

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER

By Michael A. Kaiser

Motzei Shabbat. The recitation of the final amen pierces the air like the crack of the starter's pistol and signals that the race has begun. The sleepy gait of Shabbat has gracefully retired into the shadows of evening. I spring into action. I mutter my perfunctory *gut vochs* and make a beeline for the shul exit. No time for idle chatter. Like a well-trained athlete, every movement has been meticulously coordinated and repeatedly rehearsed to achieve optimal speed and efficiency. The dash home is completed in record time with barely any visible strain. So far so good. The next step—assembling everyone for Havdalah—poses more of a challenge. With gentle and sometimes not-so-gentle coaxing I succeed in getting Havdalah underway. As I snuff the flame of the Havdalah candle I shut my eyes and wait with baited breath. Silence. Excellent. That means no one requires transportation. I exhale a sigh of relief because chauffeuring is my weakest link, and it's beyond my control. I glance at the kitchen clock to confirm that there is still time for a snack and a drink. I smirk and applaud my good fortune that the master plan is unfolding so flawlessly. Suddenly the phone rings. I smell trouble brewing. My wife answers the phone and calls to

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me that it is one of our married children (still learning) who says it is important and must speak to me. I tell my wife to tell him I mailed the check on Thursday and he should be getting it any day, and I'll call back later. Determined not to let matters unravel further, I know I must make my departing move now. I gaze at my watch and do a rapid calculation: twelve minutes left—two minutes to the car, eight minutes to shul, if the traffic lights go my way, two minutes from the parking lot to my seat. I'm cutting it close but I'm still in the safe zone. I grab the car keys, which amazingly are in the exact spot I placed them on *erev Shabbat*, in the anticipation that every second could be critical. Unlike last week, when I wasted precious minutes frantically searching for the car keys until I finally discovered them tucked into the back pocket of my teenager's trousers (which were at the bottom of a heap of clothes in the corner of something he has the audacity to call a closet).

I grab the car keys, open the front door and suddenly—WHACK!—a jarring thought jolts the cortex of my brain like a knockout punch delivered to the center of my forehead. THERE IS NO *SHIUR* TONIGHT. LAST WEEK WAS THE FINAL *SHIUR* OF THE SEASON. I freeze in dreaded panic and morbid

fear. The sobering thought that I have been mercilessly abandoned and will have to fend for myself begins to slowly penetrate and sink into my dazed noggin. The awareness that this very scene, at this moment, could be replaying in thousands of homes around the globe, offers little consolation.

Disoriented and in a state of shock, I stagger to the insular security of my den to regain my composure. I plop onto my trusted couch—the last vestige of real estate that has not yet been expropriated by my wife, children, children-in-law, grandchildren or mother-in-law—to contemplate my next move. In sheer desperation, I grab the rumpled *Jewish Press* lying beside me, and frantically scan the various crises hot lines for one that could possibly help me cope with my present fragile state of mind. No such luck. I wonder if Hatzolah is trained to respond to calls from Rabbi Reisman-*shiur* junkies suffering acute withdrawal trauma. Maybe if I add, “and shortness of breath.”

Severely wounded but still undefeated, I am determined to work through this on my own. I realize that the road to recovery lies in coming to terms with and grasping the very nature of the attachment to the addictive substance. I begin to calm down and seriously concentrate. What is it about Rabbi Reisman's *shiur* that fosters such fierce loyalty? That engenders attendance records that are the envy of every speaker? Is there an explanation as to how one individual in a relatively short span of time has single-handedly redefined what it means to go out on a Saturday night? How can one person rise to the top of Blockbuster's most-wanted list for causing a precipitous decline in Saturday night movie rentals in all large metropolitan areas in North America? Prior to the beginning of a *shiur* in my Toronto shul, I often glance around the room and marvel at the diverse ages and backgrounds of those in the audience. From *spodek*, to Borsalino, to velvet *kippah*, to knitted

kippah, to baseball cap, they are all present and well represented. Why do they all come? Nestled in the comfort and safety of my couch I spend the balance of the evening dissecting this lingering and nagging conundrum. After many hours of pensive reflection and thorough analysis, I conclude that it all boils down to the three Cs.

1. Clairvoyance (not to be confused with coincidence)

At first I attributed it to mere coincidence. I would be grappling with a sensitive subject matter in a family dynamic or a business environment, and then lo and behold, I would attend the *shiur* on Motzei Shabbat, and Rabbi Reisman would address that particular issue. After repeated occurrences I began to interrogate my family and office staff to see if anyone had contacted Rabbi Reisman in order to “suggest” topics for the *shiur*. Skeptical of the denials, I would scour old phone records searching for Rabbi Reisman’s phone number in order to contradict the protestations of innocence. I had my home and office premises swept for listening devices, my phone lines checked for wiretapping. After finding no evidence to confirm my suspicion, I was left with only one conclusion—after all the years of cavorting with the *Nevi'im* and expounding their words, something had mystically rubbed off on Rabbi Reisman. My “revelation” was corroborated by other attendees of the *shiur*.

Every Motzei Shabbat, from Sukkot until Shavuot, close to 1,000 people cram into Congregation Ahi Ezer in Brooklyn to hear Rabbi Yisroel Reisman’s *shiur* live. About a thousand more flock to their local shuls in over forty cities to hear Rabbi Reisman via satellite. Thanks to Torah Conferencing Network (TCN), people in places such as Teaneck, New Jersey; Norfolk, Virginia; Overland Park, Kansas; Memphis and Toronto can enjoy Rabbi Reisman’s musings on topics in Tanach.

For the past three years, the *shiur* has focused on Yirmiyahu; previously, Rabbi Reisman, the rabbi of Agudath Israel of Madison in Brooklyn, has covered Shmuel I and II and Melachim I and II. TCN has been broadcasting Rabbi Reisman’s *shiur* for three years.

While over forty congregations regularly broadcast Rabbi Reisman’s Motzei Shabbat *shiur*, there are currently about fifty-six shuls that are equipped to receive the satellite broadcast. The satellite operates in a fashion similar to the television industry, where a TV network broadcasts programming, but the local affiliates decide whether or not to play it.

TCN also broadcasts other popular speakers on a regular basis including Rabbi Yosef Viener, rabbi of Agudath Israel of Flatbush in Brooklyn; Rabbi Yissocher Frand, a *rosh yeshivah* at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore; Mrs. Shira Smiles, a teacher and lecturer from Israel, and Rabbi Mordechai Becher, senior lecturer for Gateways, a not-for-profit Jewish educational organization, as well as other special programming. While Rabbi Frand’s *Shabbat Shuvah derashah* of 2005 was TCN’s most popular *shiur*, the most popular weekly *shiur*, in terms of attendance, is that of Rabbi Reisman.

For more information, or to equip your shul to receive TCN programming, contact Morris Smith at 201-788-5601 or visit www.torahconferencing.net.

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2. Common Touch

Rabbi Reisman has been wildly successful in forging a deep and intense bond with his audience. Why? Because he is sincere, humble, compassionate and down to earth. He does not preach from a vaunted pulpit but rather from one that is firmly planted on the ground. He strikes a chord with his listeners, who have little difficulty in relating to him. He is a local boy made good. He does not possess a prized pedigree that provided any head start.

He attended the same *yeshivot* and camps we all did. The only difference is what has become of him and what has become of us. He stands as a shining example of what we all could have and should have become had we bothered to expend the same effort, diligence and dedication.

3. Comedy (as in humor)

A critical component in Rabbi Reisman’s popularity is his endearing and self-deprecating humor. Why is it so vital? Or for that matter why is humor a mandatory instrument in the great repertoire of life? To laugh or to smile, especially during difficult personal moments, allows one to momentarily step outside his confined box and see the absurdity of his plight, or to realize his predicament is not so uncommon and is but one infinitesimal, insignificant speck on the overall colossal canvas. Depressed people do not laugh or smile because they believe they are forever trapped with no way out. To laugh and smile means there is a ray of hope. If there is a ray of hope, one will undertake the process of bringing

about a change. The extraordinary capacity to change lies within all of us and is the beginning of redemption. This is Rabbi Reisman’s potent message to his enraptured fans. This is the timeless message of the *Navi* to Am Yisrael as the Jewish people struggle through the long night of *galut*.

After what seemed an eternity, I managed to rise from the couch. I grab the calendar on my desk and leaf through it. Only seventeen weeks to go.... **IA**