

# A FATHER'S LOVE

Saying no was a lot harder than saying yes

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*AS TOLD TO SARAH MASSRY*

**IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT PHONE CALLS I'D EVER MADE.** I'd originally planned on having this conversation in person, but the logistics were complicated. You see, I live on the West Coast and my son Meir lives in New York. And in any case, it would probably be easier to do it over the phone.

"Meir, there's something important I need to discuss with you," I said.

"What is it, Tatty? Is everything okay?" I was able to sense his anxiety over the phone.

"Everything's fine, *baruch Hashem*," I replied. "I just wanted to have a little talk with you about money."

"Oh," said Meir.

"I've been very happy to help you out until now," I continued, "but I've come to the realization that I can't do it forever. Starting on the first of February, a year from now, I will no longer pay your credit card bills or send you monthly checks."

Silence. Finally, Meir found his voice. "Is everything all right with the business?"

"Yes, thank G-d, the business is flourishing. Meir, you are a bright and capable young man. I know you'll be able to make it on your own."

"But..." he stammered. I knew my son well and understood how difficult this was for him. There really wasn't anything he could say. How could he argue with me? After all, I'd supported him generously for the past 12 years, ever since he'd gotten married. I'd paid for most of his living expenses, coughed up the down payment on his home, covered his children's tuition and sent him on vacations.



There was no way he could complain. At the same time, I knew he probably felt as if I were pulling the rug out from under his feet.

"Meir," I continued, "don't panic. I'll be helping you until you get on your own two feet. You still have time to figure this out. And I'll be happy to help you find a job or fine-tune a business idea."

"Thanks," he muttered.

"And don't forget that I have lots of connections."

"Thanks, Tatty, and thank you for supporting us for so long. I really have no words to express my gratitude for everything you've done for my family. We really appreciate it."

"It was my pleasure, Meir. I love you."

I hung up the phone and wiped away a stray tear. What Meir didn't appreciate was just how much I truly loved him. In fact, I cared so much about him that I'd just done one of the hardest things in my life.

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I was fortunate to have been blessed with a successful business and the means to support my family generously. While I was able to afford almost anything my children had ever needed or wanted, I was careful not to spoil them. Still, my wife, Esther, and I had a soft spot for Meir, our youngest son. Meir had been born when our youngest child was seven, and my wife often said, "Meir kept us young."

There was something about his sweet nature and charming personality that made it difficult to say no to him. The older children often complained that Meir got away with murder. But they didn't really resent him because he was a nice boy with a heart of gold. And so the years slipped by with Meir getting just about everything he pointed a finger at.

When Meir was old enough to attend *yeshiva* in Eretz Yisrael, my wife packed

his suitcases with enough clothing and food for three people. We also sent along a credit card for anything else that might catch his eye.

Two days before he left, I decided to book a ticket and fly to Eretz Yisrael with him to make sure he settled in properly. I'd heard stories of *bachurim* having difficulties, and I wanted Meir to start off on the right foot.

Esther and I missed him terribly that

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## FORTUNATELY, HIS FAMILY LIVED QUITE COMFORTABLY— THANKS TO ME.

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year and found every possible excuse to visit or fly him home. My wife also continued to send elaborate care packages to her baby.

Despite all the coddling, Meir matured and made us all proud. Shortly after he returned from Eretz Yisrael he got engaged to Nechama, a lovely girl from New York. Since Meir wanted to continue learning in Yerushalayim, the couple decided to settle there. Nechama's parents had agreed to support the couple, but the trouble began

just days after their plane landed at Ben Gurion Airport.

"Everything's great," Meir told me. But I knew my son, and I could tell that something was off. Alarm bells went off in my mind and my heart started to race.

"Yeah, it's just that..." Meir's voice trailed off. "Nah, it's nothing. Everything's great here."

"Meir, *tzaddikl*, it's just *what?* What's going on?"

He laughed. "Ta, don't worry so much! My wife is the best thing that ever happened to me. It's just that our apartment is pretty small. Nechama grew up in a beautiful house; she's not used to the Israeli lifestyle. The bathroom's a little gross, and the guy who designed the kitchen must have been colorblind. Also, the furniture is kind of shabby and there's no elevator in the building..."

I bit my lip, unsure of what to say.

"But I'm sure we'll get used to it!" he proclaimed brightly.

It was then that I made a grave mistake, the first in a series I'd make over the next decade. "Okay, Meir. Just let me know if you need help. I don't want you to suffer."

"Thanks a million, Ta!" he replied gratefully.

I smiled. It felt good to know that Meir could count on me. Sure enough, he took me up on my offer three days later.

"So actually, this apartment really isn't working out," he said.

"I can send you some money for minor renovations," I offered quickly.

"I think we'd be better off moving," he replied.

"Didn't you already put down a deposit for the first few months?" I asked.

"Yeah, but what can we do? Anyway, I'm not so crazy about the neighborhood."

"I see."

"The thing is that it's hard to find an



apartment—within our budget, I mean,” he continued. “All of the decent places in the new apartment buildings cost a lot more.”

We discussed the options. Then I said, “Go look for something you like. Don’t worry about the price; I’ll take care of it. The most important thing is for you and Nechama to be happy.”

“Tatty, you’re amazing! Nechama will be thrilled!”

Not only did I pay the difference in the rent, I also paid for their furnishings. When Nechama and Meir’s first child was born, Esther and I flew in for the *simchah* with suitcases of baby paraphernalia in tow—including a designer stroller and diamond earrings for the new mother.

Five months later, Meir confided in me that things were a bit tight. “The shekel is really weak and food costs a fortune here,” he said. He still had the credit card from before his wedding and asked if it was okay to continue using it.

Hindsight is 20/20. In retrospect, I should have let him figure out how to stay within some sort of budget and live responsibly, but instead I said yes to his request. I’m not proud of the fact that I gave him an unlimited credit card with zero accountability.

For years I subsidized his rent and paid his credit card bills. Sometimes I was resentful of his lavish expenditures. Did he really have to travel to Switzerland for a vacation? And was it absolutely necessary that he and his wife eat out so often? But at least I had the satisfaction of knowing that Meir and his young family were happy. He was also making the most of his time in *kollel*. Since I was able to afford it, I let the arrangement slide.

Meir and Nechama lived in Eretz Yisrael for seven years. It cost me a small fortune, but I was thrilled that they had the oppor-

tunity to live there. When they moved back to the States with their three small children, I helped them buy a house, furniture and a minivan. I continued supporting them with the caveat that he had to find a *parnassah*. Whether it would be in business or in *chinuch*, the main thing was that he had to take responsibility for his family.

I was sure that he would find something quickly, but he didn’t. At first he found a part-time job tutoring weak high school students. “They’re so unmotivated and difficult to reach,” he told me. “I just don’t enjoy it.” He quit within a few months.

Next he tried another teaching position, but he didn’t enjoy that one either because it was too draining. Having decided that he wasn’t cut out for teaching, he ventured into the business world but had difficulty following through with anything. He was hired twice but left both positions for different reasons. Fortunately, his family lived quite comfortably—thanks to me.

I tried not to offer my unsolicited opinion, but I was concerned. Meir lacked ambition and determination. Between the lines, I sensed his wife’s frustration too.

The truth eventually sank in.

“It’s all my fault,” I admitted to Esther one night. “I spoiled him and enabled him to be like this. Why *should* he want to earn a living and take responsibility if he doesn’t have to?”

Looking back, my mistake seems so obvious, but all those years I had been blinded by my intense, though misguided, love. Unfortunately, I’d done more harm than good, and the time had come to rectify the damage by cutting off my financial support. I could no longer serve as Meir’s crutch.

My son was on my mind long after that dreaded phone call. Behind the scenes, I made calls on his behalf in an effort to help him find meaningful employment. I know



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that a few businessmen reached out to him.

At the same time, I realized that I had to take a step back. Meir was an adult, and he'd have to figure this out on his own. I sent him several text messages with business leads that I'd dug up through my networking, but I didn't follow up on them or nudge him in any way.

When February 1 came around, it was a very difficult day for me. I cancelled Meir's credit card and didn't send him a check for the first time in years. Instead, I *davened* for him fervently, hoping he'd take charge of his own life.

Months passed. Our conversations were awkward and stilted. I really wanted to ask him if he'd figured out what he wanted to do or contacted any of my leads, but I restrained myself. Meir didn't offer any information, so our conversations were limited to small talk. All I could do was hope for the best.

Reality struck one day when my daughter Pessy called.

"Ta, what's going on with Meir?" she asked sharply.

"You're the one who lives on his block," I replied. "You tell me."

"Listen, Ta, Nechama had to borrow money from me the other day."

I gripped the phone but said nothing.

"Meir mentioned to me that you had cut off your support. I know it's none of my business, but how can you do that to them?"

"You're right—it really isn't any of your business. I'm sorry to have to say it to you in this way, but I'm doing what I feel is right, and I don't have to justify it to anyone."

"Yeah, but think of his wife and kids—"

I cut her off. "I don't want to discuss it." The conversation ended.

I wasn't aware that the rest of my children were also up in arms. Messages went back and forth on their WhatsApp group questioning my decision, which seemed so

out of character to them. How could their loving, generous father have taken such a drastic step?

The next phone call I received was from my brother Shragi. "I saw Meir in *shul* the other day, and I just want you to know that he looked awful. He mentioned that he doesn't have money to pay his bills. He's behind in tuition, and his whole family is struggling because of what happened."

"What happened?" I asked.

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## OUR CONVERSATIONS WERE AWKWARD AND STILTED. I REALLY WANTED TO ASK HIM IF HE'D FIGURED OUT.

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"You know, that you suddenly cut off your support," he replied. "No one can deny that you helped him generously when he was learning in *yeshivah*. But he needs a little more time to get on his feet."

"Shragi, you don't understand," I said, seething.

"You're right—I probably don't. And I don't know the whole story. I just think it's ludicrous that the son of a wealthy man is turning to others for help."

I got off the phone as quickly as I could.

I knew that a lot of people were judging me harshly. I was also sure that many of the *gemachs* from which Meir had borrowed money were wondering what was going on. My wife cried when our eldest son told her he'd had to pay Meir's bill at the grocery store because he'd reached his credit limit.

"This is just too much," she said to me. "We've got to help him!"

"Esther, we *are* helping him—in a much more important way than we ever helped him before."

Intellectually she understood it, but it was still painful.

As the months passed, I continued to *daven*; it was all I could do. And eventually my *tefillot* were answered. One day Meir mentioned that he was running out to class; apparently he'd enrolled in a business course. About a year later, he accepted a position and gradually worked his way up, paying off his debts and getting back on his feet, all the while maintaining a strict learning schedule.

On a recent visit to the East Coast, I spent Shabbos with Meir's family. "Meir," I told him as I was leaving, "I get so much *nachas* from you and your beautiful family. I am very proud of you."

He smiled. We'd never explicitly discussed it, but I sensed that Meir understood what I was alluding to.

A lot of other people, however, still believe that my decision was unfeeling. I wish they'd given me the benefit of the doubt. Nonetheless, I am comforted by the knowledge that Meir recognizes just how much I really do love and care about him and his family. ●

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