

Uri Orbach

Donkeys
on the Roof
& Other Stories

Sages for the Ages: Book I

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There's No Place Like Home

The teacher Rabbi Yose was known for his patience. He would never leave his classroom until every last student understood the lesson. Anyone with a child who was having trouble with his studies would send him to Rabbi Yose. Boys came from all over the country to learn with him. From *all* over.

Out of all the students in his class, out of all the struggling, daydreaming, challenging students, was a boy who baffled Rabbi Yose more than any boy he had ever attempted to teach. Not a single fact seemed to penetrate his mind. He was a daydreamer who couldn't concentrate for two seconds straight, and didn't seem to understand a thing. All his teachers had already thrown their hands up in despair. He had spent more hours staring out the window than he had spent listening to his teachers. His school deemed him the most thick-minded student they had ever encountered. His head was like a fact-repelling magnet.

But Rabbi Yose had endless patience and love for all of his students. He saw that this student was having trouble in class. Rabbi



Yose could not understand how he could pour his heart into teaching him and yet nothing, but nothing would stick.

He explained a passage in the Torah once and the student didn't get it.

Twice, thrice, he explained. Nothing.

Four, five, six times. Nada.

But Rabbi Yose had patience. He didn't shout. Instead, he asked gently, "Why don't you understand? Why aren't you listening? Why aren't you concentrating?"

For the first time, the student looked at Rabbi Yose directly in the eye, and answered, "I'm homesick."

Rabbi Yose looked at the student, and asked, "Where are you from?"

"From Great Snoring," the boy replied.

Great Snoring, Great Snoring...it took Rabbi Yose several minutes to recall where that was. Then he realized that it had taken him so long to remember because it was the biggest dump-of-a-town in the country, nowhere in the middle of nowhere, a no-man's-land in Nowheresville. Great Snoring is so hot that even the camels won't stray from the air-conditioning. Great Snoring is so dusty that it's marked on the map by a little mound of sand. In Great Snoring, people talk with their mouths closed so they won't swallow any flies. In Great Snoring, the flies fly with open mouths so they can swallow the people. Okay, maybe we're exaggerating, just a bit.



Rabbi Yose had to stop himself before he said in a disgusted tone, "You live *there*?" After all, people in Great Snoring were sick of hearing jokes and rude comments about their hometown. He said carefully, "Well, what's special about where you live?"

With shining, eager eyes, the student gushed, "Great Snoring is the most wonderful place in the world! You can cook eggs on the sidewalk! (If you clean it first from all the dust.) You never need central heating! And when a baby is born, they smear his head with mashed red figs!"

"Why do they do that?" asked Rabbi Yose, trying not to laugh.

"So the mosquitoes won't eat him alive!" answered the student. "There are lots of mosquitoes because of the neighborhood swamp, but red figs keep them away. Works like a charm."

"Ah-ha," said Rabbi Yose, puzzled, "and you... miss it?"

"Well, I do," answered the student sadly, "because mosquitoes buzzing around me aren't nearly as bad as people buzzing around me, making fun of me. I miss the warm, clay house where my family lives; the stone home that I'm staying in is so unfriendly and cold. I love the heat, the sun, and the dust more than the wealth and the greenery around here. That's my home, where I grew up, where I played with my friends, where people understand me. Back home, Great Snoring is a place to live, not a place to make fun of."

That was the first time that Rabbi Yose had heard the student say more than two words in a row. He now understood that the student was just homesick, lonely and misunderstood. It's hard to concentrate when you're so homesick. Even if the place you're homesick for is a place with a funny name like Great Snoring. Though, come to think of it, plenty of names are funny. Imagine if you lived in Sticky End, Upper Creek, or Inner Pickle. And have you ever been to Noah Vale?

He stroked his pupil's head gently and murmured to himself, "Blessed is He who makes a place beloved to its inhabitants. God did a great kindness by making people love the place they grew up in. Even if there are better places than someone's hometown, everyone loves his home, his neighborhood, and his native city. And when you are far from home, it's hard to concentrate on your studies."

And from that day, Rabbi Yose knew how to deal with his student from Great Snoring, how to make him happy and eager to learn. They often talked about that strange village where new babies got their heads smeared with mashed figs. The student told Rabbi Yose more stories – funny, weird, but mostly special – about Great Snoring, the hole in the middle of nowhere. Telling the stories helped the student get over his homesickness, and at last he made leaps and bounds in his Torah studies. And every time the student would begin to stare out the window, Rabbi Yose would fondly pinch his cheek and ask, "So, how are the mosquitoes doing back in Great Snoring?"

Based on Midrash, Bereshit Raba 34



