



BRIDGE BUILDING THE MITZVAH OF OUR TIMES

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I well remember Moishe'la: he was from South America and learnt in the Yeshivah when I was a young bochur. Moishe'la was somewhat of an exotic figure, he came from a far-off place and spoke with a different accent. Moishe was considered a fully-fledged Chasidic young man, he had perfectly curled peyos and wore a long frock in the weekdays when such was not yet the norm. We all looked up at Moshe as a model of what a frum fellow could be, and wished we could get our peyos to curl just like his! It was therefore with huge dismay that we learnt one day that Moshe had packed his bags and disappeared. He just vanished with nothing said, and disappeared into the cauldron that was the American melting pot of the early sixties. Sometime later we learned that Moshe's long peyos were shorn and thrown into the rubbish bin together with everything else that had marked his Jewishness. Moshe was the first rebel we ever experienced in our circle, and his abrupt exit from Torah life shocked everyone. Obviously, there were things going on in Moishe's heart that drove him to leave the yeshivah, the tragedy was that there was no one available who could read the signs.

In those bygone days, becoming dismayed with a Torah lifestyle was a rarity. The Torah community was still very small, and we knew everyone to a greater or smaller extent. If a youngster chose to leave, he had to make a total break, and that meant leaving everything behind and disappearing.

Today we are witnessing a different dynamic where young people can become disillusioned with things, and yet still carry on in the community without the need to leave all together. There are kids being *Mechalel Shabbos* whilst wearing the full uniform of the chareidi world, or sleeping in on Shabbos after drunkenly gallivanting about on Friday night. For a long time, many pretended all this wasn't

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1149453

happening. You averted your eyes when groups of youngsters would rumble past you on your way to shul. We all knew something wasn't right, yet figured if you didn't talk about it, the problem would somehow just fade away. After all, teenagers go through rebellious moments, and just look around you, how many baalabatisha adults of today used to be real tearaways when they were kids?

This may all be true, and there is nothing new under the sun. There never were really the "good old days" and every generation has its unique challenges. Yes, our kids are facing a world of technology that can take them into the darkest cesspools with one click, but historically there have always been tests for the soul which were tailor-made for the generation of the time. The answers to today's woes are very likely to be found in those of generations past, if we can only look at them without prejudice.

In every human there is a small child that wants to be loved. Each soul cries out for warmth, for a "nip on the cheek", for some understanding. Instead, we seem to be building increasingly high walls, closing off those who don't seem to fit, creating ever smaller spaces that are considered kosher. We check, double check, and check once more to make sure that those considered unworthy don't gain entry, but in truth we have created such confined areas that we often find ourselves suffocating. This is the beginning of the problem and the seed of its resolution. Every Yid deserves to be wanted, and every child must feel a sense of worth. Teenagers often rebel because no one seems to respect their individuality.

As we march closer to our final Redemption we are finding souls that have been crying out for affection and caring in ever more growing numbers. We have ways to reach out to them, more so than ever before. We can provide programs, spiritual tools that society overlooked till now. Ticking off boxes never really worked when it came to individual neshomos that are gifted with particularly complicated needs.

In this week's parsha -Vayishlach- we read "And Yaakov was left alone; and a man wrestled with him. . ." Rashi comments that Yaakov had forgotten small jars and returned to retrieve them. Why would Yaakov have returned for these "small jars"? The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that this reminds us that each of us must rescue a "small jar" - even one individual touched with a smile or given an understanding that they count is worthy of our wrestling with any obstacles that come our way. This need for connection is essential; its absence is what alienates our youth. Without it, they sense that we don't care.

Bridge building must become the mitzvah of our times, not only in schools, but in our shuls, our shops, in fact wherever we have the opportunity to exchange words of friendship. It is not only kids who are at risk, we are all imperiled. We all need a sense of connection and without it we just become robots that live life without heart.

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