



DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

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This week's parsha begins with the word "Vayikra," written with a small *alef*. Rashi explains that this *alef* was written small because Moshe Rabbeinu was so humble that he felt uncomfortable having the Torah record that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* was calling out to him. So instead, he wrote the *alef* small, as if it says "vayikar," as if *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* "happened" to speak to him. Nevertheless, the word remains. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* was telling Moshe, quite literally: You have a calling. Your calling is to lead the Jewish people. To build the *Mishkan*. To guide them through the desert toward *Eretz Yisrael*.

This past Sunday, I drove my son up north to his base near the Lebanese border. I had been trying for over a week to find time to visit our OU Israel team in Kiryat Shemona, so I figured I would combine the trips. We drove up together, watching the rain fall over mountains full of greenery. It was a beautiful ride. But the moment we arrived in Kiryat Shemona, the beauty was punctuated by a different reality. I tried counting sixty seconds without hearing a boom. I could not.

While it was reassuring that most of what we were hearing was outgoing fire - our forces targeting Hezbollah positions - it was still jarring. The booms were so powerful that the windows shook. Stores were empty, streets were quiet, and people stayed in their homes, understandably afraid to go outside. When you live in Yerushalayim or Tel Aviv and a siren goes off, you have roughly a minute and a half to reach shelter. In Kiryat Shemona, you might have ten seconds.

My first stop was the mayor's office. He had a meeting scheduled with army officials, but he asked to postpone it in order to personally express his thanks to OU Israel for everything we have been doing for Kiryat Shemona over the last 16 years, and especially over the past two and a half years. He is very aware of the incredible work being done by Refael Salab, our director up north, together with his wife Avital and their five remarkable children.

Refael serves as the director of our teen center in Kiryat Shemona, and the amount of honor and respect the city has for him and his family is truly admirable. Refael and Avital have earned that respect in the most meaningful way - by staying. While many residents have understandably evacuated, Rafael and Avital have remained in Kiryat Shemona. Over the past two and a half years, Refael has traveled from hotel to hotel visiting evacuees from the north, bringing them love and *chizuk* when they needed it most. And back in the city, he continues to reach out to teenagers, visit their homes, and simply be present and idealistic. Avital (@avitalsalab1) has a very significant presence on social media where she empowers and tries to explain to the world what Kiryat Shemona is going through and how to be an incredible mother. Their decision to remain sends such a powerful message to everyone there: even now, we must stand strong and give *chizuk* to one another.

I shared a *dvar Torah* with the mayor and the staff. I told them that sometimes the call from *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is written explicitly in the Torah, as it was for Moshe in this

week's *parsha*. But sometimes, the calling comes in a different form. You are elected mayor of Kiryat Shemona. You become the *Matnas* director. You are hired as an advisor working with teens. In those moments, it is clear that you have been chosen – not only by the people and the organization, but by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* Himself – to do holy work. I told them that I did not want them to feel alone. The work they are doing is so, so important.

Harel Chetzroni, from our Pearl and Harold Jacobs Zula Outreach Center joined me on my visit to Kiryat Shemona. We took the opportunity to meet with advisors of the OU Israel Teen Center, alumni and families, all while making sure to meet in close proximity to a shelter.

Afterwards, I went with my son and Harel to Rafael and Avital's home. Immediately, their children began thanking my son for being a soldier and defending Israel. This was an incredible moment. These kids see thousands of soldiers driving through Kiryat Shemona in Humvees and jeeps, but to have a real person, a real face, walk into their home and be heading into Lebanon to defend them – their gratitude was palpable. That moment made me incredibly proud.

Then something else struck me. Boom after boom would sound outside, and these children barely reacted. They were jumping on the trampoline, playing inside the house, completely accustomed to the constant noise of outgoing fire. But the instant an interceptor launched – meaning a missile was incoming and needed to be neutralized – these kids recognized the difference in a split second and ran for shelter. I could not tell the difference between the sounds. They could. Every single time. It is, on one hand, life-saving. *Baruch Hashem* these children have developed this



instinct. On the other hand, it is very sad. For children so young to be such experts in the sounds of different missiles tells you everything about what life in Kiryat Shemona has been like.

I was also moved to see MK Tzvi Sukkot come and knock on Refael's door. He came to say: I hear you are doing a great job here, and I wanted to thank you personally. Refael told me that this particular MK has already spent a number of nights sleeping in Kiryat

Shemona's bomb shelters alongside the residents. While I (and OU Israel) make sure to always stay a-political and never endorse any specific party, that, to me, is the mark of a true leader – someone who leaves the comfort of his own home to be with the people and understand what they are going through. Voting on policy is one thing when you sleep in your own bed every night. It is an entirely different matter when you have been in the shelters and met the families and felt the ground shake. I am sure other MK's have been up north but I happen to have met MK Sukkot.

Later that day, I brought my son to the base. He walked in while I stood outside waving goodbye. At that point, a car pulled up beside me carrying several high-ranking officers. They asked what a civilian was doing standing outside an army base. I told them, quite proudly, that I had just dropped off my son to defend and serve the Jewish people. They responded warmly, telling me I should be very proud, and that the soldiers up here are doing critical work.

As I tend to do, I struck up a conversation with two of the soldiers, whose names were David Berlin from Abu Tor, Yerushalayim and Amos Davidowitz from Kibbutz Gezer. Upon hearing I was from OU Israel, David lit up. "You're from the OU? I see you in Torah Tidbits! I am sure you know my aunt, she used to volunteer there!" It

turned out his aunt was Sarah Fishman, a beloved figure in our office who used to come in nearly every day to help set up the library and take care of visitors. What a small world – one person originally from Boston, another from Manhattan, myself from Brooklyn, all standing together near the Lebanese border and marveling at what it means to be part of this incredible nation, especially during these challenging yet incredible days.

These officers told me that they and their colleagues had been serving since October 7th, dedicating the coming years to the safety of the Jewish people. It was inspiring to see their commitment, and all I could think was: it is a privilege to be part of a nation that does not just talk about keeping our people safe but actually puts everything they have into this nation. Of course we took a picture, and he told me he looks forward to seeing it featured in Torah Tidbits!

Each and every one of us is receiving a calling during these extraordinary days. Each person has their own *Vayikra* from *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. One is called to fight. Another is called to donate. Another is called to learn Torah. Another is called to hold down the fort at home while a spouse is serving. Another makes sure the army receives the supplies it needs. Another ensures that the residents of Sderot or Kiryat Shemona feel the strength of *Klal Yisrael* behind them.

May *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* give all of us the *siyata dishmaya* we need to rise to our calling and accomplish what we are meant to accomplish.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,



Rabbi Avi Berman
Executive Director, OU Israel

**May the Torah learned
in this issue of Torah Tidbits
be לעיני**

**our beloved husband/father/
grandfather/great-grandfather**

Rabbi Yitzchak Pechman z"l

**הרב יצחק בן דוב ז"ל
on his tenth Yahrzeit - ב' ניסן**