

DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

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Parshat Vayeitzei begins with Yaakov leaving his parents' home in Be'er Sheva to go to his uncle Lavan's house in Charan. We know that every word in the Torah is precious and teaches us something. So why does the Torah need to tell us where he was coming from, when it could just tell us where he was going? Rashi comments (based on Bereshit Rabbah 68:6) that it is because "the departure of a righteous person (*tzaddik*) from a place leaves an impression." Even leaving Be'er Sheva had significance.

This is both a positive and negative thing. Sometimes a community has a tremendous *tzaddik* in its midst, and if the *tzaddik* moves on, suddenly there is a void and nobody knows how to deal with the situation. The community loses its spiritual momentum, and eventually it begins to dwindle. There are other times, however, that a *tzaddik* leaves a place and others step up to the plate and fill the void. That community, propelled by the impression of the *tzaddik* and the leaders who now have picked up the mantle, rises higher and higher. Rashi does not tell us what kind of impression was left in Be'er Sheva, I believe, because he wanted to teach us that each situation is very different.

This past *motzei Shabbat*, standing on Har Herzl, I heard Rav David Bagno, the Rabbi of Kehillat Mishkan Shilo in Ramat Shilo, Ramat Beit Shemesh, tell over a well-known story. Somebody once came over to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l to ask him whether it was appropriate to travel abroad to visit the graves of *tzaddikim*. Rav Shlomo Zalman looked at him and said, "Why do you have to go abroad to visit the graves of *tzaddikim*? You have Har Herzl, which is full of *tzaddikim*!" He was talking about the burial places of IDF soldiers who gave up their lives to defend the Jewish people.

Unfortunately, over the last three years, hundreds of *tzaddikim* have been buried in military cemeteries around the country, more than 240 of them on Har Herzl itself. One of those *tzaddikim* is the reason I was standing there that night: Binyamin Meir Airley HY"D. I did not have the privilege of knowing Binyamin, who by every account was a holy *neshamah*, when he was alive. After his death, I got to know his parents, Jen and Rob Airley, who are very special people.

The connection really started a few days after the Airley family got up from *shivah*. OU Israel had brought over a mission of women from North America to give *chizuk*

ישראל
Mazal Tov to
Rabbi Avi & Pnina Berman and family
on the birth of their granddaughter
daughter to Shlomo & Tamar
Great-granddaughter to
Feivy & Rachel Leah Berman
and Alex & Daniella Kuflik

to widows, and to mothers and fathers and siblings who had lost their loved ones. Our mission was packed, with lots of people and an extremely busy schedule, and one of the things we did was go over to Jen and Rob's home in Ramat Shilo.



I will never forget that visit. It was all about us coming to give them *chizuk* after losing their son. But after spending over an hour in their house, it was so clear that every single person who walked into that home, hearing from Jen and from Rob and speaking to the siblings, walked out with a tremendous amount of *chizuk* themselves. We heard wonderful stories about Binyamin. But we also saw the tree on which such an incredible apple grew. The strength, the devotion, the Torah, the connection to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the *emunah* that everyone described in Binyamin clearly came from his parents.

Since then, Jen Airley has become a regular source of inspiration across our OU Israel programs. Whether that be at our Women's Division, including this past Rosh Chodesh Kislev or NCSY events inspiring teenagers, including their recent Yom HaAliyah event. She writes for Torah Tidbits, including an article just a couple of weeks ago. Jen has truly become part of the OU Israel family.

So it was no surprise that when Nina Broder, our Director of Social Media, came over to me several months ago and told me she thought we should do this year's Tisha B'Av video with Jen Airley, it was such a natural fit. Jen and I spent two days filming, running around the country to create the content for our video, "Beit HaMikdash: In the Making," and I got to see firsthand what kind of holy mother raised Binyamin.

And then I keep seeing her in communities around the world where I go to speak. It's a funny kind of phenomenon. I was there when she spoke in Florida. I was there when she was in New York and New Jersey. Most recently I was there when she was in Toronto. When I would visit those communities and *shuls*, I would hear people talk about her amazing speeches and how much they got from them. For some of them it was a Shabbat morning talk in *shul*. For others it was a Thursday night *hafrashat challah*. For others it was a Sunday morning breakfast, or an evening in somebody's house with a group of women who needed *chizuk*.

Jen and Rob have taken the loss of their *tzaddik* Binyamin Meir and created an impression. They have done it by telling over his story, and by showing all of us that if *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* decided to take a *tzaddik* like Binyamin Meir away from them, it is not going to go in vain. Listening to their children speak at the *azkarah* on Har Herzl, marking three years since

Binyamin fell, I heard his sister Sarah talk about everything that has grown since: the grandchildren of Rob and Jen who have been born and named after Binyamin, the *yishuvim* that have been started in his name, the many children outside the family who have been named Binyamin after him, and the many good deeds that people have taken upon themselves because of his passing.

So many families who have lost loved ones here in Israel have grown and inspired others in the memory of their parent, brother, sister, son, daughter, friend. I am seeing so many people doing incredible things in memory of the *tzaddikim* who were taken from them.

It is clearly something we took from our forefathers. In last week's *parsha*, we find Yaakov Avinu cooking lentils. Chazal tell us that this is the traditional food of mourners, and he was making it to comfort his father on the day that Avraham Avinu passed away. He was going to make an impression. We constantly mention "*Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak ve'Elokei Yaakov,*" the God of our forefathers, because we want to connect ourselves to those who came before us and gave us a direction, and never to forget their incredible attributes.



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SCAN TO BOOK

That is why so many of us have taken additional *mitzvot* upon ourselves. Not speaking *lashon hara*, bad speech and gossip. Being more careful with kosher eating. Taking care with concentration in *davening*, especially not to talk during *davening*. Being nicer to the people around us. Lighting Shabbat candles. Putting on *tefillin* every single day. These incredible things that people are doing really come from a place of us becoming better people because of the passing of a *tzaddik*.

Rashi had said an impression is left in the city when a *tzaddik* leaves. Rashi calls what the *tzaddik* takes with him when he leaves is "the glory and the radiance and the splendor of a place." That may be true. But sometimes it forces those who remain to become better. In this situation, because of the passing of the *tzaddik* Binyamin Airley and the other *chayalim*, we have not stayed in the same place. We are trying to become better every single day.

In addition, Rob and Jen decided to build a center in Tzfat called Beit Binyamin, where countless groups of soldiers, bereaved families and *miluim* families are able to go and rejuvenate and receive strength. I hear from Rav Shmuel Eliyahu, the Chief Rabbi of Tzfat, how many groups are going there, and how many times he is asked to come and speak to them. I hear from Jen and Rob how many times they go up there and speak to the groups themselves. And I hear from my own teams, whether it is Frontline Support, our program for English-speaking *chayalim*, or the Zula, how many of our groups are going up there, and how many people are being inspired *le'ilui nishmat* Binyamin. It really gives me an incredible feeling. Our

enemies may have killed the physical body of Binyamin, but the spirit of Binyamin has only gotten stronger and stronger since they took him physically away from us.

Be'ezrat Hashem, may no more graves of *tzaddikim* be added, whether of soldiers, police, civilians, or anyone who gave their lives for this country. But let us continue learning from these *tzaddikim* and make sure their impression lasts. Let us think of ways to thank families who have lost loved ones and risen higher and inspired others to rise higher, for taking such sadness and tragedy and making the world a better place.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,

Rabbi Avi Berman
Executive Director, OU Israel



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