Toras Avigdor Junior

Adapted from the teachings of Rav Avigdor Miller zt"l

Yom Kippur / יוֹם כִּיפּוּר

The Empty Seat

By: **A. Ben Ami**
Illustrations by: **M. Weinreb**

Menachem knew he shouldn't have done it.

It started during recess when his best friend, Dovid, left his new watch on his desk. Menachem picked it up for just a second to look at it. It was really fancy, nothing like his own plastic kids watch. "Dovid is my best friend," thought Menachem. "He'll probably let me hold it for a few minutes."

A few minutes later Menachem was climbing the fence behind the playground when his hand slipped.

CRACK!

Menachem looked down and his stomach dropped. The glass covering Dovid's watch was shattered. He quickly scrambled down and looked toward the playground. Boruch Hashem, everyone was busy with their football game and nobody had seen anything. He slipped back into the classroom and put the broken watch exactly where Dovid had left it.

When Dovid returned, everyone heard him shout, "My watch! Who did this?!" Nobody answered. Menachem looked down at his Gemara and said nothing.

For the rest of the day he felt terrible. Twice he almost told Dovid the truth, but each time he lost his nerve. The next morning he arrived at yeshivah early and found Dovid sitting alone.

"Dovid," Menachem said quietly, "I have to tell you something. I broke your watch. I took it without permission and it fell while I was climbing the fence. I feel terrible. I should have told you right away."

Dovid stared at him. He couldn't believe his best friend had watched him asking everyone who broke his watch and said nothing. "You're supposed to be my best friend!"

Menachem had no answer. He offered to pay for the watch, but Dovid didn't even want to talk. He picked up his seforim and moved to another seat. For the first time in three years, the chair next to Menachem was empty.

A week passed. Every day Menachem saw Dovid in class, but they hardly spoke. Then Erev Yom Kippur arrived.

Menachem had saved enough money to repair the watch, and during lunch he handed Dovid an envelope. "This is the money for your watch. And I want to ask you mechilah. Please, Dovid. I'm really sorry."

Dovid took the envelope and was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said, "OK, Dovid. I forgive you."

Menachem said thank you and returned to his desk. He should have felt wonderful. Dovid had forgiven him. The watch would be fixed. But something was wrong. The seat next to him was still empty.

Menachem looked across the room and saw Dovid laughing with some other boys. And suddenly he understood. He didn't only want forgiveness. He wanted Dovid back.

That night, the shul was packed for Kol Nidrei. Menachem stood next to his father as the chazzan began that slow niggun, but Menachem kept thinking about the empty seat. Then came the requests for forgiveness:

סלח לנו. מחל לנו. כפר לנו.

Forgive us. Pardon us. Give us kapparah.

Until now, Menachem had always thought he understood Yom Kippur. You do aveiros, Hashem forgives you, and now you won't be punished. But suddenly that didn't seem like enough. What if Hashem forgave him but he was still far away? What if the punishment was erased but the seat was still empty?

Menachem felt a lump in his throat. Dovid had said, "I forgive you," but that wasn't enough. Because Dovid wasn't just someone whose watch he had broken. Dovid was his friend.

And Hashem wasn't merely a Judge who decided whether Menachem deserved punishment. Hashem was his Father.

Menachem closed his eyes. "Hashem," he whispered, "I don't only want You to forgive me. I want You to want me back."

For the first time, Menachem understood what he was asking for. Every aveirah had pushed him away a little. Every time he ignored what Hashem wanted, it was as if he had turned his back and taken another step away from Hashem. And now Hashem had given him Yom Kippur — a day to come back.

סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו.

Menachem said the words again, but this time they meant something different. "Please, Hashem. Take away everything that's between us. I want to be close to You again."

The next morning Menachem arrived early at shul and saw Dovid near the entrance. He walked over to him. "I know you forgave me yesterday, but there's something else I wanted to ask. Can we be friends again?"

Dovid looked at him for a long moment. Then he smiled. "Yeah. Let's try to make believe it never happened."

Later, when the two boys stood near each other Yom Kippur davening, Menachem finally understood why Yom Kippur could be one of the happiest days of the year. Being forgiven was wonderful, but being welcomed back was even better.

Have A Wonderful Shabbos
and a Gemar Chasimah Tovah!

Rav Miller Speaks:

"What is teshuva ? What is kaparah? When a person wants to get kaparah it means he is seeking to reconcile with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He wants to come back to His favor. And that's the greatest happiness in the world, that Hashem should take me back again."

-September 1985

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