



Individuals Who Obligate Us

I want to tell the story of three individuals that I know personally who are an example of what it means to engage more deeply with the Torah and its values. What strikes me most about them is that they think far beyond their own needs. They care deeply about strengthening the klal, the Jewish community as a whole. And I believe their example not only inspires us but obligates us. Let me frame their stories with a message connected to Shavuot.

This Shavuot will be a moving experience. We will stand again at the foot of Mount Sinai and receive the Torah anew. Amid all the challenges facing Israel and the world, it seems our connection to our Jewish identity and to God only grows stronger. This isn't folklore, and it isn't a trend. It's not something that will fade as time passes since the October 7th massacre, nor is it something that was born as a result of the October 7th massacre. This is people connecting to the truth: the Jewish people are returning

to Torah and mitzvot. In these times, it feels like every day is a new revelation at Sinai. Those already engaged Jewishly are becoming even more committed. Those who were on the outside are coming in.

In Tractate Yoma, we are told about several figures whose examples obligate others to engage with Torah, because they themselves managed to do so under extraordinarily difficult conditions. Our sages tell us there that if a poor person is asked after death why he didn't study Torah, and he says he was too busy trying to make a living, they'll tell him: "Surely you weren't poorer than Hillel the Elder, who nevertheless spent his time mastering the Torah." The same applies to the wealthy. If a rich person arrives in the World to Come and answers that he was too preoccupied with his assets to study, they'll ask him: "Were you wealthier than Rabbi Elazar ben Charsom? Rabbi Elazar, despite his great wealth, studied Torah day and night." And so on, even regarding someone primarily occupied with his



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evil inclination and desires. They'll tell him about Yosef HaTzadik, who was handsome in appearance yet withstood temptations in Egypt and clung to Torah. In summary, our sages conclude: "Hillel obligates the poor, Rabbi Elazar ben Charsom obligates the wealthy, Yosef obligates the wicked."

From this perspective, I want to tell you about three people in our generation who obligate us.

Chaim Elchanan Aidan

Have you ever read a Torah newsletter typed with someone's nose? I hadn't either, until I met Chaim Elchanan Aidan. He's a 21-year-old from Jerusalem living with cerebral palsy. He can't walk, eat, or speak independently. A few years ago, when he tried typing on a computer as usual, he felt once again that his fingers weren't responding quickly enough. His nose, however, tapped out letters in sequence. That's how it all began.

"I'm typing to you with my nose right now too," he wrote when I interviewed him this year on WhatsApp. Then he sent me a file—his weekly newsletter on the Torah portion. A publication called "Or HaTorah," which he started producing back in seventh grade. It turns out he sends texts and printing instructions to the print shop, and also distributes the newsletters himself with his motorized wheelchair to synagogues throughout Jerusalem. "I have to act and do," he explained. "Otherwise I get depressed."

It's an impressive and fascinating publication. Full of quotations, sources, stories, and laws. And he publishes consistently, week after week. If you read the newsletter, you couldn't imagine how it was written. Elchanan handles both the content and the technical side. He obligates us to reconsider our assumptions about our own limits, especially when we tell ourselves we lack the stamina or capacity to take part in a cause or project.

Here's a quote from his Passover issue, an idea that was perhaps also written about himself: "Many people ask what 'v'hi (and she) she'amda' means—that famous passage from the Passover Haggadah. Who is 'she'? I heard an idea: 'she' is our faith. What has stood by our ancestors

and us throughout all generations is faith, even in difficult moments. We have an inner capacity to believe things will be good. When a person maintains faith, he's already on the path to freedom!"

When I asked Elchanan for a tip, he typed this to me with his nose: "My recommendation to everyone is to pray, to talk with God always, even in your own language. I talk to Him a lot, and I recommend it. He's there, He's listening. And you don't need to type to Him with your nose..."

Leah Rieder

Leah Rieder was laid to rest a few weeks ago in Jerusalem, at age 68. She was the wife of Ralph Rieder, and together, they partnered in countless acts of charity, chessed, and kindness.

I'll start with my first encounter with her: "I'm Leah," a lovely woman introduced herself at an event in New York. "Tomorrow my mother, a 96-year-old Holocaust survivor, is coming to the historic Siyum HaShas ceremony. You should come."

So I came. The next day I showed up there with a camera crew. One hundred thousand Jews arrived at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey for the celebratory event. Anyone who studies one page of Talmud each day completes the entire Shas at the end. And consistent Torah study, particularly in the United States, is something worth celebrating and honoring.

Leah introduced me to her mother, who became the hero of the story that I

broadcasted. Marlit Wandel is a survivor of nine concentration camps. I stood beside her and her descendants as she spread her hand and pointed to the entire crowd, one hundred thousand Torah-loving Jews: "Hitler wanted to destroy us all, and now—look around! Look! They wanted to destroy us—and we're dancing a dance of Torah. If someone had told me this back then in Auschwitz..."

I thanked Leah for the "news item," which was so much more than a news item. It was a rare encounter to connect with the *Am HaNetzach*.

After the terrible massacre on October 7th, I was invited to accompany a group of Nova survivors who came to observe Shabbat together in Jerusalem. About 400 young people gathered at a hotel, and with them—Ralph and Leah Rieder as well. That's how I discovered they were the donors behind this amazing initiative, launched by Tzili Schneider from the Keshet Yehudi organization. You can't count the Shabbatot and holidays we've celebrated together since then, in this special community. Leah personally accompanied the Israelis who chose Torah and mitzvot, heard their stories, and was even a member of the active WhatsApp group called "From Nova to Jerusalem." There are about 3,000 Nova survivors and this group has more than 3,000 members who support and inspire each other.

This past Simchat Torah, these growing Nova survivors requested their own Torah scroll, in memory of the friends who were murdered. Ralph and Leah agreed to donate it. Imagine Nova survivors, on Simchat Torah, dancing



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with a Torah scroll, feeling the souls of their murdered friends dancing with them above. As Marlit said: "They wanted to destroy us, and we're dancing a dance of Torah." I covered this event as well and again thanked Leah for the "news item," which was so much more than a news item. It was another opportunity to connect with the *Am HaNetzach*.

The following story, which went on behind the scenes, tells us about the impact that Ralph and Leah made on this group. Shira is one of the young Nova survivors; she comes from a religious home and reconnected after she survived. She approached Ralph and asked for the Torah scroll, saying "I keep some of the Shabbatot."

Ralph answered her with a smile: "Then I'll give you part of the Torah scroll. We'll take out a few portions."

Shira understood the hint. Since then she's kept Shabbat fully, every week, and so have other young people from this group.

In recent years, Leah faced a serious illness with grace, until she passed away in her home, on Shabbat—the day that so identified with her. Hasidic and Lithuanian women from Monsey, NY alongside young women with piercings and tattoos in Israel, shed tears for their shared friend. For me, she was an example of someone whose priorities were not confused by financial success. On the contrary, success obligates us to use money for the most important thing—to add Torah and mitzvot to the world.

The funeral procession departed from New York, and on Monday morning, the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Leah was laid to rest in Jerusalem. Because all roads—from Auschwitz, from New York, from Nova—lead to Jerusalem.

Julie Kupershtein

There are many more examples of self-sacrifice in special circumstances. I considered writing about soldiers I've met who studied Torah on the battlefield. I considered writing about famous artists returning to observance and releasing songs of faith that are conquering the Israeli playlist. I considered writing about daily Daf Yomi classes in the city of Kiryat Shmona that continue under fire. Or about Chabad emissaries throughout the world who are writing a new chapter of Jewish self-sacrifice during this period. But then, on Chol HaMoed Pesach, I met Julie Kupershtein at the Western Wall. I've had the privilege of accompanying her over the past two and a half years, and watching her withstand the most difficult tests. She truly is an "obligating" figure.

Julie is married to Tal, and they have five children. She became observant and tried to bring family members closer to Judaism as well. Tal was injured in a car accident and became disabled. Their eldest son, Bar Kupershtein, was a security guard at the Nova party and was kidnapped and held hostage in Gaza. During this difficult reality, Julie became a symbol. She created an "Iron Dome" of prayers, Shabbat, mitzvot, and Torah study, and managed to reach very distant sectors and connect them.

The Israeli and international media tried to get news headlines and political statements from her. Julie refused. For two and a half years, she ran a command center of faith alone. Every time they asked her to say something about the Prime Minister, about the President of the United States, about the approaching deal, she raised her eyes upward. She reached the most insular ultra-Orthodox communities and the most secular and left-wing protesters with exactly the same words. I saw her one Shabbat before Bar returned home. She was leading an initiative of students who came to keep Shabbat for the first time. Minutes before

candle-lighting I saw her smiling, moved when someone put on tefillin before sunset in order to add more merits on behalf of Bar.

"People think I'm crazy, but what I'm doing is the most real thing. You'll see," she said throughout the journey. Bar came home, healthy and whole. And then this past Chol HaMoed Pesach, with Bar, at the Western Wall. They were celebrating his 24th birthday. Julie, beside Tal in his wheelchair, watched Bar in a kippah and tzitzit as he was lifted on the shoulders of people singing "Am Yisrael Chai."

"Look," she said to us, "you're seeing your prayers come true before your eyes. We didn't believe Bar would return like this, and he did. I don't think this a private story. It's a message for all of the people of Israel: this is how all our prayers will come true. We need to believe, to pray, to act."

Most of us are ordinary people, far from the three stories described here. Our Jewish lives aren't so dramatic, but even in them—every mitzvah and every good decision matters. It's so moving to see people on airplanes, at bus stops, and in every place and situation—studying Daf Yomi, studying daily Chumash, connecting to Torah. There have never been so many opportunities and apps and accessible, explained content. And every bit of our daily learning is a touch of eternity. Shavuot is an opportunity to take upon ourselves such daily study.

Let's return to the Talmud in Tractate Yoma, which asks us to look at figures who went to the extreme and succeeded in passing the test. May we all learn from them, draw inspiration, and succeed.