

Missed Opportunities

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Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

Refael was a born leader. If he suggested playing basketball during recess, basketball it was. If he groaned when a book report was announced, the whole class groaned along with him. He would never say it aloud, but he enjoyed having the whole class follow him.

Unlike some leaders, he never led the class into doing anything wrong. Not Refael. He knew how to behave properly, and he never excluded any boys from any game or made fun of them. That's why Rabbi Goldberg placed Yeshaya Miller in the seat next to him.

The Millers had just moved to Detroit from New York, and Yeshaya didn't know anyone in the class. Rabbi Goldberg thought it would be a good idea to sit Yeshaya next to Refael who would hopefully help him break into the class. It was a good idea. Refael smiled at his rebbi and made a mental note to invite Yeshaya to play ball during recess.

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On that morning, the class was taking the big Chumash test. The boys were soon busy answering Rabbi Goldberg's questions as best as they could. The test was hard; Refael had studied, but there were some answers that he wasn't sure of.

Recess finally came, and Refael put down his pen with a sigh of relief.

"Race you to the yard!" Tzvi, who sat in front of Refael, called.

"First one out in the yard is captain!" Refael shouted, sprinting with all his might. He was first, as usual, and the game was soon underway.

Yeshaya stood up hesitantly. Should he follow the boys? He wasn't even sure in which direction they had gone. He'd been waiting for recess to get to know them. During the test, Rabbi Goldberg had told him to read a book, since he hadn't learned the material. He'd been bored but had consoled himself with the thought of having a good time during recess. Now the classroom was completely empty.

Yeshaya decided to try to follow his new classmates, but he was soon completely lost. The secretary, a nice girl named Baila, helped him find his way back to the classroom.

"Recess is almost over," Baila told him.

Yeshaya sat down in his seat again. He'd just wait until everyone came back, he thought. Refael looked like a nice boy. Maybe he'd have a chance to talk to him before the bell rang.

But he didn't.

Refael's team had lost, and it was all because of Yissachar.

"Why didn't you throw it to second?!"

"We could have won!"

"You missed a great opportunity!"

Almost every boy had something to say to Yissachar who was beginning to feel quite miserable. Refael was trying not to say anything, but Yissachar really had messed up the game. He'd missed a great chance.

Yeshaya's eyes lit up with excitement as he heard the boys coming back. Surely someone will come over to talk to me, he thought eagerly. Certainly Refael will notice me. After all, his seat is next to mine. But it didn't happen. Refael sat down in his seat, looking angry. All around him, Yeshaya could hear nasty comments – something about a ball game. No one paid any attention to him.

Rabbi Goldberg entered the classroom a moment later, and the unpleasant buzzing immediately died down.

"Open your Chumashim, boys," he said. "We're going to learn the end of Parshas Vayaishev, which talks about Yosef HaTzaddik. Imagine, here was Yosef, sold by his brothers as a slave. Now he was even put into jail - and he hadn't done anything wrong! He had every right to sit in a corner and sulk, but what did he do? "When the opportunity came to cheer up someone else, he grabbed it and asked his fellow prisoner why he looked so sad. Yosef never missed an opportunity to do a mitzvah. We should all learn from Yosef HaTzaddik to grab every chance to do a mitzvah. Sometimes an opportunity can be sitting right next to you but, if you don't realize it, it will slip through your fingers."

Refael was still upset about Yissachar. *Boy, he's really someone who missed an opportunity, he fumed. I hope he's listening to Rabbi Goldberg.*

"Ah-ah-choo!"

Refael turned to see who'd sneezed. Yeshaya was pulling a tissue out of his pocket as he tried to write down every word that Rabbi Goldberg was saying.

He really wants to do well on the next test, Refael thought. He's probably very nervous. It must be hard to come to a new class in the middle of the year. Come to think of it, he must be shy. He didn't come out to play with us during recess.

Suddenly Refael realized something. *Boy, talk of missed opportunities! I really missed out. Why didn't I think to invite him to join us? I'm much worse than Yissachar. All he did was ruin a silly ball game.*

"Now choose a partner, boys, to review the vocabulary words for the next perek (chapter)," Rabbi Goldberg was saying.

"Wanna review together?" Refael asked Yeshaya. "And would you like to come to my house to play ball after school? Tzvi is coming, and I think I'll invite Yissachar, too. Yissachar, wanna join us for a ball game after school?"

Yissachar grinned, and Yeshaya's smile seemed to fill his whole face.

No more missed opportunities for me, Refael thought happily.

