, he woke up to get a glass of water, and heard Rav Amital sobbing uncontrollably. More than any shiur Rav Amital gave, more than any speech over any Yom Tov or Shabbos, it was this image that was seared indelibly into this talmid's consciousness; the Rav losing sleep over the fate of his beloved talmidim, and of the Jewish people. The Kohen Gadol's sleepless night challenges us, too, on this Yom Kippur. What are the issues or causes that are most important to us, the ones that keep us up at night- and how do we model that for others? It is through the intentionality and visibility of our actions, the way we choose to spend our time and the prominence we assign to various areas of our involvement. For example, it leaves a powerful impression on children to see their parents daven or bentsch with fervor, in any language. If you are running out to do a mitzvah- making food for a neighbor who is ill, doing an airport run for Bikur Cholim or buying your

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<https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/yom-haatzmaut/commemorating-yom-kippur-war-legacy-rav-yehuda-amital>

Arba Minim, let your kids or your friends know about it, and take them along when appropriate. It's normal to complain that Jewish life is expensive- tuition, Shabbos, Yom Tov- and our children know, even if we try to shield them, that it comes at a cost, especially if we complain that we're not getting our money's worth. Tell them instead that it *is* expensive and it *does* come at a cost, but don't forget to add that investing in a Torah life is worth it. Let's share with them how we lose sleep over the kind of person, the kind of spouse, the kind of parent and the kind of Jew they will become. More fundamentally, show them that you are willing to cry over them. Of course, this isn't limited to parents and children. Each one of us worries at night - but do we let the people we love know that we worry about them, that we lose sleep over them, that they are *kodesh kedoshim*?

Finally, there is a third lesson we can learn from the *Pirchei Kehunah*, by way of a story told by the ultimate storytellers- Chazal. It happened during the destruction of the first temple, in the year 70 CE.

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כט עמוד א

תנו רבנן: משחרב הבית בראשונה נתקבצו כיתות כיתות של פרחי כהונה, ומפתחות ההיכל בידן, ועלו לגג ההיכל ואמרו לפניו: רבונו של עולם! הואיל ולא זכינו להיות גזברין נאמנים - יהיו מפתחות מסורות לך, וזרקום כלפי מעלה. ויצתה כעין פיסת יד וקיבלתן מהם...



Groups of young Kohanim, seeing that the structure was going to be incinerated, ascended to the roof of the Temple and said, "God, since we were not appropriate stewards, please take these keys back" - and they threw the keys back up to God. An image of a hand suddenly emerged, and took the keys from them...

It's unclear what use the keys would be if the structure they opened was being reduced to ashes; clearly the Gemara is meant to be interpreted on a level deeper than the simple reading. The *Pirchei Kehunah* are the most innocent, the holiest people to serve in the Beit Hamikdash. What was their response to its destruction? That they had failed in some way to discharge their duty, or that they had done everything they could, and there was nothing more they could do. In that moment of desperation, they handed the keys back to God, telling him, "God- you drive. You are in charge again." Perhaps this profound insight was only possible because they possessed simple, pure faith. The Kohen Gadol spent time with the kids before the *Avodah* because he needed to learn from them that even though he was the most powerful Jew, he actually controlled very little.

As we stand in reflection today, and we recite the Viduy (and Yizkor) there are two recognitions at which we need to arrive. First, that we may not have been the most loyal custodians of this life. We didn't take care of the body that encases our soul, we didn't take care of the soul trapped in our body, we didn't take care of others as we should, we

failed to preserve the continuity of our heritage (and the legacy left us by our forebears). In essence, we fell asleep on the job. Once a year on Yom Kippur, we look at the simple, righteous people who never lost sight of who really runs the show, and we throw up the keys, saying the refrain כן אנהנו בידך - we are in your hands. We will do our best to change, but You hold the keys and we trust You. We need You to bless us with *parnassah*, with physical and mental health, with humility, with successful relationships, with spiritual growth, with inner confidence, with breaking old habits and starting new good ones that will last.

May we learn the lessons of the Pirchei Kehunah. Let us cultivate religious leadership and integrate it into our lives, and those of our children. Let us be unafraid to lose sleep over important things, and let others know, through our talk and our actions, that which we value. And lastly, may we have the courage and the humility to hand the keys back to Hashem.