



A Meeting with a Distant Brother
Parshas Toldos

I looked at a man in the audience, yes, it's him, I was almost sure. The eyes were the same. The gaze was the same. He had changed, and I have not seen him for a long time. But there was no mistake, it was Naftali.

Naftali was a classmate of mine from the old neighborhood in Jerusalem. I knew his entire family; I knew him from childhood. He was quiet and modest. It's been so many years, so much had changed.

I had heard that he had stopped living as an observant Jew, and that he had moved to the US.

Now he was here, sitting in the audience in a Shul in Brooklyn, listening to my talk in 1975. I was stunned for a moment, but continued with my words. I knew at that moment that someone special was here to listen to my words.

Those were days of turmoil, in Israel and abroad. In those days many abandoned their Jewish roots and heritage, and many left the Israel in search of new and different lives elsewhere.

Naftali, who was now known as Poli, sold pizza for a living and was not religiously observant in any discernible way.

I was not entirely sure what to say during the address.

I began with the Midrash on the verse in our weekly parsha: "And he [Yitzchak] came closer, and he kissed him [Yaacov], and he smelled the fragrance of his garments, and he blessed him, and he said, "Behold, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field, which the Lord has blessed!"¹

The Midrash recounts the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The captors decided to send in Jews to the Temple first, and offered Yosef Meshita to take anything he wanted from the Temple to get him to enter ahead of them. He entered and returned with a golden Menorah. The captors said he could not take it, as it was not made for the use of commoners.

He was ordered to enter again, but refused this time. They threatened him with penalties, but he was steadfast, saying "I have angered my G-d once, I will not do it again."

They tortured him, as he cried out saying "woe is me, for I have angered my Creator."

I then explained the significance of the Midrash. Many Jews appear to be traitorous, but when given the moment, they immediately become G-d's most staunch supports.

I then told the audience a story about an inmate I had met in the Shata prison, where I worked as an educator. I told them that even among those who appeared most distant from G-d, at the right time the element of self-sacrifice became evident.

During my first visit to the prison, I kissed one of the convicts, named Dado.

A few days later I received a letter: "Rabbi Grossman, I have been an orphan from a young age. I have never been kissed by anyone. I am anticipating your next visit. Dado."

I knew I had won. Another Jewish soul had been saved. I had managed to make a difference with Dado. Each Jew is fundamentally good, and has the ability to become a vehicle for G-d's presence in this world.

As I mentioned the Midrash's words, "woe is me, for I have angered my Creator," I looked at Poli and his expression. He sat at the end of the Shul, wearing a blue baseball cap. I saw the words moved him, and repeated them again, "woe is me, for I have angered my Creator."

I saw him changes colors, place his face in hands and leave the Shul. I have not seen him since.

My brother had recently returned from a trip to the US where he had met Poli, who has since become Rabbi Naftali. He was sitting with a group of Jews and teaching them Torah, telling them that "Rabbi Grossman's words had completely changed my life."

It turns out that on that fateful Shabbos, Poli was strolling with a cigarette in hand, when he saw a group of Jews going to Shul. He felt a strong desire to follow them and hear the address given by me, his old classmate.

That day, after Shabbos ended, he joined a Yeshiva, and eventually became a teacher of Torah.

¹ Beresheit 27:27.