

Where There's **SMOKE** There Will Be Tefillin!

Lazer Raksin

(This is the sixth in a series of articles by our own Lazer Raksin describing his work in Mivtza Tefillin. The series will come to a conclusion when he reaches his goal which is, of course, the coming of Moshiach.)

Before the tragic accident this past July in which my children and I suffered the loss of my wife Bella, a”h, as well as both of my parents-in-law, Rosie and Yitzchok Scheinfeld a”h, there were still a few individuals who regularly refused to let me put tefillin on with them. They were very tough customers and weren’t showing any signs of weakening at all; some were downright hostile. After they found out about the terrible accident, that I had lost my wife so suddenly and all I asked of them was to put on tefillin in her merit, there was a clear softening of hearts.

There was this one particular person who I would sometimes bump into at the mechanic’s (and regular readers know I often “do business” there) whose response was always the same: “Listen, don’t educate me; I know what tefillin is all about. As a matter of fact, my father was a Rabbi, my brother until this very day is a sofer, I have mezuzos on my house, and I learned in the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. I decided years ago that I was not going to be religious and therefore I have no reason to put on tefillin. I think you’re doing a wonderful job, but it is not for me.” Those who know me know that I never give up, so despite this strong and emotionally loaded refusal, I kept asking. My motto is, “It doesn’t hurt to ask!” Week after week I got the same response. “Good work, Lazer, but go away.”

After the accident my mechanic had some words with this tough customer. He told him, simply and factually, that this is what Bella would have wanted. This is what she *said* she wanted (as detailed in previous articles). Believe it or not, he decided to start putting on tefillin in her memory *on a daily basis*. He reminded me: “I have my own pair of tefillin, remember, my brother is a sofer.”

The next tough customer was a seventeen year old boy. I used to get him to put on tefillin from time to time, when he would be at his uncle’s place of business. He didn’t want to own his own tefillin, but he would do it occasionally, with me. Then he would tell me that tefillin makes him feel good. “Don’t ask me why,” he would say. “I just know that when I do it I feel good.” He never even met my wife, but (his mother told me) he was so devastated by the news of the accident that he went home crying and told his mother that he wanted to buy his own pair of tefillin. Needless to say, he has his own pair of tefillin now which he proudly uses every day. He did it for Bella. He did it for Bella! His mother told me recently, “I didn’t honestly think my son would amount to anything since he was always getting into trouble, to such an extent that I was really worried about his whole future. Ever since he started putting on those tefillin, he is a changed person. He is now somebody who you would be proud to point to and say, ‘That’s my son.’”

Bella did this.

There are several other people who used to be occasional customers, but since the accident, and hearing that this is what I am asking people to do in memory of my wife, have bought their own, or accepted them from me as a gift, or a partial gift, and are using them daily.

Several months ago, way before our lives were dramatically altered by the accident, there was this person that I started dealing with in my line of business (I have a pizza shop in the Catskills during the summer months, when I am not driving my schoolbus). I casually asked him if he had ever put on tefillin. His response was a brusque: "I have no idea what tefillin is, and I'm not about to find out. So let's just stick to business." That was that.

After the accident I happened to be talking to him again, about business, and before asking him about tefillin, I asked him if he had heard about the accident. "Of course," he replied quickly, "Who *didn't* hear about that?" I told him that the people he had heard about on the news were my wife and in-laws. They were my children's mother and their beloved, devoted grandparents. And the one thing my wife wanted very much was that I should never stop getting peo-

ple to do the mitzvah of tefillin. I asked him please, in the merit of my wife, to reconsider...

Of course they were shocked and distressed. It is so different when you hear a shocking story on the radio and it's just a story, and when you actually know somebody involved. We're all like that. His wife happened to be in his office when we had the conversation, and they told me that they wanted to think about it over the weekend. They were shaken up.

The following week, I visited them again, and they told me they had had a terrible weekend, reliving the accident, thinking about it, discussing it. I was waiting for his decision about tefillin. Here is what he told me.

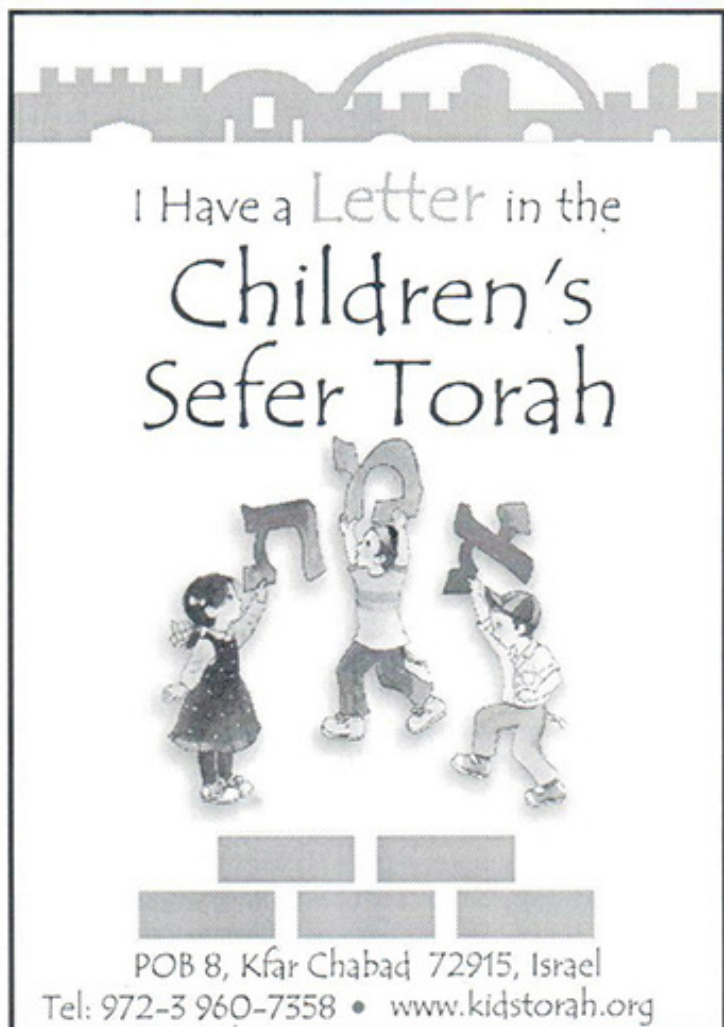
"I am a stubborn person, and when I say no, I do not usually change my mind. But on the other hand, this is such a terrible thing, and you are asking me to do this. I really don't want to do tefillin but I don't want to say no to you either. I have never had a Bar Mitzvah. I am 55 years old and I have never put on tefillin. I don't even know what it is, and I really am afraid to make a commitment—"

I right away saw what the problem was. The commitment issue. I quickly told him that he didn't have to make a commitment. Today you want to put on, fine. Tomorrow you don't want to, it's okay too. You decide when you want to put on. And I gave him a brief explanation of what tefillin is all about.

He felt a lot better about it and told me to come back in a few hours. Somehow he didn't want to put on tefillin when his workers were anywhere in the building. People have all sorts of feelings and hang-ups about religious things. No problem. As I left, I suggested that he could call my mechanic, a mutual friend of ours, and ask him about tefillin. He knew the mechanic well. As readers of my previous articles know, the mechanic had only praises about putting on tefillin and the good that it does for people.

At closing time I was there and this Jew put on tefillin for the first time in his life. I gave him reading material about tefillin, and later he told me he even surfed the net to find out more about tefillin. Since then he agreed to put on tefillin one more time, although other times he has refused. I have to catch him at just the right time, because he will only agree after closing, but not too far after closing or he is gone. Now I only travel up to the Catskills (when it's not summer) once a week, so it gets a little complicated. Hopefully by the time you read this article, I will have been able to buy him his own tefillin and he will have agreed to use them daily.

Guess what! You remember the second person in the article called The Smoking Tefillin, the one who believed in G-d, yes, but mitzvos, no. His wife gave birth to a boy just before Rosh Hashana. I was invited again (I had such incredible hatzlocha at the last Bris (as you know) and this time it fell out on a Wednesday, so I just pushed off my usual Tuesday until Wednesday.



I Have a Letter in the
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Thank G-d the first ten people came in slowly, one at a time so I had no problem getting each one of them to put on tefillin. Then the father of the new baby walked in. You'd figure that on the day of his son's bris there would be no problem. Guess again. He was hassled, he was nervous, he was hosting a big party, and: "I'm not doing it today!" the father tells me. "Why not? It's your son's bris today." I don't believe in it, he responds. He believes in bris but not in tefillin; he believes in G-d but not in mitzvos; I am hopelessly confused by this guy's entire belief system.



This is too much for me, not to put on tefillin on the day of your son's bris because you don't believe in it. "Now don't start with me," I tell him, "Even your father just put on tefillin" He is shocked. "What?! My father put on tefillin? Are you sure you know who my father is?" He is incredulous. I assure him that it was his father: "I'll even tell you what his initials were; they were embroidered on his shirt." With that I help him off with his jacket and just start putting tefillin on him. Enough is enough.

"Stop, wait, you're messing up my hair, it took me over a half hour just to get it the way I want it." We go into a side room so he can fix his hair before and after. As we work, he protests again, "But I don't believe in it!"

By now I am good and frustrated. Believe in this, believe in that. And then *his hair*. I tell him very simply, "If you go to a doctor when you're not feeling well, and he gives you some pills to take, are you going to hold those pills in your hand and say, 'I can't take these because I don't fully understand exactly how they work, why should I believe you that this will work...' or are you going to do what he says in order to feel better, and not give the doctor such a hard time?"

He put on tefillin, fixed his hair, and went back to his party.

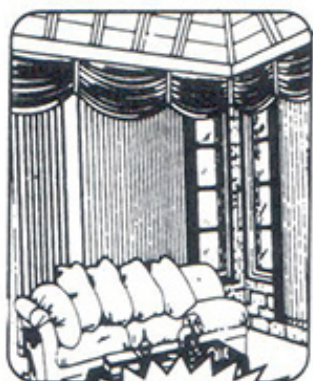
By now a whole bunch of guests showed up and I got busy again. You know the routine, I lost count after twenty, and the hardest part was to

remember with whom I had put on tefillin already. One guy figured it out for me and said with a chuckle, "The last time I put on tefillin was fifty years ago, at my Bar Mitzvah. I corrected him. "Bar Mitzvah was not your last time, it was your first time, and now that I got a hold of you there will be no last time!" A lot of the guests at this bris were repeats from the bris just over a half a year ago, that I wrote about in detail. There were a few newcomers. And guess what, I got all of them. *All of them*. Once again, by the time I got in my car to go home my tefillin were smoking again! Boruch Hashem.

I would like to finish off by asking everybody out there to please go out and put on tefillin

with as many people as possible. We are so desperate for Moshiach, and this is one of the ways to hasten his coming. Do it for yourself, and if not do it for me, and if not for me then do it at least for the neshomas of my wife and my in-laws. May we see The Coming of Moshiach speedily in our times.

If you would like to participate in this valuable work by buying someone a pair of tefillin or sponsoring the gas for these Mitzva Tefillin trips, please send your check made out to Lazer Raksin with TEFILLIN written on the memo line to Lazer Raksin, 646 Empire Blvd, Brooklyn, NY 11213.



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