

An Interview With The “Kiddush Hashem Guy”

A couple of weeks ago, while catching up on the news, I noticed a picture with a caption: *“Kiddush Hashem. Jewish man riding the subway allows a homeless man to sleep on his shoulder.”*

The image, captured by a fellow Jewish rider, depicts a smiling young man, obviously observant, who is nonchalantly sitting on the Q train, while a guy is snoozing on his shoulder, falling into his lap as the train rolled along.

My first impression was to smile. Reading a positive review about *Klal Yisroel* is always refreshing.

Then I took another look and smiled again.

There was no doubt about it. It was Isaac Shrem, the

young man I’d met at a convention last year, who’d impressed me with his refinement and sincerity. Isaac, a popular producer of documentaries who’d won several awards for his work, didn’t speak much about his accomplishments. I had to Google him to discover them on my own. What he did share at the table was his powerful story of return.

As Isaac explained when I tracked him down after seeing his picture in the news, the story happened quite “by accident,” though of course there is no such thing.

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I was on the subway a couple of weeks ago, coming home



ticularly hard day.

As I was boarding the train, I noticed a skinny black man, wearing cool sunglasses, his hair in dreadlocks, tapping his way onto the train with a long white stick. He was obviously blind. We stepped out of the way to give him space and smiled at each other, admiring his pluck and grit.

As soon as the train started moving, he sat down near an oversized man with a red shirt, who looked a little “off,” missing a bunch of teeth, with torn shoes. There was a seat between them and no one wanted to take it, so I sat down there. I figured, “What’s the worst that can happen? It’s not dangerous.”

As soon as the train gathered speed and jerked to one side, the red-shirted guy closed his eyes and collapsed onto my left shoulder, beginning to snore as if it was the middle of the night. To be honest, it was a very funny sight. People were laughing, taking pictures, giving me the look that said, “*I told ya so. You shouldn’t have sat down next to him.*” But it didn’t bother me. I took out my smartphone and began to learn a bit. Soon he started weighing me down, so I shifted up a bit, careful not to wake him. I let him snooze on my shoulder until he woke up, straightened out, and then fell asleep on me again. He woke up before my stop and smiled at me. I put my hand on his shoulder and asked if he needed any help. “Nah, man, I’m just exhausted,” he said, and we pounded our fists in farewell as I got off.

Strangely enough, the blind commuter got off at my stop on Avenue J and I offered to lend him a hand, but he insisted on going up the stairs himself. I put the matter out of my mind and went home to relax after my long day at work.

Next thing I knew, my picture was in the news as “the Jewish guy who let someone sleep on his shoulder.” I didn’t see what the big deal was, but hey, it was cool to have my picture in the paper. I’m not much of a publicity guy; my business is making documentaries of other people’s lives, not my own.

I grew up in Deal, New Jersey, part of the beautiful Syrian community. We’re a close-knit bunch, and we do things for each other all the time. My father taught me to be kind to homeless people. He would find poor people, and he and my mother would invite them to our home for *Shabbat* meals.

When I was a small child, my father would walk me around New York City, put dollar bills in my hands and tell me, “Go give it to that guy over there.” My father, who lives abroad, is a very sweet and sensitive soul. I owe a lot to him and my mother, who also would regularly feed the homeless, sending them turkey dinners with all the trimmings. That being said, it just felt natural to help the guy. Also, I am very much a go-with-the-flow kind of person, and if G-d said this guy is going to fall asleep and need

from my work with a media production company on 28th Street. We have a beautiful place overlooking the Hudson, near the boardwalk. I work in the post-production department of the studio and develop documentaries for private clients on the side.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, but not just any Wednesday afternoon. It was November 1st, the day after the horrible terrorist attack on October 31st, near the World Trade Center, when terrorist Sayfullo Saipov, driving a rented pickup truck, careened down a bike path for a mile, knocking down passersby, killing nine and injuring dozens. I had actually been riding that same path just days earlier.

The city was on edge, with people looking over their shoulders. We New Yorkers are tough, but this was a par-

my shoulder to lean on, then I guess that's what Hashem wanted to happen, so how could I do anything but laugh and smile at that?

My father was raised in Oregon and my mother grew up mostly in Brooklyn. My father is a talented artist. He owned an art gallery, which my mother helped manage. They did picture-framing together. My mother still has her own freelance business, Picture This Custom Framing.

Dad's specialty is animated buildings, clever works of art that are constructed so that the building is literally smiling at you, or accordion-pleated paintings that show different scenes, depending on which perspective you are looking at them from. He dubbed them "Shremagraphs."

My father is a true artist, a man with a deep, sensitive soul who is passionate about helping people and about his work. After my parents divorced when I was ten years old, my father moved to Paris and traveled around Europe selling his artwork. My sister and I stayed with my mother, who is also a very refined, giving person, though more of a businesswoman. My sister is a photographer who made *aliyah* several years ago.

I grew up in a traditional home, where we were proud to be Jewish and celebrated some of the holidays. We kept mostly kosher at home, with only OU products, but were more lenient outside the home, though we never ate any pork or mixed milk and meat. In fact, I would get physically sick during lunchtime in the public elementary school cafeteria when they served bacon, and my teacher would have to sit me at a separate table.

When I was twelve, my mother remarried, and I moved with her to Manhattan, attending Manhattan Beach Day School. I loved the filmmaking classes, where I felt I found my niche. I decided that I wanted to become a film producer. I went to college and got a degree in documentary filmmaking, after which I spent some time in Israel, producing documentaries of people's personal stories. At that point, I was still not interested in religion.

One of the stories I produced, "Have a Heart," was about a man who received a transplanted heart and formed a relationship with his donor's mother, bringing her comfort after the tragic passing of her son.

Then, back in 2010, a strange thing happened. One cool evening, I was walking with a friend near Coney Island Avenue and we decided to stop at a swami booth. I knew that Jews don't go to fortune tellers, and that's why I went! I was specifically trying to get rid of any connection and Jewish guilt I had regarding my lukewarm acceptance of Judaism.

At the time, I felt like I was living a lie. I didn't believe in the Torah, but I kept kosher and many holidays and traditions. But I didn't understand the reason I was keeping them. Instead, I started purposely trying to break *halacha*.

I HAD THE TRUTH IN MY SOUL ALL ALONG.

Before the swami shop, I went to a sushi place and, for the first time ever, ordered an eel sushi roll. Yet, my *neshomah* recoiled. When it arrived, I was so disgusted, I couldn't even touch it.

I went inside the fortune-telling booth, and the woman, dressed in some ancient costume, looked at her crystal ball. She then stared into my eyes and said, "You're going to go on an exotic trip very soon."

I laughed at her prediction, because although I love adventure, I was saving every dollar. I wasn't the type to go on an expensive trip, certainly not to an exotic location. When I protested that I couldn't afford it, the psychic assured me that I'd be getting paid very soon.

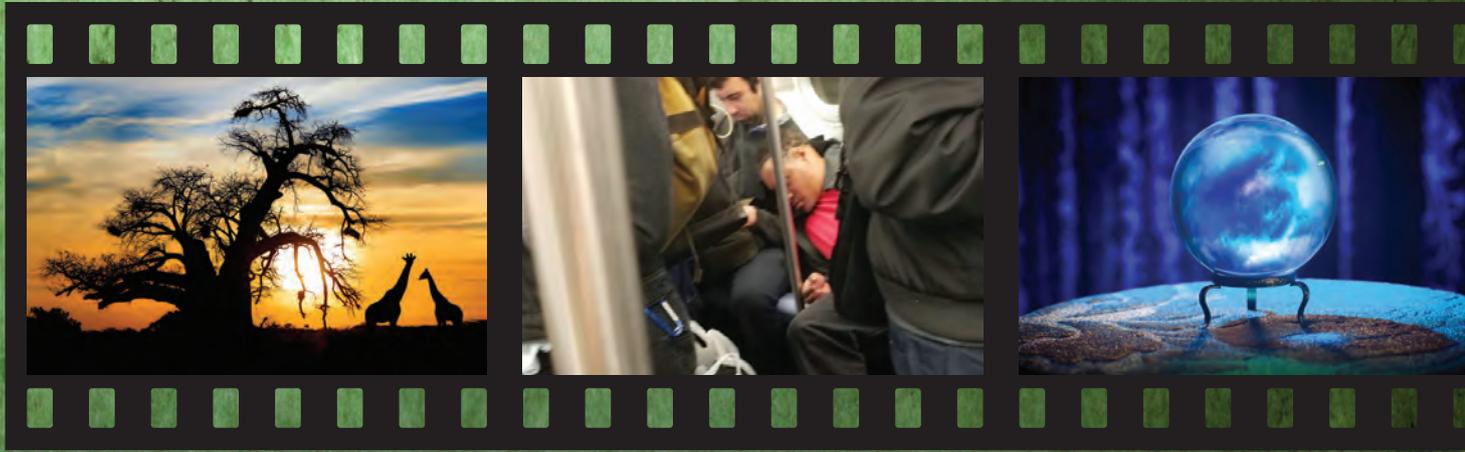
Well, the joke was on me. That week, I was invited to join a heavily subsidized twelve-day trip to South Africa, run by Aish HaTorah. The price was right: only eight hundred dollars, including airfare. I'd just gotten paid for a job I did a while ago and had exactly enough money for the trip, so I didn't think twice.

What a trip! I gave the rabbis a very hard time, and fought them tooth and nail. When they gave a lecture about how the Torah is real, my hand was always up, challenging them, refusing to accept what they said.

The trip was full of highlights, including safari excursions, great white shark diving, ATV riding, and sandboarding.

After the first week had gone by, I was still very hostile to the rabbis, unwilling to accept the truth. During the trip, I went to another psychic, just for the kicks. This one was a real weirdo, from his name, Babylon Don, to his witch's costume. He told me some generic things that could fit anyone, such as, "You're going to be a great dad one day."

But when he said, with no knowledge of who I was,



“You are going to be a successful documentary filmmaker,” I was blown away. How did he guess my career so exactly, and how did he know I was doing so well?

When I asked him how he knew what he was doing, he said, with a straight face, “Well, my friend is a witch.”

He showed me his pictures, customs, dark arts, and conjuring spirits, all from the *koach hatumah*.

Strangely enough, my visit to the psychic opened my mind enough to think, “Maybe there really is something out there we don’t understand.”

The next day, the rabbis gave one of their famous discovery classes on *Megillas Esther* and how the Nuremberg Trials were predicted through the hanging of Haman’s ten sons. My jaw dropped. This was something tangible, something I knew couldn’t be invented.

Talk about a paradigm shift. I always thought that the rabbis were sincere in what they believed, but were just misguided.

After seeing that presentation, everything changed. I kept being reminded, time and again, how the Torah was beyond the physical realm, beyond space and time. I knew that the truth was with the Torah and our teachers, not with some voodoo master sitting in a dark tent spinning his creepy magic.

I came home from the trip and returned to my routine, yet something had changed. I wasn’t just a documentary filmmaker who happened to be Jewish. I was a Jewish boy who was also a documentary filmmaker. That has made all the difference.

Ultimately, the rabbit hole kept getting deeper and deeper. I saw more and more evidence that the Torah was true, and that people living a balanced Torah life in the world had the potential of raising a wonderful, kind, incredible family. But how could I reconcile my life with

what I now knew to be true?

Then I read a book called the *Life of Pi* about a young man who was stranded, all alone, after a disaster at sea, and searched for meaning to give him comfort in a world that had deserted him. The moral of the story was that even if something wasn’t true, it was still better to believe than to have no faith at all. This idea is the opposite of *emunah*, which is rooted in strong knowledge instead of empty promises that don’t hold up to examination.

The ideas in the book pointed me to what had been staring at my face the entire time.

Emunah was the first step, the understanding that Hashem runs the world and cares about me as an individual. It initially felt like a scam, because it implied blind obedience, believing in things despite all evidence to the contrary. But then I realized that I was so determined not to believe that I was closing my eyes to the truth right in front of me.

That led to an incredible love for Hashem, His Torah and *mitzvos*, custom-made for my benefit. At first, it came from the evidence I’d seen, but eventually it morphed into an appreciation of the Torah’s vastness and ability to permeate my mind and soul.

Imagine hoping and yearning that something is real and true, because you want it so much, and then discovering one day that it is, and that it’s been yours all along. That’s what happened to me on my journey.

The stops at the swami booth and the psychic were merely red herrings, but they made me realize that I had the truth in my soul all along. It was time to put what my *neshomah* was telling me into practice, to live my life so that my parents, mentors and teachers should be proud of me, and I should be proud of myself. I know my Creator is proud of me, too.