

When a Mitzva Is Not So Easy to Perform

Numerous stories recount the devotion of our People to observing this mitzvah under the most difficult circumstances. Tefillin is a reminder of past miracles. Its observance strengthens our faith and commitment. Furthermore, Tefillin are a part of the Jew's uniform, which he dons daily as a proclamation of his deep rooted conviction. I recently came across an inspiring "Tefillin story," which conveys a universal message.

The hero of our story is a young yeshivah high-school student whom we will call David, who volunteered this past summer at the local home for the aged. One of the jobs of the volunteers was to ask the residents if they would like to go to the daily services. Most of the residents were receptive. Those who were not, were generally pleasant about it. There was one man, however, who was rather offensive in his attitude. He not only refused to attend, but he even once cursed the volunteer that had suggested he come daven, pray. Hearing this, David decided that he would go have a friendly chat with his resident.

David went over to the dining room, saw the man, and said, "The volunteers are only here to help you. There is no reason to curse them." The resident looked at David and responded "Wheel me back into my room, I want to tell you a story." David wheeled the man into his room. After he was comfortable, the resident began to relate the following story:

"I had grown up in a prominent, observant home. Everyone but my father and I had already been murdered by the Nazis. In the concentration camp in which we were interred someone had smuggled in a Tefillin-shel-rosh, which is worn on the head. Every morning the men would take turns putting on the Tefillin, even if just for a second."

"The day before my bar-mitzvah, my father became aware of a man who had a whole set of Tefillin. That evening, the man who had smuggled in the pair of Tefillin was killed by the Nazis. After hearing of the man's death, my father decided to go to his bunk and locate the Tefillin so that I could have a complete pair of Tefillin for my bar-mitzvah. On the way back, my father was seen by a Nazi, who shot and killed him before my very eyes. Somehow I managed to take the Tefillin and hide them."

The resident paused and then asked, "How could you expect me to pray to a G-d who would kill a boy's father right in front of him? He was getting Tefillin for me to be able to pray to Him! Is this the reward? My father was all I had left in the world. Why?"

Another minute went by, and the resident said, "Go to my dresser and open the top drawer." David did as he was told, opened the drawer and found an old black, worn-out bag. The man asked him to bring over the bag. The resident opened the bag to reveal its contents - a pair of Tefillin. "You see these boxes! I keep them to show people what my father died for: dirty black boxes and straps. They were the last thing my father gave me. This is my inheritance!"

One can only imagine the hurt and depression this young boy must have felt. He left the room speechless. He could neither eat nor sleep restfully. He empathized with the resident, but how could he explain to him that he was wrong? The next day, he avoided the man's floor until he was notified that they were one short of a minyan, quorum, and one of the residents needed to say Kaddish. He searched all over for a tenth man, to no avail. He had no choice but to go to the recalcitrant resident and ask him to join them.

David went to the room and asked the resident if he would attend the services so that another resident could say Kaddish. He was prepared for a negative response, so he was taken aback when the reply was, "If I come, will you then leave me alone?" David said, "Yes, if you come I will not bother you any more." David quickly added, "Would you like me to bring along the Tefillin?" To his shock, the resident said, "Yes, but after this, you must promise to leave me alone."

They went down to the synagogue. David wheeled the resident to the back. Just before he left, David showed the man how to put on the Tefillin. When the services were over, David returned to the room to help bring back the residents. He came into the synagogue to find one worshiper - his "charge," the resident whom he had brought to complete the minyan. He was sitting in the back of the shul, with his Tefillin still on. Tears were pouring down his cheeks.

"Should I get a nurse or a doctor? Does something hurt you?" David blurted out. Nothing - no response, just bitter weeping. He was mumbling something. David bent over to listen. He heard the resident saying over and over again, "Tatti, Tatti, it feels so right," as he kept staring at the Tefillin straps on his arm.

David waited until the man calmed down. He took him back to his room and helped him into his bed. The man turned to David and said, "During the hour that I wore the Tefillin, I felt as if my father were with me."

Every day after that, David would pick the man up and bring him to shul to daven with his "newly found" Tefillin. One day towards the end of the summer, David came to perform his daily ritual, but the man was not there. He was told to his great chagrin, that the resident was taken to the hospital during the night. They had just received word that he had died. David was broken-hearted. He had developed a close relationship with the elderly resident over the past few weeks. He would miss him.

A few weeks later, a woman came to the home and asked to speak to David. She said to him, "You do not know me, but you were very special in my father's eyes. Actually, in a way, you saved my father's life." She then introduced herself as the resident's daughter. "Shortly before my father died," she continued, "he asked me to bring him his Tefillin. He knew he had very little time left, and he wanted to put on his Tefillin one last time and pray with them. You truly saved him and made his last days on this world comfortable. You helped him to reconcile himself with his past. My father died wearing his Tefillin. Thank you so much for caring about him." Years of bitterness were made sweet by an individual who cared about another person. This is a Tefillin story with a message about caring, because we do not always realize the difference that a little bit of caring can make.