



SIMCHAT TORAH

Inheriting Moral Instincts: How Choices Become a Legacy

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5787 / 2026

Some legacies are transmitted through words. Others are transmitted through the way a person responds at the most demanding moments of life. Those moments become family stories, and family stories can become something more: a moral inheritance.

Rabbi Moshe Shapira was a central Religious Zionist leader and a signer of Israel's Declaration of Independence. In October 1957, while serving as Minister of Religions and Minister of Welfare, he was sitting in the Knesset plenum when 26-year-old Moshe Dwek threw a hand grenade from the visitors' gallery toward the government ministers' table.

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Golda Meir were wounded, and Transportation Minister Moshe Carmel suffered a broken arm. Rabbi Shapira was the most seriously injured; shrapnel penetrated his abdomen and head, and he was rushed to Hadassah Hospital in grave condition.

Israel's Chief Rabbis, Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog and Yitzhak Nissim, called on the public to pray for Shapira, adding the name Haim—"life"—to his name: Haim Moshe ben Shoshana Rosa. After five operations and a long rehabilitation, he returned to public life, from then on known as Rabbi Haim-Moshe Shapira.

But the most revealing part of the story came nearly a year later.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, Dwek wrote to Rabbi Shapira from prison. Conscious that sins against another person cannot be erased without seeking forgiveness, he asked the man he had nearly killed to forgive him.

Shapira made a careful distinction. For the injury inflicted upon him personally, he could grant forgiveness. But Dwek had also committed crimes against others, against the Knesset, and against the State. Those offenses were not his to forgive, Shapira explained. Personal forgiveness does not erase public accountability. Mercy does not abolish justice. But what belonged to him, he released.

That distinction reflects one of Judaism's deepest forms of moral clarity.

It also frames the dialectic between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Yom Kippur is the day of inner reckoning and moral repair, yet only days later we enter the sukkah, a deliberately fragile structure that reminds us that no system of walls or power can guarantee security. What



ultimately sustains a society is not only the strength of its institutions, but the character of those who inhabit them: the values they carry, and the responsibility they assume for one another.

Sixty-six years later, another member of the Shapira family confronted a grenade.

On October 7, 2023, Aner Elyakim Shapira, Haim-Moshe Shapira's great-grandson, was among those fleeing the Nova massacre. He and others crowded into a roadside shelter near Re'im as Hamas terrorists attacked. As they threw grenades inside, Aner stood at the entrance, repeatedly catching them and hurling them back outside, saving those behind him - until one exploded and killed him.

The historical echo is difficult to absorb: a great-grandfather nearly killed by a grenade; a great-grandson killed while shielding others from them.

But the connection between these stories is not the object itself. Rather, it is a common moral world that made both responses possible.

A straight line runs from one generation to the next—not because courage or compassion are inherited mechanically, and not because children repeat the lives of their parents — but because moral choices shape an atmosphere. They form instincts of the soul. Children, grandchildren and students absorb more than what we teach. They absorb what we embody under pressure: what we forgive, what we defend, and what we are willing to risk for others.

Rabbi Shapira faced a man who tried to kill him, and refused to be ruled by hatred. Aner Shapira faced terrorists trying to murder those around him and chose, instinctively, to place himself between danger and life. One protected his soul from vengeance; the other protected human lives with his body.

Neither moment was rehearsed. Character speaks most clearly when there is no time to think. That is why moral education is never only textual. It is atmospheric. It is what children see when adults are wounded, tested, afraid. They learn what dignity looks like when our values cost us something.

We cannot know which moments will remain in memory, but we should never underestimate the reach of an act of selflessness, restraint, courage, or sacrifice. These are not isolated gestures; they become part of what a family, a community, and a people can be.

We cannot always choose what enters our lives. We can choose what we leave behind. We can choose whether pain produces bitterness or compassion; whether fear produces paralysis or courage; whether injury closes the hearts or enlarges it.

On Simchat Torah, I will dance with the memory of Aner Shapira close to my heart. To me, Aner was a walking Sefer Torah, because in the decisive moment, he embodied one of Torah's deepest demands: to love life enough to risk one's own for the sake of another.