



DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

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Those who regularly attend *shul* on Shabbat morning know how important a good *baal koreh* (Torah reader) is to the service; someone who pays attention to the different emphases of the words and letters, reads clearly, and not too quickly but not too slowly either. For most of my life, I grew up in *shuls* that were blessed with such readers. Every Shabbat, they stood ready and willing when the need would arise, and they read from the Torah beautifully.

Because of that, apart from my own Bar Mitzvah, I was rarely asked to help with the reading of the weekly portion. Instead, I had the privilege of sitting and listening, and I was able to develop an ear for good reading. If you pay attention, you can really tell when a reader has prepared more than just knowing the next word, and that effort is itself a way of honoring the Torah.

The first *parsha* I was ever asked to prepare after my Bar Mitzvah was this week's *parsha*, Parshat Pinchas. The year after my own Bar Mitzvah in Israel, my mother took me to the United States for my cousin's wedding. She asked whether I would be willing to learn Parshat Pinchas so that I could read it in America before my grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I answered her with an enthusiastic yes. But I needed to practice, and having a teacher again would help.

So my father asked Rabbi Tzvi Liker, a neighbor of ours in Ma'aleh Adumim, if he would learn it with me, and he did. I loved the time we spent together, and he really put his soul into our learning. Before I left for

America, I asked him to record the *parsha* so that I could keep reviewing it, which he did on a cassette tape. I sat on the plane with a Walkman and headphones, listening to it and reading again and again. There was no internet then, no clip to pull up on YouTube; the tape was all I had. And *baruch Hashem*, the reading that Shabbat in America went great. From then on, I fondly remember Parshat Pinchas as the first *parsha* I ever prepared as an adult.

But it was far from my last. I can clearly recall one of my earliest NCSY Shabbatonim. Sitting there in the *shul* on Shabbat morning, I realized that no one had been asked to prepare the reading. Quickly looking through the reading, I went up to read. With so little time to prepare, inevitably, I made mistakes, but got through it with a kosher reading. Afterwards, I sat down and began to think about the irony. So much planning goes into an NCSY Shabbaton: signing the contract with the hotel, registering the teenagers, designing the flyer and the multimedia presentation, setting the menu with the caterer, choosing the right advisors and flying them in, preparing the decor, the various Shabbat gatherings like *onegs* and *tishes*, deciding who will speak at the *ebbing* and who will lead *havdalah*, even buying the tall *havdalah* candle for after Shabbat... An enormous amount of love and effort goes into it, and a real *yashar koach* is due to the NCSY teams in Israel and America, and to everyone who builds Shabbatonim to inspire our youth.

But the entire reason we gather is to show

our teenagers the beauty of Torah. What is it worth if the decor is beautiful, the skits are brilliant and funny, and the food is wonderful, and then, at the most important moment of all, the reading of the Torah, that is the one thing we did not prepare? A young person notices. It sends a message to them, intentionally or not, of what we value and want to emphasize. From that moment on, I took it upon myself that for any Shabbaton I helped run, the very first thing I would arrange was an advisor to prepare the Torah reading, months in advance, so that the Torah would never be the thing left unprepared.

All of these memories came back to me this past week when a friend from my *shul*, Yonatan Elman, sent me a flyer for an initiative that our shul, Neve HaGivah, has just begun. Even though our *shul* is also blessed with fine readers, they are encouraging the younger members of our community, boys who have become Bar Mitzvah over the last few years, to take on a section (one *aliyah*), learn it well, and step into the cycle of the readings. He approached my son Mordechai Tzemach and asked him if he would like to choose an *aliyah* in *Devarim*. I was thrilled when he did.

The fact is, the more you do it, the easier it gets. *Baruch Hashem*, I read from the Torah every Shabbat at *mincha* in a *minyán* near my home, and I know from personal experience that learning a *parsha* is like learning to ride a bike. You never really forget it. Read it once a year, or even every other year, and it becomes yours, drawing you closer to the *parsha*, to the Torah, and ultimately to the *Ribono Shel Olam*.

Being a *baal koreh* is less a talent and more a skill. It takes hard work. Sure, it comes more easily to some than to others, but today, with recordings waiting on YouTube or Spotify to play straight into your ear, so many more



people are in a position to learn and to share with the community. Yonatan's initiative is aimed at our youths, and yet I would suggest that those of us in our 30s, 40s, and 50s might take it upon ourselves as well. Choose a *parsha*. It can be six months from now, or a year from now. And if it is truly not for you, there are other roles waiting to be filled at *shul*: serving as a *gabbai*, sharing a Torah thought, or cooking a meal for a new mother or someone in need in the community. Every one of these matters.

It is an amazing power to learn a *parsha* and carry it with you, able to read it again year after year. A Torah community is built from each of us taking up our own portion, and when we draw the next generation into that work at a young age, *be'ezrat Hashem*, it will stay with them for decades to come.

So I am praying for the success of this beautiful endeavor, and especially for our younger generation, who, with Hashem's help, will gain from it, as will the entire community. A heartfelt *yashar koach* to Yonatan Elman for beginning it, and to everyone who steps forward to take up a role in the life of the community.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,

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