

Drosha – Bar Mitzva of Yaakov Yisroel Singer n”y
November 28 – Shabbos Parshas VaYeitzei

My wife and I would like to thank everyone for coming to share in our simcha, this joyous occasion of Yaakov Yisroel becoming a Bar Mitzvah. To my mother and brothers, and nieces and nephews who traveled far to be with us today with us and of course to the Novices and Roths, to my friends and colleagues from work, and *acharon acharon chaviv* to the distinguished Rebbeim who are here with us today. To all the people who changed their travel plans to be here and to all who have so generously offered to host our out-of-town guests. Thank you for contributing so much to our Simcha. I would also like to take this opportunity to give – on behalf of the entire congregation - a heartfelt *mazel tov* to Benjamin and Elizabeth Berman on the occasion of their marriage. May you enjoy a lifetime of health and happiness together, as you go about the sacred business of building a *beis neeman b'yisroel*, an authentic Jewish home.

It is perhaps appropriate to share with you, Dennis, an intensely emotional experience I had during the beautiful wedding in Miami last week. After the wedding processional, just before the ceremony, all the Berman and Shechter children were all gathered together near the stage, in anticipation of the chupah. From my vantage point on the men's side, I noticed how all of your sons and son in law stood so tall and straight, how they warmly embraced one another as each made his way to his appointed place, how they in turn held their children, and I saw what a beautiful family Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu has given to you and how, to coin a phrase, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy or more worthy person. You really are one of my teachers, Denny, and you should only continue to have *nachas* from all your family.

And then, amidst this reverie, I thought of my own family, my own children, my son-in-law, who is like a son to me, and, of course, my granddaughter, and how fortunate my wife and I have been to be blessed with children who have embraced with both arms, hearts and souls the values that we hold so dear, and who care so much for another. They are growing into such wonderful, responsible, personable, and sensitive human beings – how when I gaze upon this family at the Shabbos table, or even now when I see them all sitting here today – so committed in the most genuine and sincere way to authentic Torah values, all I can do is echo the words of Yaakov Avinu and say, *katonti mikol hachasadim, Dear G-d, I am undeserving of all the kindness that you have bestowed upon me.* All I can say is “*Yesh li kol*” – *I, we, have everything.*

Of course Yaakov that sentiment is amplified 10 fold as we celebrate today the occasion of your becoming a Bar Mitzvah. You have made your mother and I, your Rebbeim, your grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, and friends so proud. It is not just because you did such a good job leining (reading from the Torah), leading the prayer service, giving your speech, or even making two siyumim today – on Mishnayos Seder Moed, and Gemorah Sukkah (and one more on Mishnayos Seder Nezikim in a couple of weeks) Or that you are an excellent student, and a gifted athlete. I remember when you were in the Torah School how your class had an assignment wherein everyone had to write something nice about his classmates and how almost to a boy all your classmates said that you were a real good ball player -and a really good friend, About 5 or six boys said that you were their best friend - that you were always willing to help someone in need. [And who can forget Yaakov that you have contributed in essential ways to the Singer family lexicon. That when you were little and you felt mistreated by one of your brothers, it was you that coined the immortal phrase “You don't do that to a person” or when, on our way to snowtubing you got so excited when the van went over a big bump in the road you said “Give me a dollar!”. Of course, there were other classic lines that are best not shared at the

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present time – one poignant example being when you fell off a road bike into 6 inches of mud during our family vacation to West Virginia last year.

But if the people here today are to get a truly accurate picture of you Yaakov, they need to know these following things: that whenever you get any birthday money, you run to a Jewish bookstore and buy seforim - like the Mishne Brurah, the Piskei Teshuva, and the Shita Mekubetzes. They need to know how your eyes are aglow with excitement when you bring those seforim home and begin to learn from them. They must understand how despite a very demanding Yeshiva schedule that typically runs from 7:30 in the morning to about 6:00 at night – not counting homework, you – on your own initiative - learn an extra few hours a week with Rabbi Hess and Yehuda Mendlowitz to go beyond your class in gemorah, Rashi, and Tosfos– Who could be more proud of such a son? Your mother and I know for a fact that there is a G-d in the world because our prayers for you and all our children have been answered. I fully expect that someday you and your brothers will surpass me in Torah knowledge and general level of religious observance – and despite the fact that I will never admit that that has ever happened, - know that, deep down I will be very happy. So Yaakov, as you are about to take your first steps into Jewish manhood, I want to impart to you some fatherly advise. But you must understand something very important: my remarks are not directed simply to a Bachur Ha Bar Mitzvah, to a young man who has just become an adult in the eyes of the Torah - they are directed to someone whom I believe will someday be an important spiritual leader of the Jewish people, a gadol hador –in that regard, they are for all my children - but today Yaakov, they are especially for you.

I would like to share with you an important thought from Rav Avroham Pam zt”l * [excerpts taken from Rav Pam on Chumash] – but first we need to provide a little bit of background concerning the life Yaakov Avinu, Jacob, our father, His life was filled with one difficult challenge after another. Shortly after leaving his parent’s home, he was attacked by Esav’s son, Eliphaz, who took away the money and gifts that Yitzchok, his father, had given him. From the day he arrived in Charan, he had to deal with the self righteous deceit of his future father-in-law Lavan. Time and again he was cheated by him, yet Yaakov remained a paragon of integrity and devotion. When after twenty years, he was able to return to Israel, he faced the real and present danger of a mortal confrontation with Esav, his aggrieved brother who still hated him. The night before this confrontation occurred the Torah describes Yaakov’s circumstance in poignant terms “*Vayivaser Yaakov livado*” “*And Yaakov remained alone*” whereupon he became engaged in a cosmic struggle with the angel of Esav. He emerged victorious, though wounded, from that battle - with a new name, Yisroel, Israel – and then flush with victory – with the reasonable expectation that the worst was behind him, his daughter Dina was abducted. That prompted his hot headed sons, Shimon and Levy to massacre those abductors as well as their entire city as they rescued their sister – leaving Yaakov to deal with the political repercussions of their actions. Shortly after that his beloved wife, Rachel, died when she was giving birth to Binyamin. When Yaakov finally returned home Rashi brings the Medrash which states”

[Hebrew]

“Hoping to finally settle down in tranquility, the anguish of his favorite son Yosef’s [kidnapping] pounced upon him”

Rav Pam asks “How was Yaakov able to overcome the almost constant periods of terrible calamities, anyone of which would have destroyed a person of lesser stature.” The Medrash in Breishis Rabba 68:7 suggests that what kept Yaakov going during those difficult times was the

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knowledge that “if I give up, I will forfeit the energies that my mother invested in me to help me obtain the blessings from my father .” Because after all, Rivka has risked I tall to help Yaakov acquire those blessings – she told him “Your curse should be upon me , my son. “ This thought was Yaakov’s constant source of inspiration during the numerous crises he faced.

At this juncture, it is entirely fitting to share with you the details of yet another life, another story of sacrifice and courage, one, however, that is literally and figuratively much closer to home – and that is the story of your grandfather, your Saba, he should live and be well. I’ll just try and state the facts which need no embellishment on my part. Saba was born in Warsaw in 1927. Life was tolerable until 1939 when the Nazis came and from that time on until the end of the war, the Warsaw ghetto was a place where people starved to death or were murdered with horrific regularity, where Jewish education was illegal and where those who dared to defy that edict simply disappeared. Saba has remarked that life – if you could call it that – was easier in Aushvitz than in the ghetto because in Aushvitz the people who died were strangers – not so with the family members, neighbors, Rabbis, teachers and friends in the ghetto. In 1941, his parents determined that their 14 year old son’s only chance for survival was to escape from that ghetto. So they bribed a Polish police officer to look the other way while they hid him under the seat of a trolley car that serviced the gentile sector of Warsaw but which did its roundabout within the ghetto walls. That was the last time your Saba ever saw his parents. From 1941 to 1944, he lived in Ostrovich with his cousins and, for much of that time, worked in the Herman Goering Ironworks as a slave laborer. Yehoshua ben Efraim Sosnovith, zt”l, whom we commemorated in the twinning ceremony a few moments ago, was one of those cousins. Unlike Saba, he was too young to be of value to the Reich so he perished in 1942 when the Jews of Ostrovich were liquidated. In August of 1944 Saba was transported to Aushvitz where he stayed for six months until that nefarious place was also liquidated. Then came the death march to Buchenvald, where Saba ate grass to stay alive, and the transport to Theresienstadt where he was liberated by the Russian army on the last day of the war and was almost left for dead. He moved to England, met Savta, started a family, got his PhD in physics, emigrated to the US to Elmira, NY where he worked for Westinghouse and helped build a camera for the first lunar mission, onto Silicon valley in to San Jose, CA, and now lives here in Potomac, MD where he is here with you today to celebrate your Bar Mitzva.

I hope and pray that you, my dear beloved son, will have a life of pleasantness, peace, and prosperity. That your life will always be filled with joy, graced with honor, that Hashem will always reveal Himself to you - that only good things will happen to you when you try to do good things. Alas Yaakov, I can make no such guarantees. There may be times when the choosing between taking the high road or the path of expedience is excruciatingly difficult, when you will face problems that do not have answers in the back on the book. And, in truth, you will likely make mistakes and perhaps you will feel discouraged afterwards. That is when I want you to remember the inspiration of Yaakov Avinu, your namesake: “if I give up, I will forfeit the energies that my mother invested in me” I want you to remember how much your parents, Rebbeim, grandparents, siblings, and all your friends have invested in you, how much we believe in you, and how much we love you. We know that you will always try to do the right thing.

I have told you these painful stories because I want you to fully appreciate the sacrifice and courage of the people who went before you – the people who have bequeathed to you, with

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their tears and their devotion, the precious legacy, which today you are charged to uphold. It is because I want you to appreciate the gift of life – and with that appreciation, I want you to feel an attendant sense of responsibility that you need to use all your strength, your heart, your soul - all your abilities to the fullest, to study Torah, to serve Hashem, and to serve your fellow man. Mostly, however, I am telling you this because I want you to see and appreciate the fact that there are human beings who have seen the worst the world has to offer, who have seen the light of day masked with the ashes of death – who still believe in the goodness of G-d, who still observe His Commandments, who put Tefillin on every day, who are kind to people, who still believe that life is worth living and that this world is fundamentally a very good place – Tov Moed. We now understand why the Satmer Rebbe, zt”l told his Chasidim that they could solicit blessings from anyone with numbers tattooed on their arm upon which Tefillin straps lay. So Yaakov, anytime you might be inclined to feel sorry for yourself, when you fall off the proverbial bike of life and find yourself sitting in a puddle of mud, please remember that things are not so bad. There may be times, like Yaakov Avinu, zt”l, , that you may feel like you are standing utterly alone in the dead of night, feeling that you are ill equipped to fight the battles that are raging around you, that you are lacking the strength of character, courage, or resolve to do the right thing. It is then that I want you to think of all the great Rabbis who came before you, who lived and died, so that you could have all the tools you need to grow into a complete person, I want you to think of my father of blessed memory, the grandpa you never met, who sacrificed his entire life so that his children and his children’s children would have opportunities he never had, and it is then I want you to think of your Saba

No one here expects you to be perfect or to never stumble, to never be afraid or feel overwhelmed – but we all expect that should you stumble, chas v’shalom, you will get up, you will learn from your mistakes, and emerge wiser, kinder, and even more giving and G-d fearing than before. As the proverb states, *Sheva yipol tzadik v’kom.* - *Seven times the righteous man falls and get up.* We expect that when faced with complex and difficult problems, you will seek council with Rebbeim and ask shelylos, questions, that are intellectually and emotionally honest and that you will remain fully prepared to follow through on their teshuvos. And Yaakov – all my children - should, chas v’shalom, it should ever come to pass that you feel enveloped by the forces of darkness and feel that there is not light at the end of the tunnel, I want you to remember this moment – how your Saba , imprisoned in the deepest dungeon of the Kingdom of darkness, emerged like Yaakov Avinu, slightly wounded, but victorious - with his heart , soul, and integrity in tact, - who sits today surrounded by his grandchildren and great grand child, enjoying the simple pleasures of your Bar Mitzvah. He is a living testament to the words of the Rosh HaShanna liturgy

[Hebrew] *“And so too, the righteous will see and be glad, the upright will exult, and the devout will be mirthful with glad song.*

[Hebrew] *Iniquity will close its mouth and all wickedness will evaporate like smoke, when You will remove evil’s domination from the earth.*

Yaakov, Hatzlocha Rabbah - I love you.