



A Quiz That Went Beyond the Questions

“For the first time in Israel: a Bible Quiz for special education students. We are honored and delighted to invite you to share in this moving, first-of-its-kind event.”

That was the festive invitation to an event I was privileged to emcee last week at Kibbutz

Ashdot Yaakov. For the past 18 years, the kibbutz has been home to the Life Skills College, founded by Yardena Amsalem for her son, Eran, who has special needs, and for other young people like him.

About a year ago, Yardena decided to do something revolutionary – to hold a Bible Quiz for young people with special needs. The

enthusiasm was tremendous. AKIM centers, the network for students with disabilities, and other therapeutic frameworks joined the initiative and began preparing. And then the big day arrived.

Each institution sent a team of representatives. The event featured a roster of speakers as well as a distinguished panel of judges. And the questions were anything but easy!

I told the contestants that they may be called “people with disabilities,” but when it comes to the soul and its connection to Torah and to God, there is no such thing as disability. That connection rises above the limitations of the body.

Once the quiz began, they proved my point. Their command of the material, which was on sefer Bereshit, the Book of Genesis, was remarkable. They cited dates, years and facts, but also, the deeper messages and meaning.

One contestant stood out: Bat-El Maimon from Kibbutz Mizra. She struggled to get the words out, fighting with real determination to give answer after answer.

At one point, I asked what is symbolized by the new name, Yisrael, given to our forefather Yaakov. Bat-El answered: “The ability to struggle and to withstand challenges.”

In that setting, her answer carried extraordinary meaning.

There was no single winner. At the end, everyone received the same certificate, and two participants went up to sing “Kanfei Ru’ach” — “Wings of Spirit.”

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who wrote the words to that song, set out on what became



known as the Journey to the Moshavot, visiting the kibbutzim and moshavim of northern Israel, which at the time were distant from Judaism, and often alienated from it.

About a hundred years later, in those very communities, a Bible Quiz like this was held, with contestants from Ashdot Yaakov and Mizra. And the contestants themselves sang Rabbi Kook's words: "Human being, rise upward, rise; you have wings of spirit."

Rise Up!

Last Tuesday, the wedding of Miriam Shani and Ofek Dotan took place at the "Tzon Kedar" farm near Ma'ale Adumim. I met Miriam a short time after the tragic death of her husband, Captain Uri Shani, who fell on Simchat Torah. We will never know how many people were saved thanks to his resourcefulness and courage, and that of the team he commanded, in valiant battles that lasted long hours.

Miriam then came with their baby, Roi, to an event in memory of Uri. "Roi is just starting to walk," she told me. "When I see falling and getting up, and walking a few more steps and falling and getting up again, I think about myself. It's a message for me and for all of us. We have to fall and get up, to insist on continuing to walk and to grow."

I shared her words at the time, and they gave strength to many. This week, I saw Miriam herself get up. Little Roi has long since been walking. He ran among the guests, while his mother built a new home in Israel, with Ofek.

Anyone who was at that chuppah felt a special holiness that's hard to put into words.

Shuli, Uri's mother, welcomed the guests with hugs. "Since Simchat Torah I've been praying for this moment. I said to God: we will cope, we will overcome, but Miriam — don't leave her alone."

Yehoshua Shani, Uri's father, heads the "Forum of Heroism," which brings together hundreds of bereaved families. He has a great deal to say — about leadership, about spirit, about unity — but on this evening his only words consisted of one of the Seven Blessings that the couple asked him to recite under the chuppah. ■



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