

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

*Captivating stories full of Yiras Shamayim taken from Shmuessin that
Reb Kalman Krohn z'tl gave in Adelpia Yeshiva*

Shackled Body, Unfettered Soul

Until Milton Feist was fourteen years old, he was a regular American boy with similar interests and hobbies as the rest of his public school classmates.

And then he was stricken with polio.

Milton was lucky to survive with his life, but life as he knew it changed forever. He became paralyzed from the waist down, and all the muscles in his immobile lower body shriveled, turning his legs into thin, skin-covered bones. One of his lungs had collapsed during his illness, leaving him with but one frail lung for air. At that tender age of fourteen, he was confined to a wheelchair, which he would continue to use for the remainder of his life.

From an active and carefree teen, a helpless, disabled young man emerged, dependent on others for his basic needs. The simplest of tasks, such as getting out of bed, were excruciatingly difficult for him. His family was there to assist him as he learned to maneuver himself and his wheelchair, as he tried to transition back into the life of an American teenager.

Polio was not the only painful reality Milton was forced to contend with in his teenage years. When he was nineteen years old, his beloved father passed away, leaving him not just handicapped, but an orphan as well.

On the day of his twentieth birthday, his mother knocked on the door of his room. "Milton? Can I come in?"

"Come in!" he called back.

She turned the knob and entered, holding a thick envelope in her arms. "Happy birthday, Milton," she said emotionally. "I have a present for you." Silently, she put the envelope down on the desk before him.

Through the open flap, Milton could see a stack of bills. It was cash. "What's this?" he asked in confusion. He had not been expecting such a big gift.

"I'm giving you this money to start you off," his mother continued. "It's time for you to leave home."

Milton dropped the envelope and stared at his mother in shock. "What?!"

"A mother doesn't live forever," she said simply, looking away. "You need to learn how to manage on your own."

A wave of panic rose up inside him. “Mom! You can’t do this to me!” he wailed, willing her to change her mind.”

She shook her head. “No, Milton, I’m serious. Your father is gone, and I won’t be here forever either. The time has come for you to learn to fend for yourself. Milton, you need to leave the house.” He looked at her with pleading eyes. “Where should I go?” he whispered fearfully.

“You can make some calls, network with friends,” his mother suggested. “I’m sure you’ll find a room to rent. I gave you enough money to start yourself off, and you’ll have to figure things out from there. I’m doing this for your own good, Milton. You’re on your own now.”

His gaze followed her as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. He could tell she had meant every word she said, and he knew he needed to find himself a new home. Uncomfortably, he picked up the phone and began making calls.

Being that he was wheelchair bound and needed a handicapped accessible apartment, finding a room to rent was a lot more difficult than his mother had made it sound, but Milton persisted. By the time he went to sleep that night, he had spoken to the landlord of a vacant, ground floor studio apartment and was scheduled to tour the apartment the next day.

Just a few days later, Milton’s mother bid him a tearful farewell, promising to visit him often. She watched as he wheeled himself outside and rolled in the direction of his new residence. Despite the pain, she knew she had made the proper decision. Milton would thank her later.

Living on his own was a tremendous adjustment for Milton, and he slowly taught himself tricks and techniques to manage tasks that were difficult

for him. When his mother died five years later, he grieved over his loss while acknowledging her foresight. She had given him the greatest gift: independence.

His two brothers owned a well-known, prosperous business, the Feist Company of Music Sheets. Wealthy and generous, they understood that their little brother could not subsist on his disability payments alone and brought him in to join the company. Milton couldn’t work in their offices, as they were not wheelchair accessible, and so they provided him with office work that he could do from his own apartment. He earned a generous monthly paycheck for the bit of work he did.

His life had reached a predictable, if somewhat boring, routine. He pulled himself from his bed to his chair, did work, ate meals, and pulled himself back into his bed again. He saw little other than his four walls and those who came to keep him company.

One night, as he slept in his small studio apartment, he was awakened by the sound of his window creaking open. In horror, he watched as a black man hoisted himself through the now-open window. Milton shriveled in fear. He was severely disabled and knew that he was no match for the strong, well-built intruder.

Luckily, the thief didn’t seem interested in harming him. He shown his flashlight in all directions grabbing up items of assorted value and stacking them near the window for access on his way out.

“Excuse me!” Milton suddenly called as the man prepared to make his exit. “Wait a minute!”

The intruder shone a flashlight into his eyes, blinding him temporarily.

“That tape recorder won’t work without the wire,” Milton explained. “You had better make sure to take the wire along as well, or it will be useless.”

The man lowered his flashlight in bewilderment. The last thing he had expected was the victim of his robbery assisting him. Was this a trick to keep him from fleeing before the police arrived?

“Please switch on the light,” Milton continued. “I want to speak to you.”

The thief hesitated for a moment. Then, realizing that Milton was severely disabled, he shrugged and flicked the switch. If he needed to, he would easily be able to eliminate his victim.

Milton grabbed the handlebars near his bed and pulled himself into his wheelchair. “You must be hungry,” he told the startled intruder. “Let me make you a cup of coffee.” He left the man contemplating his words and rolled himself to the small kitchenette. A few minutes later, he handed his ‘guest’ a cup of steaming coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs. “Sit down, and let’s talk a bit.”

The man grudgingly accepted the food and settled into a chair. “Alright, what do you want to talk about?” he asked gruffly.

Milton looked him up and down. “You look like a nice man, fine and respectable. Why are you ruining your life like this? Let me give you money and set you up with a proper job. You can get married, start a family, and live a happy and successful life. What do you say?”

“I... I...,” the man stammered. “No one has ever spoken to me this way,” he admitted. “I never had a chance to get a respectable job. This is the only life I know.”

“If you want to turn your life around, I’m willing to help you,” Milton promised sincerely. “You

look like an honest man, and I truly believe you’ll return the money that I’ll lend you.”

It took the man a while to believe that someone was willing to give him a chance to start his life over on a positive footing. Milton lent him a significant sum of money, and the two parted as friends. Indeed, the man turned his life around and became a respectable person in society. He married, established a family, and advanced in a profitable career. Needless to say, he remained close to Milton his entire life.

After his near-robbery, Milton began to question the trajectory of his life. I eat and sleep to have energy to work, he thought to himself as he lay in bed after his midnight intruder left. I work and work so that I can purchase transient pleasure in this world. Just five minutes and one thief, and I can lose everything I spent my life working for. There must be more to this world than that.

Thirsting for meaning and fulfillment, he began searching for spirituality, and before long, he discovered Yiddishkeit. He absorbed everything he learned, and within a short time, he shed his former persona and became Reb Meir Feist, a staunch Breslover chassid.

When he moved to Lakewood at the age of sixty-four, he joined the ranks of the talmidim of Bais Medrash Govoha, where I merited to be his study partner. In accordance with the Breslover custom, Reb Meir would learn lehalachah, to understand the practical ramifications of the mitzvos as they apply to us today. Together, we completed many masechtos, including Chulin, Nedarim, Parah, and Yora Deah.

During that time period, about ten days before Shavuos, I contemplated the fact that although Reb Meir was a loyal Breslover chassid, he never went to the mikvah. I assumed that since, as a handicapped individual, immersing in a mikvah was not something Reb Meir could do without

assistance, he had never really had the opportunity to purify himself in this manner.

I debated back and forth about whether I should broach the subject with my esteemed chavrusah. Would Reb Meir appreciate it if I offered to take him to the mikvah, or would it be an unwelcome intrusion of his privacy?

An opportunity arose one afternoon as we waited at the head of a tall staircase. Reb Meir's substantially heavy wheelchair demanded the strength of four men to carry it up or down stairs; two in the front and two in the back. As we waited for three more men to join me in lifting the wheelchair, I decided to jump in.

I stood behind him, gripping the handlebars of the wheelchair, grateful that I couldn't see his face as he heard my question. "Reb Meir," I said softly. "The Taz explains that la'asok bedivrei Torah means that Torah is a business. Let's make a business deal."

"What do you have in mind?" he asked from in front of me.

"I'm not a Breslover chassid," I responded, a trifle hesitantly. "But if you teach me some Breslover chassidus, then I'll take you to the mikvah."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. How did you dare ask such a thing to man so much older than you? I berated myself. Taking Reb Meir to the mikvah meant stripping him of his privacy, and as an invalid with a deformed body, this was probably all the more difficult for him. I held my breath as I waited for him to respond.

Before he could open his mouth, the other three men appeared, and together, we began the task of bringing Reb Meir down the stairs. When we reached the bottom, I thanked them and we parted ways. I gripped the handlebars on the wheelchair

and wheeled Reb Meir to the designated table where we learned night seder together.

I pulled out a chair beside him and sat down. To my horror and astonishment, Reb Meir was crying!

In that moment, I realized I had made a terrible mistake. "I'm so sorry," I told him sincerely. "Please forgive me! I only had good intentions; I thought you might have been interested. Please forgive me!"

With his single good hand, Reb Meir gripped mine. "You don't understand," he said, tears flowing down his cheeks. "For months now, I have been davening to Hashem to send someone to take me to the mikvah. How I long to immerse myself, to purify my body in the mikvah. Thank you! Thank you for offering!"

I yanked my head back in shock, a warm feeling spreading over me. Not only had I not caused this special man pain, I had also been chosen by Hashem as the answer to Reb Meir's tefillos. "It would be my honor to take you," I told him.

At that time, I was completely ignorant of the challenges, the effort and strain involved in taking Reb Meir to the mikvah, but I found out soon enough.

Right from the moment I picked him up from his home, the challenges began. First, I needed to transfer Reb Meir from his wheelchair into the front seat of the car. This was much easier said than done. When he was finally seated in the car at last, I rubbed my aching muscles and folded his wheelchair, stowing it in the trunk. We proceeded on to the mikvah.

At the mikvah, the difficulties continued. Moving Reb Meir from the car to his wheelchair was just as difficult as the other way around. When I wheeled him up to the entrance, I realized

belatedly that there were two small steps to get inside. Just two small steps, but they were like towering mountains to me, since there was no one to help me lift the wheelchair up over them. This was all part of the mitzvah, I knew, as I summoned superhuman strength and managed to do the job of four people in getting the wheelchair up those stairs.

The greatest challenge was the mikvah itself. Covered by a towel, Reb Meir wheeled himself up to the steps of the mikvah, and I watched as his face turned white. He had only one lung, his legs were immobile, and he had the use of but one arm. To him, the four-foot mikvah may have been a vast ocean.

In a trembling voice, he asked me to seat him by the steps of the mikvah, and I obeyed. He sat at the top step, small and frail, gripping the banister with white knuckles. After all the effort, all the energy and emotion that the two of us had invested in the venture, I was ready to give up, to give in. Reb Meir was terrified of the water; it did not appear that he would be immersing in it anytime soon.

And yet, his persistence surprised me.

Taking a deep breath, Reb Meir asked me to wet my hands and then assist him in immersing in the warm water. I went in first, and from my vantage point inside the mikvah, lifted him into the water. Steadying my arms, I lowered him slowly into the water until it reached his nose. He gave a tiny nod and I submerged his head in the water for a split second before bring him back up.

As I struggled to help him back onto the stairs, Reb Meir began sputtering and coughing. This was his first experience in a mikvah, and he hadn't been in any sort of pool since before he was stricken with polio fifty years earlier. His cheeks budging and his face a deep scarlet, he

coughed and coughed. I watched apprehensively, afraid that the immersion had harmed his lungs. Suddenly, the venerated mashgiach of Beth Medrash Govohah, Harav Nosson Wachtfogel, entered the room, intending to use the mikvah. He stopped at the sight of Reb Meir, who was still gasping for air. "Can I help in any way?" he inquired.

"It's Reb Meir, Reb Meir Feist," I explained quietly. "I think he's okay. We're on our way out."

The mashgiach nodded and left the room.

Reb Meir's breathing took on a more natural rhythm, and I lifted him out of the mikvah. Wrapped in a towel, I wheeled him to the dressing room and waited outside for him to get dressed. While a typical person needs no more than five minutes to dress, I figured it would take Reb Meir significantly longer due to his disabilities. I waited for twenty minutes, then twenty-five, but Reb Meir was still inside the dressing room. Was he okay?

Knocking lightly on the door, I called, "Reb Meir? Are you ready?"

"Come in!" he called back.

Inside, I was astonished to find Reb Meir exactly the way I'd left him: wrapped in a towel in his wheelchair. His face was glowing with an ethereal light, and he was clapping his hands in excitement. "I merited taharah!" he declared jubilantly. "I merited to purify my body in the mikvah!" His infectious joy was so intense that he was unable to do anything other than bask in it.

Eventually, we made our way out of the mikvah, and I explained to Reb Meir that we needed to pay for using it.

He immediately pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket.

“It only costs a quarter,” I tried telling him, but he wouldn’t hear me.

“Twenty-five cents for this invaluable mitzvah?!” he exclaimed dismissively, pushing his twenty dollars into the slot.

I watched this extraordinary man, who had lived through pain and suffering for the majority of his lifetime, in awe. His disabilities enabled him to recognize the true value of each mitzvah, to understand the greatness of one immersion in the mikvah, to envision that which the rest of us, the healthy ones, are blinded to. Reb Meir’s body may have been shackled, yet his soul soared freely toward tremendous heights.

Yehei zichro baruch.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!

This story is taken from tape # A303

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