



LIVING — THE — CHABURAH

SELF-DEVELOPMENT EXPERT RABBI ARYEH NIVIN HAS BEEN TEACHING EAGER STUDENTS STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH LIFE'S DIFFICULTIES FOR YEARS. THEN HE FACED A CRISIS THAT PUT ALL THOSE STRATEGIES TO THE ULTIMATE TEST

BY *Shraga Simmons*
PHOTOS *Shraga Simmons, personal archives*

It

was the fall of 2013 and Rabbi Aryeh Nivin was lying in intensive care, his body ravaged by a killer bacteria. His sickness had begun with a difficult two-week flu, followed by severe heart pains. Before he knew it, Reb Aryeh's legs had filled with 20 kilos of water.

"I woke up one morning and felt like my body was literally being attacked," says Rabbi Nivin, relaxing in his spacious Torah

library on a recent winter's day in Ashdod. "My system began shutting down and my kidneys stopped functioning. I was hospitalized and they couldn't pinpoint the problem. They ran a bunch of tests, and finally discovered a bacteria that could not be treated with antibiotics. Apparently, the flu I'd contracted — in combination with medication — had weakened my immune system and enabled the bacteria to take hold."

The bacteria had completely overwhelmed Reb Aryeh, who eventually suffered from multiple organ failure — heart, lungs, kidneys. He was hooked up to dozens of wires, tubes, and machines to monitor his system and keep him alive. In addition, except for movement in his arms and toes, he was paralyzed from the neck down.

"That's when the doctors turned to my wife and said, 'We're sorry. There is nothing more we can do.'"

Hashem was sending the ultimate test of *emunah* — a "Rabi Akiva moment" facing the angel of death.

Fortunately for Reb Aryeh, known in the *frum* community for decades of teaching self-development *chaburahs*, he had a safety net consisting of Torah tools for vitality, transcendence, *emunah*, and joy.

Now those ideas were being put to the test. Principles of inspired living he had gleaned from the work of the Ramchal, Arizal, and the *baalei mussar* all came crashing to the fore, playing out in real time. Theory was now reality.

"Early in this ordeal, my wife told me that the only way to get through this is to *mafkir* everything to Hashem. The Torah tells us to love Hashem *'bechol nafshecha'*, with your entire life. So I did a serious *cheshbon hanefesh* and in effect went through an emotional process of *aveilus* — thinking about



After a life-threatening challenge, Reb Aryeh is leading his *chaburah* groups with a new fire. "I don't see with the same eyes anymore"

everything I hold dear in life and letting it go."

As I sit with a healthy Reb Aryeh, his calm description of these events spanning six months attests to the integrity of his *emunah*. Having "talked the talk" for so long, Reb Aryeh was now called upon to "walk the walk."

"Hashem had taken away my *parnassah*, taken away my mobility, taken away my organ function. Plus, I was on medication that made it difficult to even think. My entire morning revolved around just sitting in a chair. There was nothing left of me."

Reb Aryeh shares how one familiar *vort* took on new meaning:

"After every davening we say 'Aleinu,' which speaks about *v'yadata hayom*, the ideas we know in our head. But then we say, *v'hasheivosa el levavecha*, put them on your heart. I felt like the Torah ideas in my head were now being laser-etched onto my heart."

Amidst this harrowing medical experience, Reb Aryeh had responsibility for his wife and 14 children — one who was engaged to be married. The future of the Nivin clan was imperiled.



Tefillah would prove the key. Fortunately for Reb Aryeh, as a Pittsburgher chassid, he had access to powerful resources.

“The Pittsburgher Rebbe is an extremely loving man. He sort of adopted our family, which is why we moved to Ashdod. Through my illness the Rebbe would frequently call and daven for me. I had given up any hope of recovery, but he would tell me not to worry, that everything will be okay.

“One day the Rebbe came to visit me in the hospital. I was slipping closer to death. He took my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, ‘I promise you that you shall live. I promise you. And in three months, you will be dancing at your daughter’s wedding.’”

The Rebbe’s words shocked Reb Aryeh.

“It was so far from reality to think I’d ever walk again, much less be alive in three months.”

The breakthrough came just a few days later, at the Rebbe’s Friday night *tish*.

“The Rebbe took an orange in his hand, and began davening with great intensity. He then called over my teenage son, handed him the orange, and told him to bring it to the hospital immediately after Shabbos.”

Reb Aryeh ate the orange, but — given his intensely critical condition — didn’t think much of it.

“Monday morning, I opened my eyes to see the ICU nurse literally dancing in front of me. ‘We killed him!’ she cried. ‘It’s a miracle! We killed him!’ I didn’t know what she was talking about. I thought maybe they’d stopped a terrorist. ‘The bacterial!’ she said. ‘It’s completely gone! Eradicated from your system! It’s a miracle!’”

Reb Aryeh stops, closes his eyes, and relives the pleasure of that moment.

“Somehow the Rebbe had used all his powers — and the powers of his holy father and grandfather — to literally pull me out of Gehinnom.”

Head to Heart Incredibly, there is yet another chapter to Reb Aryeh’s near-death experience. Though the killer bacteria had miraculously disappeared after two months in the hospital, he was still 90 percent paralyzed from the neck down. As the weeks wore on, a care center was set up in his home and Reb Aryeh was discharged from the hospital.

“One night, I had a dream. A voice told me, *It’s time to get up and walk*. The idea was so ridiculous that I actually laughed in my dream. The laughter woke me up. So here I am, at 3 a.m., lying paralyzed. Again I hear the same voice, *Get up. Give it a try*.



After growing up in staid suburbia, Aryeh Nivin became hooked on the round-the-clock discussions and the front-line *kiruv* of Aish; (Inset) with his father Sam Nivin, who rebuilt his own life after the nightmare of Auschwitz

“IT WAS SO FAR FROM REALITY TO THINK I’D EVER WALK AGAIN, MUCH LESS BE ALIVE IN THREE MONTHS.”

“So I stood up and although I was wobbly, I was able to walk! At that moment, I lived all the blessings we say every morning, thanking Hashem for our ability to stand upright and to walk on dry land. We take these for granted, but I felt like 500,000 people in an Olympic stadium were cheering me on.

“I started crying out to my wife: ‘Come quickly! Come quickly!’ She thought something terrible had happened. It woke up all the kids and everyone came running. They stood awestruck, witnessing a miracle. They never thought they’d see their father walk again.”

But Hashem had a final challenge waiting for Reb Aryeh: His illness had triggered pericarditis, an inflammation of the membrane surrounding the heart. Due to Reb Aryeh’s other complications, this was such a severe case that repairing the pericardium would require open-heart surgery.

The power of community kicked in once again. The Pittsburgher Rebbe got involved, and — through Rav Avraham Elimelech Firer — arranged for the best surgeon in the world, at the best hospital in the world, Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

“All I needed was a few hundred thousand dollars to pay for it,” Reb Aryeh says with a note of bewilderment. “During this time I was unable to teach my *chaburahs*, and we had literally no money. A group of close friends from yeshivah days undertook to arrange the funds that literally saved my life. I am ever grateful. They even arranged for a private plane to transport me from Israel to the United States.”

During the complex seven-hour operation, the Pittsburgher Rebbe was immersed in *tefillah*, and Reb Aryeh’s network of *chaburah* students arranged teleconference Tehillim around the clock. The operation was a success.

Reb Aryeh, gaunt and hobbled from six months of one medical crisis after another, finally returned home before Pesach 2014. “Two months later,” he reports with a grateful smile, “I danced at my daughter’s wedding.”

You Can Do It Aryeh Nivin was not always connected this deeply to Torah. His father, Sam Nivin, spent his teen years

enduring his own series of near-death experiences: nightmare encounters in Auschwitz with Mengele and Goebbels, on a sadistic death march, and finally internment in Bergen-Belsen.

After the war, Sam made it to America. Yet along the way, his Yiddishkeit weakened. “I was a misfit in suburban life,” Reb Aryeh recalls of his youth in Fairlawn, New Jersey. “I was interested in philosophy and at age 13 was reading thousand-page books like *Atlas Shrugged*. I wanted to talk ideas.”

In 1980, at age 18, Reb Aryeh left home to visit Israel. (“It was the easiest way out of Jersey,” he says.) While studying in Israel, he heard about Aish HaTorah and quickly became connected to the intense, round-the-clock philosophical discussions that characterized the early days of the yeshivah.

Reb Aryeh was hooked. He dove deep into learning and relished frontline *kiruv* in the Old City of Jerusalem. Eventually, he would also lead Discovery seminars, develop a personal growth program at Aish, and serve as Rav Noach Weinberg’s personal assistant, where he had the opportunity to view the Rosh Yeshivah up close.

Rav Noach was known to push his *talmidim* to set their sights high and take on new projects, and his encouragement contributed to the success of Reb Aryeh’s *chaburahs*.

“One time I was driving Rav Noach around, and I had the nerve to ask him: ‘The Gemara says: In the way a person wants to go, Hashem will lead him. Nobody wants to save the Jewish people more than you, Rav Noach. So how come you haven’t yet achieved your goal?’

“Rav Noach got very serious and said, ‘Stop the car.’ He wanted me to listen carefully.

“We got out, he looked me straight in the eye, and he said: ‘True, I am a failure. But you? You can do it!’”

That’s when Reb Aryeh defined his *ye’ud*, or life goal, as “finding the path to personal development for our generation” — and dedicated his life to achieve it.



Rav Noach Weinberg taught Reb Aryeh what it means to achieve your goal

What’s Life All About? In 2006, a group of Torah educators asked Reb Aryeh to share his personal development curriculum on a weekly conference call. The format worked, and today he operates an array of teleconference *chaburahs* via his Machon HaAdam HaShalem, helping thousands of *frum* Jews — of various ages, circumstances, and affiliations — strengthen their “in-the-moment” awareness.

During our visit, Reb Aryeh proudly shows off what he calls the “virtual spaceship” — a hi-tech communications hub where *chaburah* members connect either via computer or telephone, to study and share comments and questions in real time.

Reb Aryeh’s *chaburahs* are based on an 18-month process where participants develop a Personal Life Plan and a self-knowledge database that helps them to identify — at each moment — their unique *tafkid*, their role in that moment.

“We stress the questions: *Who am I? What is my shoresh neshamah, the root of my soul? What’s life all about? Why did my soul come into this world? How do I actualize my potential?*”

Arriving at the answers, Reb Aryeh

explains, requires two key pieces of self-knowledge.

“The first, *tikkun*, is knowing the major character flaw you’re here to fix. The Vilna Gaon and the *baalei mussar* all say the same thing: Whatever drives you the most crazy, the area in life that presents the biggest difficulty and challenge, the corrupted part of your personality, where you constantly fail in *avodas Hashem* — that is precisely what you were brought to this world to fix.

“Of course, *‘zeh l’umas zeh asah Elokim* — Hashem created this corresponding to that.’ In the same way you have a particular negative trait, you also have talents and interests where you excel. This defines your *ye’ud* — your ‘Positive Life Zone.’ Looking back at your life, what were the most pleasurable moments? When you were passionate, fully engaged, and in a flow state? What screams out: ‘This is what my life is all about?’ These are the questions to explore.”

To attain this knowledge, Reb Aryeh’s toolkit includes a method he calls “Paradising” — turning everyday challenges into opportunities for spiritual growth.

“It all depends on consciousness,” he says. “For example, if a woman knows that five o’clock is her rush hour with the kids,

“WE KILLED HIM! SHE CRIED. ‘IT’S A MIRACLE!’ I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT. I THOUGHT MAYBE THEY’D STOPPED A TERRORIST. ‘THE BACTERIA!’ SHE SAID. ‘IT’S COMPLETELY GONE!’”

she should schedule ten minutes prior to introspect and project on how things might potentially get crazy. She needs to ask: *Where do I short-circuit: cooking dinner, serving dinner, or cleaning up dinner?*

“By bringing more active consciousness to the fore, you’re prepared and don’t get triggered. This boosts your immune system and you can knock out a good percentage of difficulties on the spot. Even the unpredictable is predictable, because your positive *ye’ud* and challenging *tikkun* are uploaded to your consciousness. Life will always have hills and valleys, but you can smooth out the extremes.”

People have complaints against life, Reb Aryeh says, because they don’t understand the paradigm. “If you wake up in the middle of the night to a crying child when you have a full day of work the next day, or if you have a complicated teenager, you need to reframe the experience and say: *This is the most important thing I could be doing right now.*

Hashem wants us to have the greatest pleasure, he says, so He created a world of adversity and challenge. “This way we earn our pleasure — making a free will choice, turning to Him for help. When we make that choice, we go up one level, connect deeper with Hashem, and experience tremendous joy. That’s the cycle.

“Understanding that paradigm is the definition of mature spirituality. It changes everything.”

One of Reb Aryeh’s tools is plugging into the Jewish calendar —

drawing unique energies from each particular day, season, and holiday.

“The key times to embark on a ‘Life Plan’ journey are Chodesh Elul, leading into Rosh Hashanah, plus Shevat and Nissan, which the Mishnah also identifies as Rosh Hashanahs. We know from Devarim 20:19 that ‘a person is like the tree of a field.’ *Sheim MiShmuel* explains that Shevat is the time of integration, when the ‘sap is rising’ and the year’s potential is actualized. For Nissan, the Leshem writes that the 72 days from Adar-25 until Shavuot is a period of incredible expansive growth.”

Wisdom Over Speed Reb Aryeh’s “spaceship” includes a multi-screen set-up where he monitors real-time *chaburah* interaction and shares visual aids. The system, however, does not accommodate video participation. Reb Aryeh says he’s never considered the option.

“There’s actually a big advantage to audio-only,” he says. “Everyone is faceless. Nobody is distracted by checking out everyone else’s age or head covering or appearance. Audio cuts through the externals and it’s just the voice of *neshamos*. People can get incredibly close, like a soul family.”

Participants say their *chaburah* groups have created a community of lifelong friendships, sharing joys and struggles together for many years.

Reb Aryeh says today’s generation is experiencing unprecedented technological, political, and societal upheavals and notes a big difference between people over and under age 40.

“Technology has helped make Torah learning more accessible — Aish.com, TorahAnytime, even my NewChabura.com. That’s a positive development. But the overall impact on spirituality has not been good. Everything is so speeded up and a person is expected to be on red alert all the time. Being faster does not necessarily equate with more meaning, happiness, or productivity. We’ve lost touch with being calm and smelling the roses. In the end, wisdom is far more valuable than speed.”

In researching this article, Reb Aryeh invited me to define my *ye’ud* during a live *chaburah* workshop. It sounded fun — and exceeded expectations. In minutes, Reb Aryeh hit the bull’s-eye on my unique life mission. The sensation was liberating.

Reb Aryeh explains how crucial this process is:

“It’s possible for a Jew to serve Hashem his whole life, even accomplishing great things, without fulfilling the mission he was created for. That’s *avodah zarah* in the allegoric sense — a service of Hashem that is *zar*, estranged from your essence.

“When we clarify our particular mission on earth, no sacrifice is too dear. The clearer we are, we are less prone to being deterred or distracted. We are energized to expend every effort fulfilling our personal mission.

“The Slonimer Rebbe says that someone who lacks clarity of his mission is like wandering aimlessly through the dark without a lantern. If you don’t know where you want to go, you’re missing the point of life.”

Next Steps Reb Aryeh has surely defined his own *ye’ud*. Now, four years since his near-death experience, what are the long-term effects?

“On a physical level, thank God my body has fully recovered, although I do feel weak and frail at times. On a spiritual level, it’s been extremely powerful. I don’t see with the same eyes anymore. I have very low tolerance for nonsense and vanities.

“The Mishnah says, ‘Do *teshuvah* one day before you die, because you’ll never know when it will be your last.’ For me, this resonates every day. If I catch a flu bug, I know that in one moment I could be finished.

“My mission is to empower powerful people,” Reb Aryeh says. “I teach FFBS from Boro Park material from the Arizal, the Vilna Gaon, the Slonimer Rebbe, and they say: ‘We’ve never heard this before. We had no idea!’ I taught this material recently to a group of Torah educators in Jerusalem and the room lit up like a light bulb.” ●