

דב"ר

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## ***The Positively Handicapped Genius***

*Based on an article by Yosef Ehrenfeld on //israelnationalnews.com (Feb. 27, 2020).*

Despite severe physical limitation, **Uri-Yitzhak Shachor** became one of the prominent scholars in the Nahalat Yosef Yeshiva in Shavei Shomron, in central Israel.

"Up until the second year, I struggled with my disability. I did not want to be disabled," shared Uri Yitzhak Shachor, a fourth-year student at Nahalat Yosef Yeshiva in Shavei Shomron. "Being handicapped is suffering. How much more money should be spent each month on a disabled person? Therapeutic swimming, transportation from *yeshiva* and back to *yeshiva*... It requires a lot of money and loads of strength, which I did not always have."

In 11th grade, he reached a breaking point. "I returned home and was very depressed. I had tremendous pity on my parents. During this time they raised seven children. It was difficult for me knowing I was a burden. All I wanted was to have a normal life. "

However, at one point Uri Yitzhak's attitude towards the disability changed. It was a sentence he heard from one of the rabbi's during a moment of crisis.

"The rabbi asked me, 'Why are you crying? Perhaps there might be something positive about you being handicapped.' At first, I was amazed, but after a few minutes I started to change my thinking."

Despite severe physical limitation, Uri Yitzhak Shachor became one of the prominent scholars in the Nahalat Yosef Yeshiva in Shavei Shomron. Today, he is considered a rare phenomenon in the *yeshiva* world. At the age of only 22, he has already managed to complete the entire Talmud -- 2711 folios (5422 pages) divided into 63 tractates -- no less than eleven times! He achieved this almost unprecedented level despite his **cerebral palsy**, which confines him to a wheelchair.

Now he aspires to the next goal: to become a rabbi in Israel, and at the next stage -- a *dayan* -- a rabbinical judge -- probably the first disabled dayan in Israel.

He is the eldest son of eight brothers and sisters. His family lives in the religious settlement Sde Yaakov in the Jezreel Valley, where his father Yishai is a doctor and a *mohel* (circumcizer), and his mother, Yehudit, is a veterinarian who runs a home clinic.

From the moment of birth, the parents realized that they were expecting quite a challenge, but only after a few months did the extent of the challenge become clear: Uri Yitzhak was afflicted with cerebral palsy.

Today, after a long and intense process, Shachor is willing to share his life story, with the goal of empowering those who are in a similar situation to his own. His speech is slow but confident, and he's not hesitant to open his heart.

Undoubtedly this is a brilliant kid. Beginning from second grade, he attended the local school in his *moshav*, and did his high school studies at the Nahalat Yisrael Yeshiva in Migdal Ha'emek.

After that he went on to senior *yeshiva* studies, but it was only after two years at the *yeshiva* in Shavei Shomron that his consciousness changed with regard to his condition, as mentioned above.

He gives the major credit for his attitude change to his *yeshiva* friend, who also helps him physically on a daily basis.

"The person who really opened a completely different view of things, of what it means to be a disabled person, is Re'em Bernstein, my close friend and aide, who said a powerful and true sentence. He said that the disabled have tremendous powers that not everyone sees, and that: the handicapped are the greatest people of the generation.

"At first I couldn't understand how a disabled person can be so great, and only then did I realize that I had the opportunity to live life to the fullest. True, it is hard to be disabled and all things are done slowly, but there is also a positive side to it. A person who does things slowly, lives every moment of life. Realizing that I have limited physical power, but with the power I have, I do my best. Every person must understand that, even though their powers are great, they have a limit too. Not everything is achievable.

Re'em Bernstein, the friend and aide, describes Uri Yitzhak's upheaval during his first Yeshiva years. "At first, he didn't do much for himself. His friends would help him and pamper him endlessly. By the second year, I started demanding things from him, like getting out of bed alone, brushing his teeth, adjusting the water in the shower on his own, getting in and out of the shower alone, putting on a shirt - and today he does it all by himself. I help him only as a 'caddy', to bring him the objects he needs.

"He went through a profound change here. It really stabilized him. That's how he managed to write his own Torah commentaries. Next year he also plans to do a year of *Sheirut L'Am* ('National Volunteer Service'). Without the *yeshiva*, his situation would have remained stagnant for many more years. He became more independent and balanced. "

Despite the physical progress he has made in recent years, Uri Yitzhak still has to devote a good part of his day to physical needs, and he still requires basic-function assistance. But he does not give up.

"Although I am disabled, in place of everything God takes, He also gives. I can study Torah very swiftly. My fantastic memory makes me proficient about much of the studying. In Talmud studies I learn between 15 to 20 pages of *Gemara* daily!"

In response to the question, "What remains in memory of the vast volume of pages you study daily?" Uri Yitzhak usually invites the questioner to test him on the pages.

Or else he replies simply, "The L-rd granted me great memory. The head of the *Yeshiva*, Rabbi Yehoshua Schmidt, tested me and can testify that not only am I a constant learner, but that I am well versed in everything I have learned." For example, when he was only in the 10th grade, he went to the national Bible quiz and came in sixth place.

One of the things that has caused him many years of frustration is the public's attitude towards the handicapped. "This is mainly due to the speed at which the world is running today," he assesses. "The world is moving at a very fast pace. There is hardly anybody who does not think about several things at the same time. It causes a great glitch in society. Today one looks only at the quantity, how much one has achieved. That's all. No appreciation for hard work or all the challenges one has overcome".

This insight, which meant that the handicapped can only proliferate through a language that is appropriate to their lifestyle, led to the fact that last winter, he began studying for the rabbinate's tests, "so that there will be a handicapped rabbi in Israel who for once, will truly understand their struggles."



The reality of a disabled person, even in the perspective of *halacha* (Jewish law), is something that a normal person finds difficult to comprehend. To understand better, Uri Yitzhak gives as an example the *mitzvah* of holding and shaking the four *minim* (species)[1] on Sukkot. "What will a man do with only one hand? How will he complete

the *mitzvah* of the four *minim*? In *halachic* law there are two options. Take each one of the *minim* separately, or do it with your mouth or foot.”

So is the question of a disabled person being wheeled with a motorized wheelchair on Shabbat and Festivals. "These are examples of questions that an ordinary person does not think about."

He relates that *halachic* issues have occupied him from an early age, as all his handicap issues were accompanied by not so simple *halachic* questions. When he first received a motorized wheelchair, Uri Yitzhak debated about his permit to use it on Shabbat.

"Basically, there are such chairs today with a Shabbat command system. When I was 14, I contacted Rabbi Dov Lior[2], who is our relative. Rabbi Lior said the only problem was incandescent light bulbs, because they technically were a real burning fire, but in the chair itself there was no problem of a Torah prohibition. So we replaced the lights in the chair with LED bulbs." On Shabbat he reads the Torah from time to time as he sits in his chair, as he did on his Bar Mitzvah.

This past summer, the Chief Rabbinate changed the prerequisite conditions for becoming a rabbi, so that any man who turned 21 could take the exam, and not just the married ones. Uri Yitzhak pounced on the opportunity.

"Not long after I arrived at the *yeshiva*, Rabbi Schmidt urged me to study well without any exemptions, including all *halachic* subjects discussed in the 'Beit Yosef' and 'Shulchan Aruch' compendiums[3], so that I had extensive background in the many topics. The first of many exams which I began to study for was the laws of circumcision.”

In the month of Cheshvan this year [Oct. 2020), Uri Yitzhak and his mother traveled from Sde Yaakov to Jerusalem to take the exam. "I don't know any other parents who pushed and supported so much so their son can succeed in the Torah. I'm not sure a normal parent would be able to face the challenge".

According to the Chief Rabbinate, close to 5,000 people from all over the country were tested at this time, with Uri Yitzhak being the only disabled candidate. "They told my mom this is the first time a person in a wheelchair came to take the bar. Basically, the test is in writing, but since I can't write, a tester was assigned to type the answers for me. The test was long and hard, with no reference material, I needed to remember it all, including the '*shakla v'terya*' (the back-and-forth debates before the final conclusion of a difficult law was reached).

Six months ago, his 75-year-old grandfather, the late Rabbi Shmuel Friedman, died suddenly. He was a very active person and came to Shavei Shomron at least once a week to study 'one-on-one' with his brilliant grandson. Towards the end of the 30-day mourning period for his grandfather, Uri Yitzhak published a booklet "*Lehavot Yitzhak - Siftei Shmuel*" - Torah commentaries on the book of Numbers he wrote himself, along with reminiscences about his grandfather."

In the booklet, he collected Torah commentaries on the book of Numbers, which were already written down by his *yeshiva* friends. They are now in the final stages of preparation for the publication of the full book of Uri Yitzhak's Torah commentaries, planned for Adar 21 (in 3 weeks, on March 5), the anniversary of the death of the great 18<sup>th</sup> century chasidic master, Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzansk, who wrote "Let us see the virtue of our friends and not their shortcomings." Uri's aspiration and main goal is to make "Handicapped Day" a day in which the public stops and salutes the disabled.

The idea of publishing his Torah thoughts was conceived even earlier. "I thought to myself: 'If I'm not for myself, than who is and when I'm only for myself then what am I? If I study Torah only for myself, what am I? It's time to put my thoughts into action."

In addition to investing his time and energy in rabbinical studies for subsequent ordination as a Dayan for litigation, Shachor also works to make the basic services needed for every Jew available, such as the *mikvahs*.

He discovered that things could be changed and executed better. When he came to study at the *yeshiva* in Shavei Shomron, the *yeshiva* was not accessible and handicapped friendly at all.

"The *yeshiva* has turned itself inside out for me," he describes excitedly, "the place was inaccessible and had to raise more than NIS 40,000. They brought in a contractor so that the *yeshiva* will be accessible. Today we are proud that the *yeshiva* is accessible. The Torah belongs to all people of Israel, including the disabled."

In contrast, the status of the *mikvahs* in Israel, he says, is far from satisfactory. "Today, for a handicapped man[4] to bathe in the *mikveh* is a tremendous effort. I have to find where and how. I want to change that reality. To create a situation that every city will have an accessible *mikveh*. The next stage after that is to make all *yeshivas* accessible."

In the near future, Uri Yitzhak has plans to open a Facebook page where he will share his personal experiences as a disabled person, with the aim of changing the public consciousness towards people with disabilities. My slogan is: 'A person with a disability is not inferior'," he said.

He quotes a rabbi who once said to him: "A handicapped person becomes a disabled person because the body could not meet the size of the soul and is therefore broken."

"Some people do not understand it," he said, "sometimes even people who are very close to the handicapped do not understand it. Disability is a cover, and when you open the cover, you find unbelievable spiritual strengths."

"Uri Yitzhak is a symbol of strength in his determination," says Rabbi Yehoshua Schmidt, the head of the *yeshiva*, "he could give up and get lost so easily. Even in classes, he participates and does not give up. Apart from the single individuals that help him every day, the entire *yeshiva* is committed to him and wants him to be happy. We're glad he doesn't feel alone. Many times we take him to the center of the dance circle. He

joins us in weddings also and we don't give up on him. On Simchat Torah we danced around the neighborhood and, and of course, took Uri Yitzhak with us.

"When Uri Yitzhak first arrived, we knew there was a big task to be managed," Rabbi Schmidt recalls, "to take a boy with disabilities who leaves home for the first time to a full time boarding school. Apart from the physical difficulty, there was also the difficulty of moving. We saw this as a task, but we didn't know exactly how big it was going to be. At first there were difficulties and it was unclear how we would get past them. We had a lot of conversations with the boy and his parents, who have boundless powers, very strong people who give us great sustainability.

"Today we are at the point that Uri Yitzhak is an essential light in the *yeshiva*. We cannot picture the *yeshiva* without him. His knowledge, his thoughts, his behavior, his Torah and his wisdom of life. We hope that all the *yeshivas* will take on boys with disabilities. It will enhance them as well as the boys and make them all better people."

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Source: Excerpted and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the above mentioned Arutz 7 article. Photo credit: Amichai Bachar

*Connection:* The Weekly Reading of *Mishpatim* is the basis for nearly all the Torah's rulings in matters of civil law.

Footnotes:

[1]Lulav (date palm frond), etrog (citron fruit), hadassim (at least 3 myrtle stalks), and arovot (two willow branches).

[2]The chief rabbi of Hebron and Kiryat Arba and currently a rosh yeshiva and the head of the 'Council of Rabbis of Judea and Samaria

[3]Both authored by the great 16th century sage Rabbi Yosef Caro, the latter during his years here in Tsfat.

[4]And much more important, for handicapped women