

What it Means to be There

The story is about an eleven-year-old boy whom we will call Jerry, whose father suddenly passed away at a very young age. Jerry was left alone in the world - alone with his young, widowed mother, who had to go out to earn a living to support the two of them. She worked long hours, and Jerry was alone for much of the evening. He missed his father terribly, but he had to cover up his loneliness, lest his mother notice and be overcome with grief.

Jerry was observant in a traditional sense. There was no Jewish Day School in his town, so he would go to the afternoon Talmud Torah after public school. His day would begin at 5:30 a.m. when he arose to go to the early Minyan to recite Kaddish for his father. It was not much different than it is now. Most of the men in shul were the older men who were present early every day. The sight of an eleven year old boy reciting Kaddish tore at everyone's heart. Understandably, all of the men doted on young Jerry. They were all very protective of the little orphan.

After a few weeks of attending Minyan something occurred. Mr. Goldman, the shamas, sexton, of the synagogue, began to appear at Jerry's front door each morning, just as Jerry prepared to begin his trek to the synagogue. Mr. Goldman was not a young man. Originally he had gotten a ride to the synagogue each day. Now, all of sudden, he was just "passing by" the house - each morning just as Jerry began his walk. He explained, "Your home is on the way to the synagogue. I have to go this way to the synagogue. I have to go this way anyway, and I figured it would be nice for me to have some company. This way I would not have to walk alone."

Mr. Goldman was incredible. Through the freezing cold of winter, through the blazing heat and stifling humidity of summer, they walked together. The pelting rain and blinding snow did not halt their daily walk. During their walks, Mr. Goldman would share a story from the Midrash, a thought from Chazal, a halachah from the Shulchan Aruch, a mussar, ethical, thought. He held Jerry's hand as they crossed the street. He slowly moved in to fill the void left by Jerry's father's death. Indeed, as Jerry recollects today, it was those daily walks and comradeship that convinced him to pursue his religious studies in a yeshivah gedolah.

Years went by, and the walks were replaced by phone calls and letters. Jerry shared his successes with his surrogate father. When Jerry graduated yeshivah high school, Mr. Goldman was there to share in the nachas. Years later, when Jerry received semichah, ordination, Mr. Goldman shared in this most wonderful moment. Indeed, Jerry felt that his semichah was a gift, a special gift to a special man, who from out of the blue had become his primary motivator and source of encouragement.

Jerry met his bashert, Divinely ordained match, and Mr. Goldman attended the wedding. He sought no accolades, just the pure nachas of observing the joy in the life of the young man whom he had befriended. A few years later, Jerry, together with his wife and little six-month-old son came to visit his mother. They called Mr. Goldman and asked if he could come to the home that he would "pass by" so often, years ago. Mr. Goldman responded that he would like to, but, alas, he could no longer walk more than a few steps. Jerry said he would gladly come by to pick him up. Realizing that he had never known where Mr. Goldman lived, Jerry asked him for directions.

The trip was long and complicated. It was a full twenty-minute drive. As Jerry drove, tears ran down his face as he realized the distance Mr. Goldman had walked daily just to "pass by" his house. He had walked over an hour just so that a young orphaned boy should not feel the pain of loneliness. He had made Jerry feel that he was the beneficiary of having a young boy keep him company, when, in truth, the opposite was true. He understood the young boy's loneliness and he sought a way to alleviate it.

They met - the young boy turned man, his family and the old man who was now in his nineties. Everyone cried. What a beautiful and poignant scene it was; the next generation supporting the past

generation, the generation that had nurtured and sustained it. It was an inspiring moment for Jerry and his wife. He finally was able to repay the man who had given him so much. What did he want? He merely wanted what all parents want - nachas and the best for their children. Jerry took Mr. Goldman home. As he said goodbye, they embraced and cried. They both knew that this would probably be the last time they would see one another. A short time later, Mr. Goldman went to his eternal rest, satisfied with a life lived well, a life that had inspired and kindled the spark in another life. Like a candle, he lit the flame in Jerry's neshamah, soul. By his simple gesture of being there, of holding Jerry's hand, of walking with him to shul and letting him know that he was not alone, he engendered confidence and faith in a young boy, giving him the reason and hope to go on. It is so easy and takes so little to help those in need. What are we waiting for?