

Five Minutes for YOSSI



AS LAG BA'OMER APPROACHES, OUR thoughts turn to last year's tragic crowd pileup in Meron, in which 45 lives were lost. That night, first responders administered medical aid to those who were hurt, and most of the survivors recovered from their injuries. Two of the survivors, both young boys, are the exception. One of them is Yossi Reit, a fifteen-year-old *yeshivah bachur* from Beit Shemesh. When Yossi was pulled from the crush of the narrow passageway, he was in critical condition. His life was saved. But it wasn't the life he'd had before.

As told to Devorie Kreiman by Yechiel Reit

caption

Yossi hadn't planned to go to Meron on Lag BaOmer, but when night *seder* ended, he and his friends decided that they wanted to go. There were buses leaving to Meron from our neighborhood. He called me to ask for permission, and I said yes. Yossi and his younger brother are the only two of our six children born in Eretz Yisrael. My wife, Michal, and I made *aliyah* with our four older children 17 years ago. Yossi was a serious learner. The first *masechta* that he learned in *yeshivah ketanah* was *Masechet Gittin*. His class didn't complete it before moving on to the next *masechta*, but Yossi wanted to make a *siyum*, so he set out to complete *Masechet Gittin* on his own. He had only 12 *blatt* left. They remain unfinished, along with so much of what he wanted to do...

He loved reading books about history. In general, he was very sheltered and had no interest in politics or the corruption of the "outside." He liked to make us laugh. He'd come up with sharp, witty insights, and because they were coming from such a pure and innocent mind, what he had to say was really funny.

He was also athletic—which is not typical among Israeli *yeshivah bachurim*. He enjoyed playing soccer and basketball on Motzaei Shabbos when he had the chance. Michal and I liked to watch him play sports.

She used to say, "It's a *brachah* to have such a healthy child."

Last year on Lag BaOmer, which was a Thursday night, Michal and I went to a wedding. We got home late and went to sleep. At 1:30 a.m., my phone woke us up. It was one of our married daughters. She said, "Did you hear what's going on in Meron?"

We called Yossi's cell, but we couldn't get through. This didn't alarm me. When there's a crisis, many people call at the same time and the network can

crash. We figured we'd wait a while and try again.

At 3:30 a.m., a paramedic from Magen David Adom called me. He'd found a phone in his ambulance and presumed it belonged to the patient he'd just transported. He'd scrolled through the contacts, found a listing for "Abba," and called me. He asked me to send a photo of Yossi so that he could verify that it was him. I sent him a photo, but he was unable to identify Yossi conclusively. He said to me, "If that patient was your son, he's in critical condition. He was transferred by helicopter to Rambam Hospital in Haifa."

We sent our ten-year-old son to stay with one of our married daughters, and Michal and I drove to the hospital. We went directly to pediatrics, but Yossi wasn't there. When he'd been admitted, they hadn't known who he was or how old he was. Because of his height, they assumed he was over 18 and put him in the general ICU.

The doctors came to talk to us. I'm a doctor, and I understood too well what they were saying. Yossi had traumatic asphyxia with anoxic brain injury—a crush injury and brain damage from oxygen deprivation.

Michal and I moved into the ICU at Rambam. We stayed 52 days. It was touch-and-go for the first few weeks. Yossi wasn't expected to survive. As a doctor, I could relate to the staff on a professional level and even offer a suggestion here and there, but there was nothing I could do for my son other than stay at his bedside and *daven*.

Hashem had given us a "*potch*" but softened it with kindness. The medical care at Rambam was outstanding. Sometimes people go through trauma without the support they need. Sitting with Yossi in the ICU was far from easy, but we were treated with sensitivity and gentleness, and for this, we

I NEVER FELT THE NEED TO ASK, "WHY ME? WHY MY YOSSEI?" OUR JOB IS TO DO THE BEST WE CAN WITH WHAT HAPPENS TO US.

continue to be grateful. We were also "held" by our community and the larger Jewish community. Public *tefillos* were recited on Yossi's behalf, which gave us strength to face our new reality.

I never felt the need to ask, "Why me? Why my Yossi?" Neither did Michal. Many people better than us have experienced hardships. Our job is to do the best we can with what happens to us.

Yossi made some progress. He was weaned off the ventilator, and then off the tracheostomy tube. Today, *baruch Hashem*, he breathes on his own. He remains in a minimally conscious state. He can open his eyes, but he's mostly unresponsive and disconnected from his environment.

His prognosis? No one knows. From a medical perspective, patients who are comatose usually wake up within 30 days. Sometimes it can take months or a year. Once in a while, there's a story in the news about a patient waking up after being in a coma for a much longer period of time. According to *halachah*, one may not *daven* for a miracle that would violate the laws of

VERTICAL
1/3

{w} 2.5 X {h} 10.3

nature. It is possible for a patient to wake up from a state like Yossi's; it doesn't happen often, but it can happen. As *Yidden*, we don't live according to the rules of statistics. If we did, we would have disappeared a long time ago.

After 52 days in the ICU, Yossi stayed in the pediatric ward in Rambam Hospital for a few more weeks. Then he was transferred to ALYN, a rehab hospital in Jerusalem.

He's still at ALYN.

Michal goes to Yossi every morning during the hours when our youngest son is in school. She makes sure to be home for our son after school.

There's another *chesed* within this hardship. Our younger son's life took a drastic turn a year ago. He went from living at home with Yossi to being the only child at home, sharing his parents with a brother in rehab. With all that, *baruch Hashem*, he's doing okay. He's successful in school, has many friends, and is just about the most normal kid you'd expect to bump into.

Every afternoon after Michal leaves, others come to stay with Yossi until nightfall; some volunteer and some are paid. Yossi is never alone during the day. Sometimes his friends from *yeshivah* visit him. I spend every other Shabbos with him. I hold his hand and sing the *tefillos* to him. I'm not much of a singer, but it's how I connect with him when it's just the two of us. On the *Shabbosos* when I'm not with Yossi, we hire older *yeshivah bachurim* to stay with him.

Yom Tov is more challenging. My wife and I have to be home with our son on Yom Tov, so we hire *bachurim* to stay with Yossi. Our youngest daughter and her husband spent Pesach with him. They made a Seder at his bedside. Yossi is fed by a tube and is unable to eat anything, but they ate matzah near him and told him what was going on. We're not sure how much he under-

Caption

IF THOSE 15 YEARS WERE ALL THAT YOSSI WAS ALLOTTED IN FULL HEALTH, I WILL CONTINUE TO SAY THANK YOU FOR THEM.

stood, but we felt this was very important.

Sometimes we see tears in his eyes. Michal reads to him and talks to him, and he responds to her voice more than he does to mine—although his response is very minimal. It's possible that the part of his brain that is responding is accessing an earlier stage in his life when he was more connected to his mother. I noticed that when the female physical therapists say something like "I'm moving your shoulder,

move it with me," Yossi responds more than he does with the male therapists. Overall, however, he doesn't have much voluntary movement. He's given pain medication before procedures, but we can't tell if he feels pain.

I suspect there's a discrepancy between what he's aware of and what he can communicate, which means he might be trapped in a dream state. But we don't know for sure.

Last summer, we started working on arrangements to bring Yossi home. We hired an architect to draw up plans for a unit in our basement to accommodate Yossi and his full-time caregivers. We need facilities to bathe him, a kitchenette for his caregivers, and an elevator so that he can be brought up to the rest of the house. The challenge is that we have to make extensive plumbing modifications to allow for drainage because our basement is below our sewage line. We're pushing our contractor to get it done as quickly as possible, but we have no idea how we'll come up with the money to pay him.

In addition to the financial hardship, we ran into serious setbacks in the work

timeline because the shipment of some of the materials was delayed due to supply-chain issues.

At the same time that the work stalled, the insurance company is pressuring ALYN to discharge Yossi. They argue that there's no longer a potential for rehabilitation, and therefore no reason to keep him at the rehab center.

Right now, we're in a triple bind—exorbitant construction costs, delays in construction, and pressure to move Yossi out of rehab.

I don't know Hashem's *cheshbon* for Yossi. I only know what this journey taught me. I'm an emergency medicine physician. I've always been healthy, *baruch Hashem*, and have had no experience with what it feels like to be on the receiving end of the medical system. Now I do.

A few days ago, a man was brought into the ER with a brain injury and placed on a ventilator. When I updated his wife, she protested tearfully, "But he's so young, so capable, so healthy. He's an engineer. How can this be?" It occurred to me that while I would move from that patient to the next, from one medical file to another, she would remain in the moment when everything changed. Since Yossi's injury, I'm not doing anything differently when I treat patients, but I am more aware when I talk to their families that for me it's a case, but for them it's their whole world. I see them now in a way that I didn't really see them before.

Sometimes, a loss is a real wake-up call to appreciate what we have. Whatever Hashem has decreed from this point on is what will be, but we did have 15 wonderful years with Yossi. Some people have children who are unresponsive from birth. We merited to get to know and enjoy our son. We hope he will return to his earlier functioning, but if those 15 years were all

that Yossi was allotted in full health, I will continue to say thank you for them. These days, we see children who have lost their way and lost their connection to Hashem. Yossi learned Torah and gave us *nachas*. We were lucky.

Every morning, we say many *brachos* thanking Hashem. We say *Mattir Assurim*, thanking Him that we can get out of bed and move freely; we say *Pokei'ach Ivrim*, thanking Him that we can see, and so on. We tend to say them quickly, and then we get absorbed in the tasks and disappointments of day-to-day living. Maybe we can take time to find meaning, to shift our priorities, to say thank you for the many things we're able to do.

One of our relatives started a project called "Five Minutes for Yossi," which spread all over the world. It's a call for people to spend five minutes on an improvement in serving Hashem, one they'd been meaning to do but hadn't gotten around to yet. Participants in "Five Minutes for Yossi" fill out a form on the website and send it to us. Among other things, people have committed to saying more *Tehillim*, *davening* with greater *kavanah*, and doing a favor for someone else, in honor of Yossi.

Last week, our niece who teaches in a *chasidische* high school in New York sent me a manila envelope full of charts that her ninth- and tenth-grade students filled out; they'd taken it upon themselves to *daven Minchah* during the Pesach break and documented what they'd done.

Michal and I read the *hachlatos* and the steps so many have taken in honor of Yossi. It gives us *chizzuk* to see how our precious son continues to influence others to bring more *kedushah* into the world.

Please *daven* for Elazar ben Reumah and Yosef Azriel ben Chaya Michal.

VERTICAL
1/3

{w} 2.5 X {h} 10.3