



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT YITRO

The Bar Mitzvah Speech

There was a man in Bnei Brak who, every single morning, would roll up his sleeves to wrap his tefillin — and one detail never went unnoticed: his arms were completely hairless. The rest of his body had normal, healthy hair, but his arms were smooth and bare.

His young grandson, who often accompanied him to shul, found this strange. Over time, his curiosity grew. One morning, he finally asked his grandfather why his arms looked that way. The grandfather smiled gently and said, "When you turn bar mitzvah, I'll tell you." The answer only intensified the boy's intrigue, but there was nothing to do except wait.

Years passed, and the long-anticipated day arrived. After the bar mitzvah ceremony, the boy approached his grandfather once again and reminded him of his promise. The grandfather placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and said quietly, "Tonight, at the celebration, you will get your answer."

*That evening, the bar mitzvah celebration was in full swing. The rabbis were seated at the head table, the boy had delivered his speech, and the room was filled with warmth and joy. Suddenly, an unfamiliar man walked into the hall. He appeared frail and gaunt, with no hair anywhere on his body — no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no hair on his head at all. Many in the room assumed he was undergoing chemotherapy, and quiet murmurs of *refuah sheleimah* were whispered under people's breath.*

Then, without warning, the boy's grandfather jumped up from his seat, ran across the room, and embraced the man tightly. The two men collapsed into each other's arms, sobbing openly. The room fell silent. No one understood who this man was or why the grandfather was so overcome with emotion.

After a few moments, the grandfather led the man to the head table and announced, "My dear friend Chaim would like to speak to the bar mitzvah boy." Chaim stood up and began slowly. "This is one of the most important days of my life. Let me tell you our story." He motioned toward the grandfather beside him.

"We were both very young when we were taken to Auschwitz. I arrived with my entire family. Upon arrival, they separated us — my parents and siblings were sent one way, and I was sent another. I was only nine years old. My mother ran toward me to give me a final hug, knowing we were being torn apart, and she was shot in front of my eyes. As I watched her bleed out right

before me, my father and my siblings were killed as well, just a few moments later. In an instant, my entire world was gone."

Chaim paused, gathering his strength. "They lined us up, stripped us naked, screaming that Jews were filthy and diseased. To clean us of "lice," they forced us into a pit filled with acid. One by one, boys were plunged in for several seconds and then pulled out. Many screamed. Some didn't survive."

"When it was my turn," Chaim continued, his voice trembling, "I decided I didn't want to come out. I had lost my parents, my siblings, my home, my shul — everything. As I was dying, burning in that pit, I thought to myself: 'The Nazis took my clothing, my dignity, my family, my entire life. But they didn't take Hashem. I still have Hashem.' I put my arms up to try and save myself, but I was already burning and I couldn't get out."

"Your grandfather had already been through the acid pit. But when he saw me, he ran back — knowing full well that he could be shot for it. He plunged his arms into the acid, reached beneath my arms, and pulled me out with all the strength he had. I was badly burned, but your grandfather hid me, cared for me, and kept me alive the entire time we were there. Had the Germans seen the extent of my injuries, they would have killed me immediately."

He took a deep breath. "One night, as we lay in the barracks, I felt like I was dying. Your grandfather turned to me and said, 'You and I will live to celebrate each other's grandchildren's bar mitzvahs — in Israel.' We never forgot those words."

Chaim looked around the room. "Tonight is the first of those bar mitzvahs. And that," he said, turning back to the boy, "is why your grandfather has no hair on his arms — because those are the arms that remained in the acid so he could save my life."

We may never be called upon to plunge our arms into acid for our brothers and sisters. But each of us is called, in our own way, to extend our arms — to protect, care, sacrifice, and embrace. Are we doing so?

(Story shared by R' Zecharia Wallerstein)

"A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because her trust is not on the branch but on her own wings. Always believe in yourself."