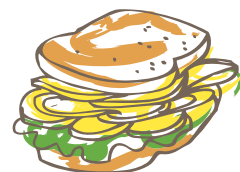




THE Sandwich MAN

BY TAMAR ANSH



Ten a.m. Throughout Israel, school bells ring to signal a break, but it is not just a typical recess when students run around the schoolyard. Ten o'clock in Israeli schools indicates *aruchat eser*, the break for a meal. The students hurry to wash their hands for *netilas yadayim* before hungrily biting into the sandwiches they have brought from home. Happy sounds of crunching and chewing fill every classroom. The tantalizing aromas of chummus and pickles, egg salad, white cheese with olives, and many other varieties of sandwiches permeate the room. Students eat whatever they have

brought and then have a chance to stretch their legs a bit before *bentching*.

Since most children leave home for school having eaten little or no breakfast, this *aruchat eser* is usually the only food students will be eating until they return home at about two p.m. Israeli schools do not provide lunch; therefore, this sandwich break is essential nourishment in a young student's day.

But the picture isn't always so straightforward.



A Startling Revelation

For years, Rabbi Yehuda Chizkiya was the administrative principal of a *cheder* in Bnei Brak. Every day, happy voices of children at play would filter into his office through his open window that overlooked the schoolyard. Sometimes, however, he thought he heard just a few boys outside quite early during the *aruchat eser* break.

Hearing the children outside while everyone else was still inside eating, Rabbi Chizkiya started to wonder: *The bell had rung only a few seconds ago, so how did these children manage to finish their food so fast? Why were they outside before all the others?*

He went outside to find out. Smiling, he asked the group of boys whether they had already finished eating. The children remained silent, not knowing what to say. Some looked down, poking the tips of their worn shoes into the dirt. Rabbi Chizkiya gently persisted until they admitted the truth: they hadn't brought any sandwiches to school. They had not eaten a thing all day, in fact. The children disclosed that this is what usually happened, since there was no food at home for them to bring.

Rabbi Chizkiya Takes Action

Rabbi Chizkiya was deeply disturbed. He knew that many of his students' families were poor, but had not realized the extent of their poverty. Now he was seeing first-hand that children were going hungry, and they were suffering more than just hunger pangs. It was unthinkable! From that day forward, Rabbi Chizkiya bought extra loaves of bread, and his wife prepared additional sandwiches daily, using the same fillings she did for their own children: cheese and tomatoes, olives and *chummus*, tuna or omelettes. In this unassuming manner, he personally distributed an extra thirty sandwiches every day.

It didn't take long for Rabbi Chizkiya to realize that the problem was bigger than one man could tackle alone. In his position as an administrator, he contacted other schools to find out if they, too, were experiencing this problem. It turned out that the crisis was more widespread than anyone realized. In nearly every school, there were children who were regularly going hungry. Rabbi Chizkiya couldn't rest. Something simply had to be done. The question was how to bring about the much-needed relief.

Benefits of a Healthy Breakfast

Chazal discuss the many health benefits people receive when they eat *pas shacharis*. Studies about the benefits of eating a nourishing breakfast abound in modern literature as well; it is a widely recognized fact that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Rabbi Chizkiya therefore aptly named his organization *Pat Shacharit*. Then his mission to relieve the children's hunger began in earnest.

Refrigerated
cheeses and salads
ready for the next
day's sandwiches.



Shortly after dawn, a truck carrying boxes of bread for sandwiches waits to be unloaded.



Very soon, what started off as one man caring about his students bloomed into a full *chessed* project. He and his wife were not able to prepare so many sandwiches on their own, so their daughters called some friends to help. These friends called some more, and soon a whole assembly line — starting at six a.m. each morning — was hard at work in his kitchen. The number of sandwiches required rose from thirty to fifty, then to hundreds and finally to thousands. At that point, Rabbi Chizkiya had to rent another apartment just to keep the system working properly.

Warm Brachos

Rabbi Chizkiya was in touch with several *Gedolim* — including Harav Shmuel Wosner, *shlita*, Harav Yaakov Edelstein, *shlita*, Harav Ovadiah Yosef, *zt”l*, and many members of the Badatz Eidah Hachareidis — about what he was doing, and he received many warm *brachos*. When word reached Harav Dovid Abuchatzaira, *shlita*, he asked that Rabbi Chizkiya come to him. It was highly unusual for the Rav to request someone’s presence. Harav Abuchatzaira was so impressed with Rabbi Chizkiya’s work that he told him he wanted to participate in this holy *mitzvah*. That is how, out of his own funds, the Rav donated a refrigerator to store all the perishables for one of the branches of the organization.

One of the *Gedolim* whom Rabbi Chizkiya visited asked him to explain how the sandwich project worked. The *Gadol* wanted to know if he could beautify the *mitzvah* further by presenting the children with their food on a special tray. Rabbi Chizkiya explained that he couldn’t accept the suggestion as it would mark the children as recipients of *tzedakah* and thereby embarrass them. The *Gadol* asked if the sandwiches could be wrapped in a nice bag with *Pat Shacharit*’s name and logo on it; again, Rabbi Chizkiya felt that it wasn’t a viable idea, reiterating that he wanted the children to receive a sandwich that looked no different from any other child’s, in an ordinary sandwich bag, so the children would not feel ashamed. The *Gadol* listened carefully. “I see that you have thought a lot about the feelings of the children and you are right in maintaining their *kavod*,” the *Gadol* said to him, “You should continue your work and be blessed.”

Feeding the hungry children of *Klal Yisrael* became a priority for Rabbi Chizkiya, a dedicated educator. It was patently clear to him that hungry students cannot have sufficient energy to learn, to listen to lessons and absorb the material. Moreover, it is painfully difficult for them to cope with a long school day.

Rabbi Chizkiya needed funding for *Pat Shacharit*, which had become a rather massive undertaking. One of the *Gedolim* introduced him to a wealthy individual who, as a *zechus* for a *refuah sheleimah* for a family member, undertook to provide the “Sandwich Man” (as Rabbi Chizkiya came to be known) with the necessities for the sandwiches. Rabbi Chizkiya organized

Yehuda Chizkiya as a *Bachur*

From a family friend:

Our family knew Yehuda Chizkiya from the time he was a young *bachur*, as he was very friendly with my brother. Yehuda was full of life, warmth and caring. Even then, he was involved in *chessed*. Everyone in Yeshivat Itri in Yerushalayim, where he and my brother learned, knew that if a *chessed* needed to be done, Yehuda was the person to turn to. Years later he was once at our house and my husband took him for *Minchah* to the shul of Harav Yitzchak HaKohen Rubin, *shlita*, now one of the *poskei hador*. Rav Rubin recognized Yehuda Chizkiya right away as he, too, had learned in yeshivah together with him. “Ah, Chizkiya, *amud hachessed*, what are you involved in today?” Rav Rubin addressed him with a smile. The Rav knew that Yehuda Chizkiya, who had always been a pillar of *chessed*, had surely perfected this *middah* even further, as it was an intrinsic part of his nature.



Rabbi Yehuda Chizkiya picking up bags to be delivered to the students.





an extremely well-structured operation: he recruited more volunteers, arranged for a truck and driver to deliver the bread and other essentials in the wee hours of the morning to every location where sandwiches were being packed, and coordinated having teachers and staff members pick up the number of sandwiches needed for their schools. From his single base in Bnei Brak, he had teachers stopping off every morning to pick up the prepared sandwiches that reached schools as far away as Netivot, Zichron Yaakov and other distant locations.

Prepared sandwiches filled with cheese and vegetables waiting to be bagged..

The Project Grows, but ...

During the time that the project was growing, the school that Rabbi Chizkiya worked for as administrator went through hard times and many on the staff lost their jobs — including Rabbi Chizkiya. This was a very painful blow, as he had put his heart and soul into his work for over fifteen years. Yet, just a few days after he lost his position, Rabbi Chizkiya returned to his former place of employment. “I didn’t come here to dispute your decision,” Rabbi Chizkiya said to his startled boss. “I just came to ask you to allow me to continue giving sandwiches to the children. Don’t let them go hungry just because I lost my job.” And for the next few years, even after he was working elsewhere, he came every day to the school that had let him go, just to deliver the food for ‘his’ children.

“Today, I have great hope that we will raise the necessary funds so that we can continue to provide *pat shacharit* for hungry schoolchildren,” says Rabbi Chizkiya. “My dream is to help children in Eretz Yisrael across the cultural spectrum. To

A “Real” Mentch

As heard from his good friend,

Mr. Moshe Kaufman, head of Israel Bookshop Publications:



About thirty years ago, when I was a teenager, Yeshivat Itri ran a summer program for American *bachurim* that I attended along with a bunch of my friends. Our *madrichim* were boys from the yeshiva — and Yehuda Chizkiyah was one of the prominent ones.

You had to picture this group of about fifteen to twenty American kids, most of whom spoke little or no Ivrit, and Yehuda Chizkiyah, who did not — and still does not — understand one word of English! But we hit it off great. We had a wonderful summer, and we became fast friends with Yehuda. Anyone who knows Yehuda knows how “*geshmak*” and ebullient he can be. He was just a barrel of fun and laughs, and we really forged a strong bond with him.

After we went back to America, I lost track of Yehuda and often wondered what became of him. When I visited Israel, I tried to look him up but was unsuccessful. A few months ago, I got a phone call from someone whom I thought I didn’t know, but it was Yehuda! He came to America, and tracked me down. And he was still as I remembered him — a tremendous *lev tov*, a good-hearted “people person,” genuinely interested in the welfare of others. That is what we saw in him, a real *mentch*, so it’s no wonder that he is involved in something as special as his sandwich project today — he really cares.

date, our organization has provided sandwiches for every sector of Israeli children who are learning in *chadarim*, *mamlachti*, *Torani*, and Beit Yaakov schools. It is a fact that children who are fed well learn better, behave better in class and fare better socially. Many teachers have attested to this.”

“It’s Not My Turn to Get Food”

“I’ll tell you a touching story,” Rabbi Chizkiya continues. “I’ve asked teachers to watch out for children who do not have food. One teacher noticed a little girl who brought food certain days but not others. On those days, she simply went outside to the playground during *aruchat eser*. The teacher asked her why she sometimes wasn’t bringing food. “Because,” the student answered, “today is not my turn to get food for school.” Since the family was so financially strapped, the children had to take turns bringing food to school.

Someone Else Was Feeding Them

“A man walked up to me, and in a voice choked with emotion, told me that he had been laid off from his job and couldn’t find work for some time,” Rabbi Chizkiya sighed. “The financial situation in his home became so bad that his children would go off to school without any food because there was none to give them. To his great surprise, though, his children did not



Simply bagged sandwiches, "just like all the other children bring."



Lachmaniot with parve hot dogs, waiting for their squirt of ketchup.

go hungry. Someone else was feeding them! He was overjoyed for his children's sake, but was too embarrassed to find out the identity of their benefactor.

"A few months ago this man finally got a new job. Now that things were more stable, he found out who had been feeding his children and had come in person to give me his hard-earned donation."

Aren't You the Fellow With the Sandwiches?

Rabbi Chizkiya recently went to Harav Yaakov Edelstein, *shlita*, of Ramat Hasharon, to ask advice about another issue, one totally unconnected to *Pat Shacharit*. Before answering, Harav Edelstein leaned forward to peer at him closely and suddenly exclaimed, "Aren't you the fellow with the sandwiches?" Amazed, Rabbi Chizkiya nodded and revealed to the Rav that although he really wanted to continue his sandwich project, he might be forced to stop because his main supporter could no longer send funds. The Rav was adamant. "It is forbidden for you to stop! Don't give up. Go overseas, raise money, you *must* continue!" Harav Edelstein strongly urged Rabbi Chizkiya to travel to the United States to raise money. Rabbi Chizkiya speaks no English and has no background in fund-raising. Yet, because of his dedication to the children, his *emunas*

chachamim and *bitachon* in Hashem, he has hopped on a plane numerous times to make the trip and see what he could accomplish.

Feeding hungry children goes far deeper than just satiating their physical hunger: children who are fed properly can be kept studying at their desks, as opposed to being on the streets, where they might easily end up if they fail in school. Often, it is a mere sandwich a day that can really make the difference!

There is a famous story in the *Gemara* (*Kesubos* 77:2) of Mar Ukva and his wife, who were both involved in *tzedakah*. Mar Ukva gave money to the poor, but his wife gave ready-to-eat food. The *Gemara* teaches us that his wife's merit was greater than his because giving food that is ready to eat is of much more immediate benefit to the poor than money.

The 'Mar Ukva and his wife' of our generation are the people in *Klal Yisrael* like Rabbi Yehuda Chizkiya, the Sandwich Man. It was a *zechus* to meet him and be involved in some small way with his story. May we all merit to follow his example of *chessed*, dedication and *ahavas Yisrael*! ■

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