

Who Changed Your Life?

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Every year, I try to purchase a new Haggadah for Pesach, a process that can sometimes involve a great deal of indecision. This year, though, there was no question. When Artsroll published the thoughts of the renowned Israeli spiritual leader and torah teacher Rav Meilech Biderman of Yerushalaim a few weeks ago, I knew immediately which Haggadah would be my new one for the season. Let me tell you, I was not disappointed. Rav Meilech tells a remarkable story about a Jew he knew who lived on Rechov Tzefania in Geulah, in Yerushalaim, who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust and rebuilt his life with a beautiful family. This Jew often shared the amazing story of his survival- all due to what he called “the greatest gift he ever received¹”

As a young man, he studied in *cheider* in a small town in Poland. One day, the *melamed*, the teacher, announced that an illustrious guest would be visiting their town and, in particular, would be coming to the *cheider*. It was none other than the

¹ Reb Meilech on the Haggadah, p. 177

Lubliner Rav, the legendary Rav Meir Shapiro, the founder of the Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva and the father of the Daf Yomi initiative that continues to this very day.

The boys were elated; not only would they have the opportunity to meet a great man, a Torah giant, but it was customary that visiting Rabbis would distribute gifts to each boy as a token of their visit. The Rav arrived, regal of bearing and warm of countenance, and tested the boys. Of course, they all did exceptionally well, and he complimented them profusely. The boys were wondering, though. Where was their gift? The Rav, before he departed, turned to the boys: “I apologize that I don’t have any gifts to give you, but instead, I will give you a piece of advice that will allow you to live in peace and tranquility for the rest of your life.”

He then read them the words of the Sefer HaChinuch, in talking about the mitzvah of Birkat Hamazon, of *bentching*²:

כך מקבל אני מרבתי, ישמרם אל, שכל הזהיר בברכת המזון מזונותיו מצויין לו בכבוד כל ימיו.

I have received as a tradition from my teachers, may God protect them, that any one who is careful about Grace after Meals will have his food available with dignity all of his days.

² Sefer HaChinuch 430

The Lubliner Rav shared a comment of Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi of Tiktin, in his commentary *Be'er Heitev* on the Shulchan Aruch, in the name of Rav Yoel Sirkis, the Bach, who points out that in the entire Birkat Hamazon, there is one letter missing- ך (go ahead- check it out when you get home!) This is the letter that appears at the end of such words as חרון אף, שצף, קצף- all words connoting anger. If you say the prayer that doesn't have this letter, you will be saved from anything having to do with these words.

The message of the Lubliner Rav, and the sources he quoted, left an indelible impression on this young man, who committed on the spot to recite Birkat Hamazon with great intent going forward.

Years passed, and the Lubliner Rav had long since died. The Nazis arose to power, and as they annexed Poland and sent millions of Jews to concentration camps, this young man was one of them. When they reached the camp, the young man saw two lines, and realized that boys his age were being sent to the left. This was where the elderly, the women and the young children were sent, and it meant immediate death, because these people were deemed useless. The young man stood tall and whispered a quiet prayer to God: "Please, God- I always fulfilled the words of the

Bach, I always *benched* with intent. Please fulfill his promise, and spare me from wrath and punishment.”

As he stood in line waiting for the fateful decree, a Jew standing nearby whispered a piece of advice. “When they ask you if you have any skills, tell them you have kitchen experience. I am a cook, and they will send me there. If you come with me, I will take care of you.” That is indeed what happened. To whatever degree the camp inmates were fed, there was a kitchen, and this young man was able to eat and drink while he prepared food.

One of the Nazi officers took note of this young man’s privilege and deemed it unfair. “Why should you be in here stuffing your face, and not laboring in the fields like everyone else? You will need to prove your right to be here.”

He then handed the young man a small hammer and issued him an ultimatum. “If you can dig a ditch, with this hammer, within three hours, you can keep your job in the kitchen. If you cannot, you will lose your job here, and enter the labor force.”

Obviously, he was destined to fail; a small hammer would barely leave a dent in the earth, and wasn’t meant for ditch digging even if it were of a proper size.

The young man turned to God once again. “Hashem, tatte, I have never missed the opportunity to say *Birkat Hamazon* with *kavvanah*- even here in this horrifying

place. I've done this with the assurance that my sustenance will come with great ease and with abundance. Please help me see the realization of that promise." With that, he began pounding on the ground. As he did so, a group of Nazi officers passed by, and, noticing the Jew, began pelting him with vegetables from the nearby kitchen, as they laughed raucously. The Jew said nothing, but kept digging...and davening.

A few moments later, a group of hungry Russian soldiers, who had also been captured by the Nazis, passed by. These Russian soldiers no doubt had no love lost for Jews; in all likelihood, they had tortured their fair share of Jews before the tides of war put the Jews and the Russians on the same side, against the Nazis. These soldiers saw the Jew standing near a pile of vegetables, and asked the Jew if he would give them some- a request he agreed to on one condition: that they would help him dig a ditch. The Russians gladly accepted the terms; they had the equipment and they were skilled at digging, and the work was done within an hour. The Russians took the vegetables, and the young man waited by the ditch for the Nazi officer to return.

Sure enough, with typical German precision, the Nazi officer arrived exactly as three hours concluded. When he saw the ditch, his eyes opened wide. "I know that your God watches you and protects you, but I did not realize how far it goes."

The young man was able to keep his job in the kitchen and, eventually survive the war and make aliyah- where he was not only blessed with a wonderful family, but with a livelihood that allowed him to support them comfortably.

This man considered a short piece of advice from someone he only knew by reputation, and only met once in his life, to be the greatest gift he ever received. It gave him the *emunah*, confidence and calmness that ultimately saved his life. Yizkor affords us the opportunity to reflect not just on our loved ones, whose absence has been so keenly felt all of Yom Tov, but also on the people who have given us these kinds of gifts that have changed our lives. These gifts can come from anywhere- an encouraging word from a stranger, in a way and at a time that we needed it most; a comment from an antagonist that hit home uncomfortably, and positively changed the path of our lives. It could be someone we never spoke with or even knew at all. This Yizkor, all of us will be thinking about Lucy, Maia and Rena Dee- the mother and two daughters murdered in cold blood in the Jordan Valley for the simple crime of being Jews, on the way to vacation in Tveria. The Dee women were deeply connected to Torah and Mitzvot, to the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and to sharing the beauty of all of these with others. As a Rebbetzin in the UK and English teacher in Israel, Lucy Dee ran an open home and shared Torah with so many people who were privileged to spend time at her Shabbos table. Maia was a student in Midreshet Lindenbaum in Lod who worked with disadvantaged youth, and Rina

as an active member of the Ezra youth group, an energetic and dedicated volunteer and dependable friend. Klal Yisrael is already moved by these women, whom most of us never knew.. When the pandemic began, the Dee family began the custom of studying Pirkei Avos together every Friday night after the Shabbos meal. Here at Shaare, we will be dedicating our Shabbos afternoon Pirkei Avos shiur in their memory. Two British students who were close to the Dee family began a whatsapp group in which they will share a few mishnayot and teachings each week in memory of Lucy, Maia and Rina- and within hours, one group became many, with over 8,000 people participating. And Lucy Dee impacted the lives of several people she never knew- by saving them. Her heart went to a 51-year-old woman, her liver to a 25-year-old man, and her kidneys to two men – one in his late 30s and one in his late 50s. Her lungs were transplanted into a 58-year-old woman at Sheba. Her corneas were also harvested and will go to recipients at a later date.³

As the Jewish people sadly mourns again, let us remember the gifts that we have received from the people we never knew, or only encountered briefly. May we give similar gifts to others, and may we live up to their example.

³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/incomprehensible-generosity-lucy-dees-organs-donated-saving-five-lives/>