

# The Mensch from Malden Mills

Category: Shemos, Shemos

*How did Moses arrive at Mount Sinai?*

## The Great Fire

On December 11, 1995, at 8 in the evening, a huge fire broke out at the Malden Mills textile factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which was the largest factory in the United States at the time.

The factory's owner, Mr. Aaron Feuerstein, was celebrating his seventieth birthday that evening with family and friends. In the middle of the party, one of his managers approached him with the news, "Mr. Feuerstein, the factory is on fire." A huge boiler had burst and caused the conflagration. The factory, which was purchased by Feuerstein's grandfather in 1956, was completely burned down. This was a fire that Boston had not seen in a hundred years.

By morning, it was clear to everyone that the three thousand workers at the factory — the factory that supported the entire local economy — were unemployed.

Everyone expected that he would take the insurance money, between 300 million and 500 million dollars, and retire, or move the factory to the south of the United States or maybe even to the Far East, where labor was far cheaper. This was a trend in those days.

But Feuerstein thought differently. He called a press conference and announced that he was going to rebuild the factory in the same location, and he also announced that he would pay the workers their full salaries over the next thirty days.

When a month passed, he again called a meeting and announced that everyone would receive their salaries again. He continued doing so until the factory was rebuilt, costing him 25 million dollars.

Feurstein immediately became world-famous. He was invited by President Bill

Clinton to the State of the Union address, where the President praised him in front of the entire nation. In the media, he was nicknamed, “the Mensch from Malden Mills.”

Five years later, in an interview on “60 Minutes,” Mr. Feuerstein was asked whether his decision was (morally right but) financially unwise — would it not have made more financial sense to take the three hundred million dollars and retire?

Feurstein looked at the interviewer and asked, “What would I do with it? Eat more? Buy another suit? Retire and die? That never crossed my mind.”

He had two goals; to rebuild the family business that was so dear to him and second, to help the loyal employees who needed a livelihood. In the course of the interview, he was asked if he was a religious person and if it had an effect on his decision. “Definitely,” he answered, “My father taught me that *bimakom she’ein ish*, in places where moral behavior is lacking, *hishtadel lihyos ish*, strive to be a moral person.” You be the moral compass.

In 2021, shortly before his passing at the age of 95, he was interviewed again about the factory. He was asked if he thought that, in retrospect, had he not wasted the twenty-five million dollars, he would have been able to save the factory — which ultimately went bankrupt.

“I don’t regret it even for a moment,” he replied. “My father taught me that one could make a kiddush Hashem or chilul Hashem.” He wanted to make a kiddush Hashem. In the factory’s downfall, he blamed himself for not making the correct business decisions.

## **The Young Lamb**

This week, we begin to read Exodus, the second book of the Torah, which describes the redemption of the Jewish people from their exile in Egypt. The story begins in this week’s Torah portion when G-d reveals himself to Moses from within the burning bush, and appoints him to be the Redeemer of the Jewish people.

Before describing the encounter at the burning bush, the Torah says that “Moses

was shepherding the flock of Jethro... and he led the sheep into the desert..." (3:1).

Why is it necessary to mention that he was a shepherd? What is the significance of his occupation?

The Midrash says that it was very important. "G-d tested Moses through sheep."

The Midrash continues: "... Our teachers have said: Once, while Moses was tending Jethro's sheep, one of the sheep ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said, 'I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted!' He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. G-d said, 'Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love - by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel'" (Shemos Rabbah 2:2).

The Torah tells us that Moses was a shepherd not to tell us how he made a living, but to show us how he demonstrated that he was worthy of being a Jewish leader.

## **The Path To Mount Sinai**

In a talk, the Rebbe noted something very interesting: Commentators say that the reason Moses arrived at Mount Sinai and the burning bush was because he chased after the wandering lamb — that's how he actually ended up at Mount Sinai to receive G-d's revelation.

The Rebbe says (24 Teves 5723, Toras Menachem vol. 36 pg. 29) that "this teaches us how to reach the burning bush: specifically by being devoted to the sheep, by chasing after them and taking care of them. That's how you reach the Divine."

The way to Mount Sinai, the Rebbe explains, is through the path of quenching the thirst of a lamb. In other words, spiritual elevation is achieved specifically through helping other Jews; only then can one reach the revelation of G-d on Mount Sinai.

On that note, the Rebbe related the following story about the Tzemach Tzedek:

The Tzemach Tzedek was accustomed to having visions of his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, where he would pose questions from his Torah learning and receive his answers.

On one occasion, he had a number of questions which he could not resolve, and he was hoping to have a vision of his grandfather, but for whatever reason, the Alter Rebbe would not appear to him. This distressed him terribly.

Early one morning, he headed out of his home for the morning service at the synagogue of his father-in-law, the Mittlerer Rebbe. As he passed the marketplace, he met Mordechai Eliyahu the butcher, a simple and G-d-fearing man. It was the market day, and the butcher approached the Tzemach Tzedek for a loan of five rubles so that he could purchase a calf and sell the meat.

“After the morning prayers,” the Tzemach Tzedek said, “I will be happy to lend you the money.”

As he entered the synagogue, a thought occurred to him: if he’ll wait until after the morning prayers, the butcher will no doubt lose significant opportunities to proceed with that day’s work. He decided not to delay the loan. He returned home, retrieved the sum of money, and headed out to the marketplace to find the butcher. It was a crowded day at the market, but after a significant search he managed to locate him and hand him the money.

Finally, he returned to the synagogue to pray. He wrapped himself in his tallis, and he suddenly had a vision of his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe. The Alter Rebbe’s face was shining. “When someone loans money to another Jew wholeheartedly, and seeks to do him kindness, all the heavenly gates are open to him.”

The path to spiritual elevation is doing kindness to another. A person can study Torah and pray, but that’s not enough. What made Moses into Moses was the fact that he chased after a single lamb in the desert. That is what brought him to Mount Sinai.

My friends, the way to G-d passes through the path of doing a spiritual or physical favor for another person. Lend money, teach him how to do a mitzvah, invite him for a Shabbat dinner, and most importantly, do it Moses’ way: don’t wait for him to reach out to you — you run after him!