

They Were His Struggles Too By Rabbi Chaim Ozer Geldzahler

I was a typically stressed-out 16-year-old bochur, hoping Uncle Shea could work his magic on me too. I'd visit him every Sunday afternoon, and although I'd just come to schmooze with my great-uncle, hear some stories, share some thoughts — you know, just because — I found myself unloading my stress and despair as he listened carefully.

"You know I don't treat family," he made sure to tell me. And then, with a glint in his eyes, he leaned over slightly and said, "A doctor who treats himself has a fool for a doctor and a fool as a patient." Okay, so how about I don't come for help, but just let me hang out and listen?

And I couldn't hear enough. His chassidishe stories, related in his own unique way, every detail carefully transmitted as he heard it, painted sceneries of yesteryear as if he were there to witness it all. When he finished, you knew how eternally relevant they were.

But sometimes I couldn't help myself and I came and complained. I remember one particular Sunday, basking in the serenity of his Teaneck home, sitting on a chair (and tempted to lie on the sofa, but we were schmoozing and not doing therapy) and I said something about feeling like giving up. He started laughing. "Let me tell you a story," he said. "When we lived in Pittsburgh, we once hosted a neighbor for a Shabbos meal and their little four-year-old was playing with a pushke and making a racket. His mother tried to teach him a lesson in hilchos Shabbos — 'Moishy, you know a pushke is muktzeh on Shabbos, and we're not allowed to play with mukzteh on Shabbos.' Moishy protested, 'Mommy, in my whole life I never heard that a pushke is muktzeh on Shabbos!' "

After Uncle Shea finished teasing me, he looked at me very seriously and said, "You wanna give up? Okay, give up! So do you feel better now? Well, why not? Didn't you give up? You see, I once tried running away, but I realized that I'd always take 'me' with me. Giving up doesn't really help anything, just like running away doesn't. You're still stuck with yourself."

One Sunday, I decided to bring up my recent smoking habit, which was beginning to bother me as I'd tried quitting a few times without success.

"Uncle Shea," I admitted. "I smoke, I don't know if I'm addicted, but I tried quitting and it doesn't work." He thought for a minute and then said "Don't quit." I was baffled. I

knew what his thoughts were on smoking and addiction in general, and I couldn't hide my shock. He calmed me down, explaining, "If you quit smoking, that pits you in a struggle against the addiction, and the addiction will eventually win — it's stronger than you are. If you want to stop, then just don't smoke your next cigarette." It took me a minute to digest that, when he continued, "I learned that from the Tiferes Shlomo, the way he explains 'hayom im bekolo tishma'u' — just think about one day at a time."

I haven't had my next cigarette yet.

Every Sunday visit was its own surprise. One week as I sat down, he randomly asked me what I was learning in yeshivah. I told him we were learning Bava Kama.

What page are you up to?" he asked.

"Daf 69."

"Ahhh, so let me see, the first Tosafos, there's a Rabi Akiva Eiger and a Ketzos I'm sure your rebbi told you about," and he proceeded to go through the amud Tosafos by Tosafos as if he learned it yesterday. I tried my best to hide my astonishment.

"So, when did you learn Bava Kama?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Let me think, it must've been in Bobov, on the West Side, so that's probably around '49." We were now in 2009!

In recent conversation with my grandmother Rebbetzin Feige Twerski, she related an anecdote that illustrates so much of what made her famous brother-in-law unique. It was at the bar mitzvah Shabbos of one of his sons, and many friends and family made the long trip to Pittsburgh to partake in the simchah. His wife, Goldie, put together the Shabbos from beginning to end, from sleeping accommodations to home-catering the meals and everything in between. Finally, after many hectic days, it was Friday night: Everyone was sitting around the long, set tables in the shul, the bar mitzvah boy was gleefully taking everything in, and there was true simchah in the air. Somewhere in middle of the pre-Kiddush zemiros, Goldie motioned to Uncle Shea that she needed to talk to him urgently. Apparently, the fish that she labored to make on Thursday and was waiting on the kitchen table for Uncle Shea to deliver to the hall, never made it — and there was no eiruv. As a hostess, she was terribly embarrassed and quite upset. After all that work, half of the meal was missing. He promised her he'd see what he could do — which, given the circumstances, wasn't much.

They made Kiddush and washed, and when the fish was supposed to be served, Uncle Shea got up to deliver a speech. “My dear wife Goldie,” he began, “in 20 years from now, we’ll be sitting at the bar mitzvah Shabbos of this young fellow’s son, G-d willing, and perhaps we’ll be approached by one of the guests sitting here now, and we’ll reminisce about this Shabbos, and surely someone will comment about how it’s so like us to forget the fish, and how it doesn’t happen to anyone else but us, and we’ll sit and laugh together over that mishap from two decades ago.

“So, Goldie and my dear guests, why do we have to wait 20 long years? Perhaps now is just as good a time to appreciate and laugh about how ridiculous it is that there won’t be any fish, because I forgot to deliver it to the hall. I know, it’s quintessential me. Isn’t it crazy? Who forgets the fish by a bar mitzvah?” Indeed, there was no fish, but there was lots of laughter, and a timeless message.

ONE SUNDAY, IN THE MIDDLE of a conversation, Uncle Shea let out a deep sigh, just out of the blue. “What’s matter, Uncle Shea?” I asked with concern. He motioned to the portrait of the Zeide Reb Mottele. “What, he did something to you?” I asked. He sighed again. “You see, he was my great-grandfather, and when I think about my great-grandchildren, it’s just disheartening, you know, when I think who is their elter zeide, and who was mine...”

This incongruity was startling — here is this great man, who has helped heal thousands of people, and yet, he beat himself up like that all the time. There was some humility involved, obviously — perhaps too much, as he’d admit. But there was something else as well. I remember he was having a rough day, and I was there kvetching about some issues I was having with a friend. As we were talking, he teared up, held my hand, and said, “How about I’ll be your friend and you’ll be mine?” It was then when I knew that all his preaching about self-esteem and simchah wasn’t some textbook psychology, but came from an intimate familiarity with them. It was his own inner conflict, his ups and downs and personal struggles, that motivated him to write and teach about these subjects and effect change and healing in so many others. It wasn’t that he was the expert because he mastered it. He was the expert because he struggled with it consciously for 90 years.

I once asked him why he wasn’t a millionaire, given his thousands of patients and consultations, his dozens of books, his speaking engagements — how did he manage to do it all and not become rich? His answer was simple and clear. “Before I went to medical school, my mother told me, ‘Remember, you’re going to help Yidden.’ ” He never lost sight of his mother’s guidance. He wasn’t in it for fame or money, both of which he worked hard to run away from. He was there to help Yidden.

Helping Yidden isn't a profession. It's a calling. Listening to Yidden, crying with them, consoling lost souls, comforting broken hearts. Whether it's drug addicts, their families, or his 16-year-old nephew with silly teenage issues, his wisdom and guidance wasn't something you could learn from a textbook. It's what some people call a rebbe. Uncle Shea gave me a vision, hope, and confidence to grow and be strong. He wasn't the first psychiatrist with a shtreimel, but he might have been the first chassidishe rebbe to have a degree.