

THE REAL REASON

Rabbi Baruch Unger* has the kind of intuition and understanding that a *bachur* needs when he thinks he's the absolute worst person in the world and will never be able to find a way out of his current morass. And since Rabbi Unger is that kind of person and has helped numerous *bachurim* with their issues, he was not surprised when he returned home one night and found a *bachur* waiting outside his home.

"Can I help you?" he asked the young man.

The *bachur* nodded.

"Do you want to come inside and have a conversation?"

Another nod.

"Well, then, please come in."

He led the *bachur* into his apartment and then into his study. When he was sitting on one side of the desk and the *bachur* on the other, he said, "Okay, what's on your mind?"

But the *bachur* was unable to tell him. He wanted to speak, he had come to the house to speak, but something was holding him back. Rabbi Unger tried to convince him that whatever secrets he had were safe with him, but nothing worked. Eventually, he did what he always did in situations where someone was having a difficult time speaking. He took out a game of backgammon and set it up on his desk.

"You know how to play?"

Nod.

“Good. Let’s play.”

They began to play. One game led to another.

“Why backgammon?” the rabbi later explained. “It’s a theory I have. When someone is tossing the dice onto the board, they make a motion with their hand that takes the dice from inside to outside. The more they toss the dice, the harder it is to stop themselves from unburdening their hearts and being able to talk about whatever it is they came to discuss.”

This boy was a hard nut to crack, and it took him a long time.

They ended up playing until four in the morning. That was when the *bachur* finally started to talk.



“A while back,” he began, “I found a job working the night shift at a factory. The reason I did this was because I wanted to make money. And I did. I began making a decent salary, sufficient for my needs. Of course, because I was working during the nighttime hours, it was very difficult for me to learn since I had to make up my sleep during the day.”

“What do you use the money for?” Rabbi Unger asked.

“To support my addiction,” he replied.

“What kind of an addiction?”

“I love technology. Anytime a new phone comes out, I’m one of the first people to buy it. I have an entire array of phones, tablets, and computers. None of my technology is kosher — and this is the case even though I hate the fact that I’ve been so ensnared in the internet’s web and can’t seem to find a way out. I hate the person I’ve become. But, try as I might, I cannot seem to save myself!

“So that’s why I came here. My guilt keeps on building up inside me, and it’s driving me crazy. I really want to find the power within me to make the changes I want to make, but I don’t know how!”

He took a deep breath.

“That’s why I came to speak with you. Because I am utterly and hopelessly addicted to technology.”



Having unburdened himself, it was clear that the *bachur* felt a little better. Now he waited to hear Rabbi Unger’s response.

The rabbi was silent for a while before replying.

“Look,” he finally said, “here’s what I think. I’m not going to get into your addiction to technology right now. Let’s say that I understand your *nisayon* — because it’s the same one that millions of other people are experiencing even as we speak. I’m going to put that to the side for now and focus instead on another point.

“You are telling me that since you have this addiction you’ve been working at night so that you buy everything you want. But because you’re so busy working, you haven’t learned anything in quite a while. Correct?”

The *bachur* nodded.

“Okay, here’s what I want from you. I want you to quit your job and get back into learning. I want you to put in full days in the *beis midrash* again. And if you tell me that you’re unable to do this because of your need for money to support your habit, then I’ll tell you the following: I am going to give you money so that you won’t have to work. What you do with the money is your business. I don’t need to know about it.”

“So what do you want?”

“Simple. I want you to come see me every two weeks and give me a report on what you’ve been learning in yeshivah. In return, I will give you money so that you don’t have to think about having to work. Do we have a deal?”

The boy looked at Rabbi Unger.

“Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

“Even though I’m telling you that I can’t stop myself from spending almost all my money on my addiction?”

“Yes. All I want is for you to quit your job and to give me a report about your learning every two weeks. Do we have a deal?”

The *bachur* nodded. “We have a deal. I will come see you in two weeks.”

And Rabbi Unger gave him quite a nice amount of money.



Rabbi Unger continued:

When the *bachur* returned to me two weeks later, he didn’t need any encouragement to talk. We spent the next half hour discussing the

Torah that he'd learned over the past two weeks, and it was obvious that he was feeling much better about himself.

But when we were finished with that part of the conversation, he looked at me and said, "I'm really embarrassed to tell you that I spent the money that you gave me. I just purchased the newest model phone on the market."

He was very ashamed.

There was no question that my response shocked him.

"I didn't ask you what you did with the money I gave you. I told you that the only thing I want a report on is what you've been learning. That's it! I don't want to discuss anything else right now!"

I then reached into my wallet and removed some more cash, which I threw down on the desk in front of him.

"Here is more money," I said. "This is for you to use. I am not getting involved in how you use it! Do you understand? Our conversation is about your learning. That's it!"

The *bachur* looked at me. His eyes were full of sadness. He pocketed the money, rose from his seat, and left my house.

He did not return.



Rabbi Unger did not hear from the *bachur* for the next couple of years. From time to time, he wondered what had become of him. Sometimes he asked himself if he had erred in the way he'd handled the boy. Had he been too tough with him? Perhaps he should have been softer?

Eventually he stopped thinking about the *bachur*.

And then, one evening, his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Rabbi Unger?"

"Yes?"

It was him.

"I wanted to share some news with you."

"Yes?"

"I have become a *chassan*, and I'm calling because I wanted to invite you to my *vort*!"

Rabbi Unger was very excited.

“It will be my greatest pleasure to attend your *vort*,” he told the *bachur*. “Where and when?”



When Rabbi Unger arrived a few nights later, the hall was lit up. He found a packed room filled with *bachurim* singing and having a good time. The *chassan* was sitting at the head table. One look at him and it was obvious that he was not the same person he'd been when he'd sought out Rabbi Unger a few years earlier. His face was radiant, and it was clear that he had become a genuine *ben Torah*. When some members of the yeshivah administration rose to speak, they described the *chassan* as one of the best *bachurim* in the yeshivah — and there was no question that they meant every word.

Rabbi Unger could not have been happier.

He was also filled with incredible relief that everything had turned out so well after the boy had left him and never returned.

The evening grew later. More and more people began leaving the hall. Eventually almost everyone had left, and the time had come for the two of them to talk. Rabbi Unger and the *chassan* sat down at one of the tables in the back of the room.

“I want to tell you something,” the young man began. “I never used the money you gave me on my second visit. I still have it now, all these years later.”

So saying, he removed his wallet and handed Rabbi Unger back the money.

“The words you said hit me hard and made a dent in my *neshamah*. I had a real turnaround that night, and from then on I began climbing back up the mountain until I became one of the best *bachurim* in the yeshivah. Somehow, you found the words that were able to get past my defenses and awaken my soul.”

They hugged with real emotion. It was a wonderful moment. The kind of moment that doesn't happen to a rebbi often enough. The kind of moment that makes *chinuch* worthwhile.

“I'm looking forward to dancing with you at the wedding,” the *chassan* said.

“I'll make sure to bring my dancing shoes.”



The *bachur* walked away, and Rabbi Unger was just about to leave when the *rosh yeshivah* approached him.

“Mazel tov,” he said.

“The same to you,” Rabbi Unger replied.

“I couldn’t help noticing that my *talmid* just gave you some money.”

“Yes.”

“What was that about?”

Rabbi Unger hadn’t realized that they’d had an audience. But the *rosh yeshivah* was waiting for an answer.

“It’s a personal story,” he said at last. “I’ll have to ask the *chassan* if he minds if I share it with you.”

“Okay.”

So Rabbi Unger asked, and the *chassan* gave his permission.

The two of them sat down. Rabbi Unger told the *rosh yeshivah* all about the night he’d played backgammon with the *bachur* until close to daybreak, and about the deal they made, and about what happened when he came back to see him two weeks later.

It was a good story, and he figured that the *rosh yeshivah* would be moved.

But he wasn’t. He was angry.

“I can’t believe you did this,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“How dare you give him money so he could go ahead and pay for technology addictions without consulting with me first? This is my yeshivah, and I am not comfortable with your decision! In fact, I think you were completely over the line for involving yourself with my *talmidim* and for implementing such a solution!”

This was one very angry *rosh yeshivah*.

Rabbi Unger tried to mollify him.

“Listen, I have an idea. If you think I was wrong for doing what I did, maybe the two of us should go to Rav Aharon Leib Steinman and ask his opinion. Is that acceptable?”

The *rosh yeshivah* agreed.



A few days later, the two were standing in front of Rav Aharon Leib. Rabbi Unger told his side of the story. The *rosh yeshivah* told his.

When they were both finished, they waited to hear what Rav Aharon Leib had to say. Rav Aharon Leib turned to the *rosh yeshivah*.

“What’s bothering you here? he asked. “I understand why you would want to discuss such a thing if it was happening right now, and we had to decide whether Rabbi Unger had chosen the proper course of action. But it isn’t happening now. The story is over, the *chassan* is one of the best boys in your yeshivah. Rabbi Unger’s course of action proved correct. So why are you so upset?”

“I don’t want him to think that he can pay for my students to go ahead and do *aveiros*,” the *rosh yeshivah* replied. “Who knows what he’s going to pay for next!”

“I trust Rabbi Unger,” Rav Aharon Leib said. “I don’t think you have to worry about what he’s going to do next.”

That was that. They had their answer.



A week later, Rabbi Unger had to return to Rav Aharon Leib for something else. When he was with the *gadol*, Rav Aharon Leib said, “I’m so happy that you came back. These past few days, I’ve been thinking about the story you told me. I need to ask you: What was your *cheshbon* for doing what you did?”

“It wasn’t such a deep *cheshbon*,” Rabbi Unger replied. “The Gemara tells us many times that the best solution for someone who has become enmeshed in the world of sin is to immerse themselves in the *mikveh* of Torah purity. It seemed to me that if this boy could get back into learning in a real way, there was a good chance that he would find a way to deal with his *yetzer hara* and overcome it.”

Rav Aharon Leib considered Rabbi Unger’s words for a short time.

“I think there’s something else going on here that you are forgetting,” he told his visitor.

“What’s that?”

“Think about what happened. You told this *bachur* that you were willing to pay for his addiction, right?”

“Yes.”

“Let me ask you a question. When you told him that you were prepared to give him money, do you think he thought that you’d be giving him an endless supply of funds for the rest of his life? Of course not.

He understood that you were offering to cover his financial shortfall for a limited time if he returned to yeshivah. From the fact that you were offering him money, you were making it clear that you believed that it wouldn't be long before he stopped needing you to give him money. Basically, you were telling someone who was trapped in a sea of impurity that you believed in him and were confident that he'd be able to turn himself around.

“Here you had a *bachur* who felt terrible about himself. He felt that he was the worst person in the world. He felt that he was so bad that he couldn't even imagine being able to change. But then you came along and told him, ‘I believe in you! I know you can change.’ And you put your money where your mouth is by actually offering him cash, because you were so sure that he was going to get himself under control. With that action, you saved his life. Your belief in him meant that he was finally able to believe in himself — for the first time in many years.

“Of course, the learning helped him, once he sat down and got back into it. But the fact that you believed that he had a chance to redeem himself gave him the ability to actually take those first steps to return.”

As always, Rabbi Unger left the simple apartment on Chazon Ish Street with a lot more wisdom than when he'd entered it.

As heard from Reb Shmully Kupferstein