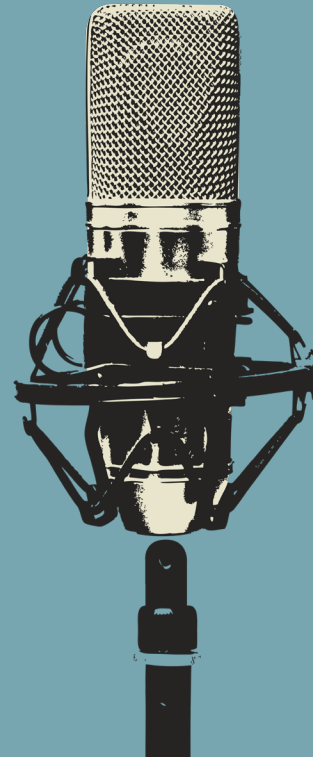




LOSS, LOVE, AND LEARNING TO LIVE



A PODCAST WITH RABBI YOSSIE PALTIEL

You are invited to read excerpts from Chana Weisberg's interview of Rabbi Yossi Paltiel on the podcast, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Stories," produced by Chabad.org, transcribed and adapted for the N'shei Chabad Newsletter by Musia Kaplan. -Ed.

Can you tell us about a challenge you faced and what you learned from it?

I'm embarrassed to admit this, but when I was single and learning in 770, the Dor Yeshorim organization came and suggested everyone do genetic testing. I didn't do it. If I had tested, my wife and I probably would not have gotten married, because we are both carriers of the Tay-Sachs gene—a terrible genetic disorder.

When we got engaged, we received an answer from the Rebbe. It contained the standard text that the Rebbe wrote to every bride and groom on the occasion of their engagement: "*Yehai bisha'ah*

tovah umutzlachas, azkir al hatziyun—it should take place in a happy and auspicious hour, I'll mention you at the *tziyun* [of the Rebbe Rayatz]." In our answer, there was an extra word: "*Nachon*—correct."

It seemed to me that the Rebbe was saying our *shidduch* was correct, and I was quite proud of that extra word. Many years later, someone told me that the Rebbe wrote "*nachon*" to couples who later suffered through something with their children.

First, my wife and I were blessed with two healthy children. Just after Gimmel Tammuz, our third child, Menachem, was born. He had Tay-Sachs disease. He lived five days short of his fourth birthday.

We kept Menachem home with us for the first two years of his life. When we could no longer properly care for him at home, we put him in the Tay-Sachs ward

of a local hospital. (Our son was not alone. A long time ago, there were many Jewish children born with this illness. Thankfully, since then, Dor Yeshorim has spared thousands of families this agony.)

This was a terribly painful ordeal for my wife, our children, and me. But it impacted us all in different ways.

For me, every day of Menachem's life was filled with raw pain and grief. But my wife felt the overwhelming love of a mother. She poured her heart and soul into taking care of him and insisted on keeping him home as long as possible. Even once we placed him in the hospital, she wanted me to see him every day. So I did. After work, sometimes as late as 10 p.m., I sat at Menachem's bedside and learned Torah for an hour or two.

When we lost Menachem after four years, I felt a sense of closure—like I could breathe again. I had been in a state of mourning for so long, and now I was

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ready to move on. But for my wife, who had loved Menachem so unconditionally, the mourning only began. The loss and suffering opened up for her just as it was closing for me. That was probably the hardest part of the whole ordeal.

However, despite our different opinions and feelings, we knew that the most important thing was to stay united as a couple. Naturally, when people suffer, they withdraw. And, during that period, we did withdraw from people around us who loved us but didn't understand how to support us. But we never withdrew from each other. For the sake of Menachem and for the sake of all our children, we knew we had to stick together.

I've spoken to many couples who became estranged during difficult challenges like this. Often, when a child is sick, parents have different perspectives on what is right. They are faced with black-and-white decisions that leave no room for compromise. But you can't let your differences tear you apart. If you don't maintain your connection, you will not only hurt yourself, you will hurt the people you are desperately trying to help. The couple's bond is the most important factor for the health of the entire family.

You mentioned before that if you had taken the genetic test, you wouldn't have married your wife. Do you think these tests can interfere with

soulmates finding each other?

When Dor Yeshorim began, Rabbi Yehuda Kalman Marlow, *a"h*, a member of the Crown Heights Bais Din, wrote to the Rebbe about this. The Rebbe responded in Hebrew, "As with every medical question (and why would this be any different), this should be referred to a physician who specializes in this field." The Rebbe wanted us to follow what the doctors recommend to prevent suffering and tragedy.

For 5,000 years, these genetic issues weren't discoverable before marriage. That was Hashem's Will. Today, *because* of Hashem's Will, they are discoverable. Of course, we should try to prevent them.

The idea of soulmates exists and can be found in the *Talmud*. But this idea is coupled with the direction for people to be reasonable and use good judgment. We must do everything in our power to live safe, healthy lives. And no matter what we choose, we know that Hashem runs the world. Even when it seems like we are the ones making decisions, Hashem is steering the ship. So don't worry that genetic testing might prevent you from finding your soulmate—you cannot exclude Hashem from your life.

Did you ever doubt Hashem's goodness during this painful ordeal?

I find that when people bemoan the suffering in this world, they are often referring to other people's suffering.

When it's your own suffering, you're simply too busy. You don't have time to complain.

During the four years when our lives were consumed by Menachem's condition, many of our friends and family pitied us. They saw that we were living through hell. But they didn't see the whole picture. Every morning, we got up, went to work, visited Menachem, and played with our children. We also continued to have more children. There was so much meaning in those years.

When you go through an ordeal, if you go through it correctly, you *live* it. You cry, you grieve, but you also laugh and experience life. That's the reality of suffering. An outsider might have a hard time seeing it—to them suffering is just black. But it's not so. There are very dark moments, but there is goodness in challenges. Righteousness and kindness emerge from these challenges.

I'll give a general example: the end of life. Some people die young, some die old, but everyone dies. That process can be miserable or it can be beautiful. The people surrounding a dying person can spend the last few weeks crying or they can treasure every moment. That is a choice.

Do you think learning Chassidus has helped you accept life's challenges?

I do think Chassidus molds our minds and affects how we process our experiences. But my *emunah*, my faith

in Hashem, doesn't come from the books. It comes from my parents and grandparents. It was instilled in me long before I learned to read. Accepting life's challenges has everything to do with that *emunah*.

One of the most important moments of my life was when my uncle Dov—my mother's younger sister's husband—passed away suddenly. He was just 39, leaving behind my aunt and her three babies (who are now grown). I was 21 years old, and I went with my father to tell my grandfather, my mother's father, what had happened.

My grandfather was at a wedding. When we walked in, he was eating. He saw us enter the wedding hall and understood immediately that something very serious had happened. He wiped

his hands, stood up, and walked out of the hall. I learned so much from the exchange between my father and his father-in-law that day.

My father said one word: "Dov."

My grandfather didn't say anything. He lifted his hand and drew it horizontally through the air, making the universal gesture for "over." My father silently made the same gesture with his hand.

They communicated without words: *Is it over? Yes, it's over.*


Then my grandfather said in Yiddish, "*Ich hub nisht kaine kashes.*" (I have no questions.)

Those words resonate in my mind until today—the perfect expression of his faith. Not just on the day of a tragedy, but every day. (You can't suddenly

become a believer when tragedy strikes.)

My grandfather inherited *emunah* from his own parents. When he was a child, during the Great Depression, his father was repeatedly fired for refusing to work on Shabbos. When my great-grandfather would come home on Friday afternoon, fired yet again, his wife would reassure him: "Hashem provided for us until now; He will continue to provide."

As parents, our goal is to instill in our children simple faith—an intuitive and subconscious knowledge that they live in Hashem's world. We want to give them a sense of safety, knowing they have a Father in Heaven watching out for them. And as adults, our relationship with Hashem continues, and we feel like we are His children, and He is our Father.



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Where does *bitachon*, trust in Hashem, fit into this equation?

Emunah (faith) and *bitachon* (trust) are often mixed up. Faith is like breathing air; trust is like eating food. Faith is the baseline—you can't live a day without it. Faith is what we imbibe in a religious home, from our mother's lullaby.

Once you have faith, there are different kinds of relationships with Hashem. When you face a challenge, you can accept it, pray for it to change, or aspire to have *bitachon*—a level of trust that turns the challenge into something overtly good.

But I feel one of the ills of our time is that people try to have *bitachon* without *emunah*. People try to make deals with Hashem—"If I see this positively for five minutes, it'll turn around"—before living with the simple knowledge that Hashem is here. Hashem is with us.

The person without faith lives in a cold, frightening world. The person with faith lives in a warm, secure world. The greatest gift Hashem gives us is not His goodness—it's His Presence. We should unwrap and use that gift.

Hashem's presence can be felt daily. Hashem's goodness is true but beyond our fathoming. We think good means money, health, and peace of mind. That's our human definition. But when we look back at our lives, as we get older, wiser, and humbler, we understand that goodness is more complicated. Sometimes, goodness can be found in the most painful parts of our life; goodness can be found in the fact that Hashem was present in those times.

How would you say that learning Chassidus has changed you as a person?

I wish I could say immensely. But there is a gap between learning Chassidus and becoming a better person. That gap must be filled with the work of self-refinement.

The Frieddiker Rebbe used to say in Yiddish, "You have learned Chassidus, but has Chassidus learned [taught] you?" (It works better in Yiddish, because the word "*lernen*" has a double meaning: acquiring information and information making an impression.)

Chassidus is supposed to refine us, but it doesn't just happen from intellectual study. Learning doesn't make me a nicer or more sensitive person. A student once told me to my face: "Rabbi, I loved you until I met you."

Chassidus informs my working on myself in a general way, but the work itself is separate. If a person has a tendency to say the wrong thing—which I do—they need to practice keeping their mouth shut. It's not sophisticated or lofty. I have tried making steps in that direction, but you'll have to ask the people around me if they see results.

Do you think Chassidus is for everyone? What about those who don't enjoy overly philosophical study?

The Baal Shem Tov said that Moshiach told him that Moshiach's coming depends on people studying Chassidus. So, yes, Chassidus is for everyone. The question is which Chassidus and in what format.

My first recommendation is always the *Tanya*. It's one of those books with inherent magic. Whatever you are going through, it will talk to you. Additionally, the Rebbe's talks, compiled in *Likutei Sichos*, present Chassidus in a language that is relevant to our day and appeals to those who aren't very spiritual or philosophical. Classes on both of these subjects, and many more, can be found on my website InsideChassidus.org.

Chassidus gives you a special sense of the immanence of Hashem—a recognition that His Presence is everywhere. That awareness inspires joy and humility, which are wonderful gifts for every person to have. I hope you will give it a try and see for yourself. ❧

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