

Lessons of Crime and Punishment in New Square Yeshiva

How Rubber Chords and False Reports Shaped One Young Man's Experience of Teaching Talmud in the Hasidic Enclave

A young father in the insular Skverer sect, Shulem Deen took the one job available to him: teacher. In an exclusive excerpt from his forthcoming memoir, "All Who Go Do Not Return," which chronicles his painful journey from 18-year-old newlywed to being expelled from New Square as a heretic, he recounts how the need to provide for his growing family led him to practices he would later question.

By Shulem Deen

It was now fourteen years since my third-grade rebbe thwacked my palms for my profane drawing, eight years since my ninth-grade rebbe slapped me for eating a bag of potato chips during a lesson on liabilities for digging pits in public places. All that thwacking and slapping now came to mind as I tried to teach Srulik Schmeltzer's sixth-grade class the laws of discarding leavened bread on the day before Passover. The boys chatted throughout the lesson, as if I weren't there, some even getting out of their seats and strolling around.

"Chaim Nuchem Braun, can you please sit down and keep quiet?" I called to a skinny boy who had stood up to look out the window and shouted something to a friend across the room.

"Chaim Nuchem Braun, can you please sit down and keep quiet?" the boy mimicked, then grinned at his friends as he walked to his seat and the class burst into laughter. I could feel the blood rush to my head as my body froze. I could not process any thoughts beyond the feeling of humiliation. I felt a kind of physical weakness in my body, a tremor in my jaws, and I clenched my teeth to keep it from showing. It was the second day of a two-week job. I could not imagine how I would last two weeks. But how could I, a twenty-two-year-old man, be cowed by a class of ten-year-olds?

At 12:45, I walked the two blocks home for an hour of lunch, before I would return for the afternoon. Along Clinton Lane, near the site of a new home construction, I spotted a "wire" on the ground, at the side of the road. It looked almost exactly like the one my fourth-grade rebbe had used instead of a rod, a white length of round, hollow rubber. It was the perfect size, twice arm's-length, just right to fold in half and hold at one end.

Halt arois di hant. I remembered the hundreds of times I had heard it. Hold out your hand. Without thinking, I picked up the rubber cord, wrapped it around my fingers, and then placed it inside my coat pocket.

There were the usual bouts of shouting and laughter across the classroom that afternoon, and I began to grow accustomed to it. I would not use the wire in my pocket, I decided. I would deal with the boys as best I could and somehow get through it. The next day, however, the boys grew even rowdier; when I called to Berry Glancz to stop speaking to the boy sitting next to him, his response sent me over the edge.

"Ich feif dich uhn."

He muttered it under his breath, not brazen enough to say it out loud, but the words were unmistakable. The language of defiance in the schoolyard, or among siblings in their rivalries, a child's bluster. *Ich feif dich uhn.* I fife my horn at you. I do not care for you or for your orders or your requests or desires, and so I blow my whistle at you. I shoot a burst of hot air in your face. Because you are nothing to me.

But I was not nothing to this boy. I was his rebbe. I reached into the inside breast pocket of my coat, where the rubber cord lay coiled flat against my chest. In a flash, I stood over Berry. For a moment, I intended to order him to "hold

out your hand." Instead, as if my body acted on its own, I delivered a strike to the boy's upper left arm, a hissing *sshhwisschh-thwack!* that frightened even me with its violence. Berry's hand flew up to cover the spot I had struck, his mouth forming a sudden, silent "AH!"

I could see the anger in his eyes but did not care. He could fife and fife, but I was the one with the authority to use force, to strike him, and I watched as this realization sunk in and he looked back at me, angry but silent. The rest of the class, too, was silent as I made my way back to my desk. They remained silent for the rest of the afternoon, and the day after and the day after that.

Silent and contemptuous. I had gained the boys' obedience but not their respect. I had demonstrated not strength but weakness, and I saw in their eyes that they knew it. They had broken me, and I hated them for it.

In the teachers' room down the hall, the rebbes would talk about changes. The rebbes in New Square were always more brutal than the rebbes in Borough Park. I had heard the stories. One rebbe beat a boy with his gartel mercilessly until the boy lay on the floor howling for hours. Another thwacked a boy's palms several hundred times, until his welts began to bleed. One of my friends told me of a first-grade rebbe who had spanked his backside so raw that he couldn't sit for days, all because the rebbe had accused him of taking a small bag of candies from his desk drawer, only to find the candies in a different drawer a few minutes later.

Now the punishments were more measured. Some only slapped the students, instead of using a rod. "Feel the sting in your hand," one fifth-grade rebbe said to me earnestly. "If it hurts the child, it should hurt you, too." Others thought the rod was acceptable but that strikes must be meted out judiciously. Whipping a boy until he howled for hours was no longer advisable. Berel Eisenman, a teacher for nearly two decades who was once known to be the most brutal of all rebbes, had done a complete turnabout. "I no longer use

They had broken me, and I hated them for it.

a rod. Now I use ice cream pops." Instead of punishing for bad behavior, he rewarded for good. The other rebbes thought his approach too lenient. Even the principal shook his head. "Children need to be hit sometimes. That's never going to change."

Walking home from school, I thought about Berel Eisenman's words. Ice cream pops, there was an idea. I did not want to hit students. I wanted them to like me. I wanted to be a "good rebbe," and so, when I finished the two weeks with Srulik Schmeltzer's sixth-graders, I took on Reuven Mashinsky's seventh-graders, and had a new method.

"We'll do things differently here," I said before I opened the volume of Kiddushin on Mashinsky's desk. I told them I was splitting the class into two teams. I would pit half the class against the other and make them each accountable to their teammates. I would



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award points for good behavior and subtract points for bad. "The winning team," I said, "gets ice cream pops."

The boys regarded me warily, as if assessing whether this plan was for their benefit or mine. They were used to being scolded and slapped and thwacked, not awarded points.

For the next two weeks, I held not a rod or a wire but a little green-and-yellow notepad, in which I marked down which student earned points for his team or incurred a penalty. In class, during prayer time, for passing the exams, for showing up on time — everything mattered. Instead of scolding or thwacking, all I had to do was get my notepad out. When Chaim Greenfeld whispered something to Shea Goldstein during *mincha* prayers, I could see Shea's eyeballs bulging and his words hissing from between clenched teeth, "Shh, the rebbe is marking points!" Chaim Greenfeld quickly set his eyes back on his prayer book.

Mordche Goldhirsch was pleased. "I don't know what you're doing, but you clearly know how to hold a classroom," he said. He knew from looking through the small window in the classroom door that the boys were uncharacteristically well behaved for a substitute. And so he offered me a regular position, teaching Mishna to fifth-graders from four to five each afternoon.

This was unlike the Gemara, the elaboration on the Mishna, which could go on for pages about why a certain law was the way it was and how it was known. The Mishna was both easy and dull, a straightforward compendium of laws.

Two men clutch a cloak. Each one claims, "It is all mine." The cloak must be split.

An egg that was laid on the holiday: the school of Shammai says, it may be eaten; the school of Hillel says, it must not be eaten.

An ox gores a cow, and the cow is discovered with its fetus at its side; the ox's owner must pay for half the cow and a quarter of the fetus.

That summer, we studied the laws of Yom Kippur as they were practiced in Jerusalem's ancient temple. The children learned that not only must the high priest have a deputy on call in case he becomes disqualified ("In case he's had an impure incident") but, according to Rabbi Judah, he was also given an extra wife, in case his wife died, and he needed a backup to fulfill the commandment: "He must atone for himself and his household."

I gave quizzes of multiple-choice

answers, with the wrong ones playful and silly and obviously wrong, and the boys loved them. When they studied well, I took them on "hikes," strolls in the nearby woods until we came to a clearing, where we'd sit in a semicircle and I would hand out half-melted ice cream pops and tell them stories of rabbis who healed the sick, spoke with the dead, powwowed with angels, and battled demons, often all at once. On occasion, I'd split the class into teams for an impromptu "Mishna Bee," and toss candies for correct answers. Soon the children were paying attention. (...)



Substituting and teaching Mishna in afternoons wasn't what I had in mind when I'd thought of teaching, but there seemed to be no opening for a full-time position. Every few weeks, I'd stop by Mordche's office to inquire. "Which grade did you want to teach again?" he would ask, as if he hadn't asked the same just last week and I hadn't told him that any grade was fine. I had no preference. I wanted a steady position, a paycheck, even the despised vouchers. We were still behind on our rent, still getting termination notices from the gas company. Freidy was beginning to walk and needed shoes. Even the vouchers eventually found their uses, and now we owed hundreds more at the grocer's.

"Nothing yet," Mordche would shake his head, shuffling papers on his desk or fiddling with the photocopy machine. "I'll let you know if something changes."

Mordche met me in the hallway one day after my Mishna class. He wanted to know if I was interested in attending a meeting.

"A meeting about what?" He seemed surprised by the question, as if meetings were to be attended for their own sake. He waved his hand dismissively. "Just a meeting. Gavriel Stein has some ideas."

The meeting was held on the first floor of the school, in a room that served as a conference room for village officials and, each Wednesday morning, as "village court," where a judge ruled on traffic violations — rolling through stop signs, or parking overnight on snow days, or driving down Washington Avenue at seventy-five miles per hour to

get a last-minute mikveh dip before the siren announced the start of the Sabbath.

Now we sat seven men in the room, six Mishna teachers along with Gavriel Stein, the same one who'd had us fill out *rezemays* a few months earlier.

"The government," he said, "has a program for tutoring students." Title something or other. "They'll pay thirteen dollars an hour."

"Thirteen dollars an hour?" all except me asked in unison. The others seemed to think the amount was pitiful. I thought it sounded just fine. We were getting only nine for our Mishna classes.

"Thirteen dollars an hour is what the government pays. You can set your own rate and get the rest from the parents."

In the corner, a large American flag hung on a pole, incongruous behind this assemblage of black hats and long coats.

"Is this a scam?" I asked.

Gavriel gave me a wary glance. "Not at all," he said. "The rebbe doesn't allow any more scams."

There'd been problems in the past, with fraudulent use of government programs. Four men, including Gavriel himself, were given prison sentences, ranging from several months to six years. Three other men had fled the country to avoid prosecution. We'd learned our lessons.

Gavriel looked around to make sure we all understood.

"Because this is a government program, you'll have to fill out progress reports," he went on, looking around at our bemused faces. "For each student, you fill out a sheet describing how the student is doing. You'll need to be creative. Write how the student is doing in math, or in English, or social studies —"

"We're tutoring math and English and social studies?"

Gavriel looked at me as if I were a child. "Of course not," he said. "But the government doesn't pay for religious studies."

I looked at the other men sitting around the table, but none of them seemed concerned. I was terrified. In my mind, I could see it all unfold. A knock on the door at dawn. Handcuffs. An ill-fitting prison jumpsuit.

My options, however, were few, so I signed up for the program. Five boys each day, all between the ages of nine and thirteen. Laws of returning lost objects. Laws of oxen falling into pits in the roadway. Laws of the Sabbath. Laws of

oxen goring cows. Laws of prayer. Laws of oxen goring cows fallen into pits during prayer.

And then I wrote the progress reports:

Mendy is improving his multiplication but still has trouble with division.

Chezky's spelling seems to have worsened.

Yanky's penmanship has vastly improved due to the practice worksheets.

There were no multiplication tables, no practice worksheets, and no improvement or deterioration in any of those subjects. I was handing in phony progress reports, with my signature, getting paid for something I wasn't doing.

"How can we be doing this and not be concerned?" I asked my friend Chaim Nuchem, who occupied the tutoring room next to mine with his own rotation of students. But Chaim Nuchem only shrugged. "You think they'll come looking?" he asked.

I looked at him dumbfounded. Hadn't we learned? People were going to prison. Others were flee-

A knock on the door at dawn. Handcuffs.

ing. Families had been destroyed. The community shamed in the papers. Clearly, someone came looking.

Chaim Nuchem laughed. "Those guys took millions. We're making thirteen dollars an hour. You think the government cares?"

Still, I hated it. I hated that we relied on the government for so much. I hated that we skirted, just barely, the edges of legality. That we made sure never to report earning one cent more than the official poverty level so that we could keep our food stamps and our Section 8 and our WIC checks. I hated that the economics of our village were such that all matters of finance were bound up in deception. "On the books or off the books?" was the big question for every new job.

And still, the money was never enough.

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