

# A Different Kind of Siyum

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Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

Autumn leaves splashed the sidewalk with vivid colors, making a satisfying crunch for the group of friends walking home from yeshiva together.

“I studied so hard for that chumash test!” Yossi wailed. “I just don’t get why I only got a 79.” Some of the guys threw him looks of sympathy. But then Avromi Peresh put in his two cents.

“You know what your problem is, Yossi?” Avromi began. “You get too bogged down with details, the little parts that are not so important. I can see it in class from the way you ask questions. How can you ever study a whole perek if you stay stuck on why Rashi said what he did in posuk aleph?!”

Yossi’s face was beginning to resemble the fiery red leaves that fluttered from the trees, but Avromi didn’t seem to notice. He plodded on relentlessly. “You ask all these small, unimportant questions, you keep the whole class waiting, and you wonder why you only got a 79?”

Without saying a word, Yossi crossed the street and picked up his pace. He could hardly wait to get home, away from the stinging words that echoed in his mind.

“Why’d you do that?!” Yitzchak demanded, glaring at Avromi. “Didn’t you see you were embarrassing him?”

“Embarrassing him?” Avromi asked. “Since when is telling the truth ‘embarrassing’? Listen guys, if you’re not straight with someone, how will they ever know what they need to fix? Maybe my advice will help him before the next test comes around.” The other boys were quiet, wondering about Avromi’s words. They sort of made sense. After all, how can someone ever know what he needs to work on if no one levels with him? But then they remembered the wounded look in Yossi’s eyes and they wondered.

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“Hey, guys, c’mere!” Everyone was just arriving in school the next morning, and Nesanel was eager to show his friends his project before class began. He carefully extracted a large poster board from a jumbo-size garbage bag.

“I barely slept a wink last night,” Nesanel announced. “I made this special collage in honor of my Bubby and Zaidy’s fiftieth anniversary party, which is tonight, but I still have a few finishing touches to add. I figured I could do it at recess. What do you think, hmm?” Yaakov, Yossi, Shmueli, Moshe, Yehuda, and Yitzchak “ooh”ed and “aah”ed. They were definitely impressed. Sruli, Nachi, Tzvi, Reuven, Baruch, and Shimmy made thumbs-up signs and patted Nesanel on the back. Together everyone gazed at the collection of colorful family pictures laid out and glued together to form the number “50.” The shiny gold background made it really striking, and anyone could see how much love and time had been invested.

“Collages are so old,” Avromi’s voice broke in, and Nesanel felt a jolt, like a cup of ice water had just been spilled all over him.

“Couldn’t you think of something more original? Now if you want my opinion, this is what I would do. In fact,” Avromi kept going, “if you want, I could even come over later and help you make a 3-D model that would really honor your grandparents. That would really impress ‘em. What do you say, Nesanel?”

Nesanel began to carefully roll up his artistry, his face pointed down so no one could see his expression.

“I don’t think there’s time,” Nesanel mumbled. “I mean, the party’s supposed to start at six-thirty tonight, and I don’t get home till five-thirty...” Just as Avromi was about to explain to him how fast they could work together, Rebbi walked in, and the conversation was brought to an abrupt halt.

An hour and a half later, the bell signaled class’s end, and twenty-one boys zoomed outside to play ball. Reuven was up at bat. He stood poised and ready as the ball flew towards him. Reuven moved his bat to meet the ball, swung - and missed.

“Aw, come on!” Avromi yelled. “Don’t you know how to play?”

Reuven colored and missed the next two throws. As far as he was concerned, the game was over. Mechanically, he moved aside for the next batter, hearing Avromi’s voice call out again.

“Hey, Reuven, let me show you how to hold a bat.”

“No, thanks,” Reuven said stiffly. “I just remembered something I needed to take care of inside.” And Reuven marched himself into the safety of the yeshiva building, away from Avromi and his honesty.

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It was a week later when the class got their invitations: elegant, cream-colored invitations with gold borders. Each boy received one in his mailbox, inviting him to celebrate with Avromi, who was making a siyum. The night of the siyum was crisp and clear. Avromi was dressed in his Shabbos best, eagerly awaiting the noise of slamming car doors that would signal his class’s arrival. The table was set, ready for all of the invited guests. Avromi’s mother was busy in the kitchen, stirring the meatballs and tossing the salad. Avromi’s father was sitting with a sefer, waiting.

“Are you sure you wrote the right time on the invitation?” Tatty asked, staring at the clock that showed the time to be 6:45.

“Of course!” Avromi answered. “I wonder what could have happened. Did they all - forget?”

Finally, a knock. Avromi raced to the door and found Rebbi standing there.

“Oh, hi, Rebbi, please come in.” Avromi tried to mask his disappointment that it was Rebbi and not any of his friends. Avromi’s father rose to shake Rebbi’s hand, and the two began to talk in learning. When it was 7:00, Mr. Peresh cleared his throat.

“Avromi, as far as I see it, we have two options. I can call around so we can get a minyan for your siyum, or you can try to make a few calls.”

“I guess I’ll make some calls,” Avromi said dispiritedly.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Rebbi said, stepping outside. Pulling out his cell phone, Rebbi began to speed-dial the fifth graders’ homes.

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“There’s no one there?” Yossi asked in astonishment. “Okay, Rebbi, I’ll be there. But let me just explain to you why I decided not to come, Rebbi. I didn’t exactly forget.”

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“I should come now?” Nesanel jumped up from the homework he was in the middle of doing. “No problem! But can I just tell Rebbi something?”

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“Sure, Rebbi, no problem,” Reuven agreed. “But I think there’s something you should know. You see, there’s a reason that I didn’t show up tonight.”

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Within ten minutes, the Peresh dining-room was filled with lots of boyish laughter and noise. Avromi looked around and sighed with relief. He hadn’t even started making calls yet when his doorbell had begun to ring.

*I wonder what happened, Avromi mused, helping himself to a generous portion of spaghetti and meatballs. How did they all forget?*

“Avromi, I want to speak to you.” Rebbi called Avromi over to a quiet corner.

“When I get up to speak, I plan to say nice things about you, about your hasmada, how you see things through. How would you feel if I told you, in public, that if you had really tried, you could have covered twice as much ground in the same amount of time? Or that this siyum could almost cancel out the failing grade you got on your last test? Would that help you?”

“Rebbi, I think I would want to dig a hole and bury myself deep inside,” Avromi squirmed.

“But maybe those words could be helpful to you,” Rebbi probed. “After all, Isn’t it a mitzvah to point out the truth to people so they know how to improve?”

“Yes, of course, but there are ways to say things. And right and wrong times, too.”

“I see,” Rebbi nodded, gazing deeply into Avromi’s eyes.

“Rebbi!” Avromi gasped, putting his hand over his mouth as understanding dawned. “Are you trying to tell me that no one really forgot about tonight? That the guys didn’t come because of . . . because of how I’ve been treating them?”

Rebbi put his arm around Avromi’s shoulder.

“You catch on pretty quick, you know,” Rebbi answered, giving Avromi a reassuring squeeze as they made their way back to the table. It was time for the program to begin. Rebbi and Mr. Peresh spoke divrei Torah. Finally, it was Avromi’s turn. He looked down at the sheaf of papers in his hand. He found it hard to lift his head and so he just kept it down. He couldn’t find his voice at first, and then it came out, hoarsely. “I had a whole megillah prepared,” Avromi began, holding up the stack of sheets that were stapled together so everyone could see. He continued in a low voice.

“I was going to wow you with some really great stuff. But I’ve changed my mind.” Then Avromi found the courage to lift his eyes, and he looked at his classmates. He hesitated, and his lower lip began to quiver. He tried to continue, but the words wouldn’t come out. A glance at his Rebbi gave him the encouragement he needed. Rebbi nodded at him and smiled. Avromi swallowed hard.

“I don’t have much to say now, except three words. I’m very sorry. I hope I won’t put my foot in my mouth anymore ‘cuz I realized tonight how awful it is to say things that make people upset. I mean, no one wanted to come tonight! I hope I won’t forget what I learned and start running my mouth again, but if I do, you have my permission to stop me in my tracks and just remind me.” Avromi’s face was burning, a shade of deep, fiery red, and he sat down hard, afraid to look at anyone. The room was silent. And then one clap was heard, and another, and suddenly the whole room was filled with smiles and happy applause.

“Now that’s a real siyum,” Rebbi nodded approvingly.

“A siyum of a bad habit and the beginning of a new one, b’ezras Hashem. But Avromi, I think we’d all like to hear what you prepared.”

“A-are you sure?” Avromi blinked back some tears. It had been hard to stand up in front of everyone and apologize, though he did feel lighter – the way a guy feels when he knows he did the right thing.

“Go, Avromi, go. Go, Avromi, go,” twenty voices chanted.

“Well, okay then.” Avromi smiled, stood up at the head of the table, and said his piece.

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The next morning...

“Yossi, let’s hear you read and explain the mishna, please,” Rebbi directed. Yossi did his best, and Rebbi filled in where needed. When his turn was over, Yossi seemed a little flustered. Avromi noticed.

“Know what I think?” Avromi sidled up to Yossi after class. *Uh-oh, here he goes again*, Yossi worried.

“You did a great job!” Avromi beamed, giving Yossi a high five.

“I did?” Yossi asked, astonished.

“Sure! Who doesn’t miss a word or two? You were great.” And the smile on Yossi’s face showed Avromi that his siyum last night had been a success.

