


"I'M REUVEN," HE SAID TO HIS NEW TEACHER.
HE REMEMBERED NOT TO SHAKE HANDS TOO HARD.

AS HE TURNED AWAY,
REUVEN TRIPPED ON HIS DANGLING SHOELACE.
A FEW OF THE BOYS SNICKERED.



Reuven wishes everything could stay the same, but there are a lot of changes in his life right now. His best friend, David, has moved away, and Reuven needs to get used to his new fourth-grade teacher. But the most upsetting change is the arrival of a new boy, Yehuda Taprik. Reuven hopes Yehuda will be a replacement for David, and that they'll discover they're related. But events don't go according to his plans. It will take Zaidy's fascinating story about the two-way gift to help Reuven understand his confusing feelings.



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Mister Lister

AND THE TWO-WAY GIFT



JUDITH PRANSKY

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MENUCHA CLASSROOM SOLUTIONS

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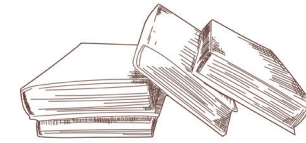
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For my parents,

**Michel (Michael) and Malka Breindel
(Mildred Beatrice), z”l**

With very much love and admiration for
who they were and all they did; and with
great appreciation for the many stories
they shared about their early lives and
our family history





Chapter 1

FIRST DAY

Reuven woke up when the sun crept around his bedroom curtains. But he didn't bounce out of bed as usual. His alarm jangled a few minutes later, but he still didn't move.

Why am I so tired? he wondered. Then he remembered. He'd had so much trouble falling asleep. He had tossed and turned, worrying about the first day of school.

I'm starting fourth grade today, he thought. And he felt sick inside his stomach.

A new Hebrew teacher would say, “Good morning,” to the class. It wouldn’t be Rabbi Goodman, his favorite teacher from third grade.

A different boy would sit beside him. It wouldn’t be his best friend, David, who had moved away unexpectedly during the summer.

His older friend, Ezra, wouldn’t be around either. Ezra had chosen Reuven to be his Brother in the special *Achim* program last year. But Ezra had graduated from eighth grade in June. He would be in high school this year.

Reuven hated when anything changed, even small things. And these things were so special to him.

At least Mr. Bookman will still be in the library after school, Reuven thought with relief. He could spend time with the librarian on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That was when his mother worked late in the pharmacy, and Reuven waited for her in the after-school program in the library.

Reuven loved talking to the white-haired librarian and helping him return books to their shelves. But who would he hang out with during recess and lunch? With David not in school anymore, there was only his friend Tzvi, whom he really wanted to play chess with. But that could only be when Tzvi wasn’t part of the Recess Races with other boys.

Reuven knew he could never run fast enough to be part of that group.

“Hey, Sleepyhead,” Reuven’s mother called from the doorway. “Time to get up. You don’t want to be late on the first day! Shira’s already in the kitchen having breakfast. She’s almost ready to leave.”

Reuven dragged himself out of bed. He washed and dressed in slow motion. Then he slung his new schoolbag over his shoulder and started to walk out of his bedroom.

But he turned back and put down his schoolbag on his desk chair. He unzipped it and rummaged through his shiny new notebooks, looking for his special list. He had started the list with Rabbi Goodman and continued it with Mr. Bookman. It was on a sheet of paper inside a plastic page protector to keep it safe.

Reuven laid the page on his desk and read the heading: *Reuven’s List of Things That Went Right.* He read it all the way through, like Rabbi Goodman had suggested. Reuven hoped it would make him feel better this morning, like it was supposed to.

But the top of the list said: *I came to Rabbi Goodman’s class for third grade.*

Another line said: *I started a Chess Club with David.*

And a third said: *Ezra became my Big Brother.*

Reuven's stomach felt worse than ever. He shook his head. "This isn't working," he muttered. He slid the list back into his schoolbag and left the room.



Half an hour later, Reuven and his big sister, Shira, were riding in their mother's blue van. They inched along the carpool line at Torah Day School.

"I can't believe I'm starting sixth grade!" Shira exclaimed, staring out the car window.

The crowd outside is like last year, Reuven thought. Teachers held up signs with numbers, and students gathered around them. "I can see Rabbi Goodman," he mumbled. The tall young teacher was holding up a sign with the number three for third grade.

Ima looked at Reuven in the rearview mirror. "You should go say hello to him," she suggested. "I'm sure he would like that."

Reuven just shrugged. When the teacher in charge of carpool opened their car door, Reuven leaned over to kiss his mother goodbye. Then he followed Shira onto the sidewalk. He watched as his sister hurried toward the girls' building and was surrounded by her friends. But he stood still.

"Do you know where to go?" the teacher asked him kindly.

Reuven nodded but still didn't move. Then he

remembered what his mother always told him to do when he was having trouble: Make a list.

Reuven loved lists. They were clear and orderly. They helped him figure out what to do when he wasn't sure. That's why his mother had nicknamed him Mister Lister.

Okay, Reuven said to himself.

1. Take a deep breath.
2. Find the teacher with the number four.
3. Walk over there and say hello.

"I'm Reuven," he said when he found his new teacher.

"Well, hello!" the teacher replied. "I'm Rabbi Abrams." He held out his hand, and Reuven shook it. Just in time, Reuven reminded himself not to squeeze too hard, like he used to. That was one of the things on the list in his schoolbag. He had written that he had learned how to shake hands and hug people without hurting them.

Reuven had never seen this teacher before. He was new to the school. He was shorter and rounder and older than Rabbi Goodman. Reuven stood near him awkwardly. He wasn't sure what to say or do next.

He turned to walk away, but as he did, he stepped on his dangling shoelace that had come undone, as

usual. He tripped, and his schoolbag slid off his shoulder. He almost landed on top of it on the ground. He caught himself, but not before a few boys snickered.

Reuven's face turned red, but just then, Rabbi Abrams dropped the pen and clipboard he was holding. Reuven hurried to pick them up for him. He saw that the clipboard had a list of the names of all the boys in the class. Rabbi Abrams had been checking them off as the boys arrived.

"Thank you. Thank you," Rabbi Abrams said in a rush. He gave Reuven a crooked smile. "I'm not having the best morning either," he said in a low voice.

Reuven didn't know what to answer. He stooped down to tie his shoe, then looked around to find his classmates. Most of the twenty boys from last year were there already. But not David, of course, and Tzvi hadn't arrived yet. The boys were standing in small groups, laughing and talking. A few waved to Reuven, but no one invited him to join them. And Reuven didn't feel comfortable just walking over to them.

Then Reuven saw a boy standing a little apart from the others. He reminded Reuven of how he must have looked last year, when he was new to the school in third grade. The boy kept looking around at the other fourth graders, then down at the ground.

Reuven thought about going over to say hello, but

he was too shy. And just then Tzvi arrived. He was immediately surrounded by classmates, like Shira had been. He gave Reuven a wave and a big smile. But Reuven and the new boy never made it into the groups.

At last, Rabbi Abrams led them all to their classroom.



They were up on the third floor this year. The walls had decorations about different subjects. One wall was covered with maps. Another was full of poetry and writing ideas. The third had Rosh Hashanah and Sukkos pictures. And the fourth had posters about American history.

The desks were in four rows, and boys began grabbing seats near their friends. They were calling loudly to each other and laughing. Reuven and the new boy stood uncertainly, looking for empty seats. If David had been there, Reuven would have sat down next to him. He looked for Tzvi, but the seats near him were already taken.

Rabbi Abrams walked to the teacher's desk. He stood studying his clipboard with the list of all the boys in the class. He looked up but didn't say anything. He just stood quietly until the room slowly grew silent around him. He still didn't say anything,

until the silence began to feel awkward.

Finally, he spoke in a very low voice. He could only be heard if every boy stayed silent. “Good morning, boys. When I give the signal, I want all of you to stand and pick up your things. Then line up against the wall near the door, alphabetically, by last name. If you need to ask someone’s name, speak in a voice no louder than mine.”

The boys stared at their new teacher with wide eyes. When he pointed toward the wall, they began moving there so quietly they seemed to be walking on tiptoes. Except for the new boy, they all knew each other’s last names already. So the only questions were for him. What was his last name? Where should he stand in the line?

Within a few minutes, everyone in the class knew that the new boy’s last name was Taprik. The same last name as Reuven! And his first name was Yehuda, which meant he should stand right after Reuven. Suddenly, Reuven and Yehuda were the center of attention. There was one whispered question after another.

“Did you know you two have the same last name?”

“Are you related?”

“Did you ever meet each other before?”

“Do your parents know about this?”

“Did you set this up?”

Reuven and Yehuda shrugged their shoulders. They looked at each other and grinned. And when Reuven glanced at Rabbi Abrams, he saw that the teacher was smiling, too. But after a few minutes, all the boys realized Rabbi Abrams was standing silently at his desk again, staring at them. He wasn’t smiling anymore. The whispering stopped.

“Now take your seats in alphabetical order,” Rabbi Abrams said. “Fill up one row at a time. Then take out a pencil and paper for your first assignment.”



At supper that night, Abba asked Shira and Reuven, “How was the first day of school?”

“Lots of fun!” Shira told her father. “I still can’t believe I’m in sixth grade. We have different teachers for almost every subject. And we get a lot more freedom in the halls and at lunch.”

“You’re growing up,” Abba said with a smile.

Ima nodded. “Almost time to start thinking about your bas mitzvah.”

Abba turned to Reuven. “What about you?” he asked. “How’s fourth grade?”

Reuven shrugged. He tried to talk, but his mouth was stuffed with his hot dog and bun.

“Take your time,” Abba said with a laugh. “Finish what’s in your mouth, or you’ll choke.”

Reuven stared at a glob of mustard he had dripped on the table. He worked on chewing his mouthful of food. Finally, he said, "There's a new Hebrew teacher, Rabbi Abrams. He's kind of strict. Everyone's a little afraid of him."

"Really? Why?" Ima asked.

Reuven thought about it. It was hard to explain. "I don't know," he said. "He stares at us until we quiet down. And he talks really quietly. We have to listen carefully if we want to hear him. And he gives a lot of instructions. We have to do just what he says. He even gave us an assignment on the first day!"

Everyone was quiet for a few moments. Then Abba said in a fake horrified voice, "That sounds terrible!"

Shira burst out laughing. "Come on, Reuven!" she exclaimed. "It sounds like this new rebbe knows exactly how to handle fourth-grade boys!"

"But...but..." Reuven tried to explain it again. "But he stares. He never smiles."

"Never?" Ima asked. "He didn't smile at all today?"

Reuven thought about it. He pictured Rabbi Abrams throughout the morning. "Well, actually... he did smile right at the beginning. When I first met him. He dropped some things, and I picked them up, and he smiled and told me he was having a bad morning."

"He told you that?" Abba asked.

Reuven nodded. "It was right after I tripped and almost fell. And some boys started to laugh. And then Rabbi Abrams dropped his clipboard and pen, and said he was also having a bad morning."

"Ahh," Ima said softly.

"I just remembered, there was another time, too," Reuven said. "In the classroom. He told us to line up alphabetically by last name. And there's a new boy in our class. His name's Yehuda. But guess what? His last name's Taprik, the same as ours! And when the rest of the boys found that out, they started asking us all kinds of questions. They wouldn't stop. Me and Yehuda started to laugh. And I saw that Rabbi Abrams was smiling – but only for a second."

"Taprik? Really?" Ima asked. "What did the boys want to know?"

"All kinds of stuff," Reuven said. "Like did we know each other, and are we cousins—"

"Well, are we?" Shira asked her parents. "That would be so super cool if we found out we have relatives we never knew about!"

"We'll have to look into it," Abba said. "We'll find out who these people are, and we'll see if they're connected to our family in some way."

"That's part of my assignment!" Reuven exclaimed, and everyone looked at him. "The assignment that Rabbi Abrams gave us today. We have to find out

about our families and our names. He drew what he called a 'family tree' on the board, and he wrote a list with a bunch of questions we have to try to answer, one at a time. He said me and Yehuda have a good chance of being related because Taprik is a pretty unusual name."

"Well..." Abba said. He had a doubtful expression on his face. "Don't get your hopes up. It's a long shot, but who knows?"

"What does 'a long shot' mean?" Reuven asked.

"It means it doesn't have a good chance of happening. Like if you're shooting an arrow at something that's a long distance away, it doesn't have a good chance of hitting the target."