

One Perek Each

Chapter 1: The Announcement

It starts on a Tuesday in Iyar, when the mechaneches comes in with a face that makes thirty girls sit up straighter before she says a word.

Blimi's mother is in the hospital. It came suddenly, the doctors are using careful words, and the family is living at the edge of a waiting room. Blimi is staying with her aunt. The mechaneches says all of this gently and exactly, the way you say things to sixteen-year-olds who deserve the truth, and then she says the other thing.

"The family asked for Tehillim. I thought - a class circle. The whole sefer, every day, for as long as it takes."

The room answers before she finishes. Hands go up like it's a sale. Girls call out numbers - I'll take five, I'll take ten, give me the long ones - and somebody finds a chart, and the chart fills with names in four minutes, and the mechaneches stands at the front with her eyes wet and says, "This is a class."

Aidy signs like everyone. She takes five perakim, and on the bus home she says the first three, and she means every single word.

Chapter 2: The Blaze

The first week is a bonfire.

The sefer finishes by lunch every day. Girls say their perakim on the bus, on the stairs, under their desks during Chumash review when the teacher isn't looking, which the teacher is looking and lets it go. Girls who never finished a perek in their lives are finishing five. Blimi comes in on Thursday for one period, pale and quiet, and the chart is full to the corners, and everyone feels it: we are doing something.

The second week is a smaller fire.

The chart starts to show white spaces by Wednesday. The ten-perek girls are at four. Aidy covers two gaps on Tuesday, three on Thursday, and by Friday she is saying eleven perakim a day and keeping count in the margin of her planner, and the count is starting to feel like a debt collector.

The third week, she catches herself racing the words. Racing them. For Blimi's mother, who is lying in a hospital bed while Aidy gallops through the verses like a girl trying to finish chores.

She stops on the steps of the building and thinks to herself: this is failing. Not the davening. The design. We built a circle out of week-one hearts, and it is now week three.

Chapter 3: The Arithmetic of Enthusiasm

That night she does the numbers, because numbers are how she thinks when she's upset. Her planner is a battlefield: perakim scribbled in margins, tally marks, a girl's initials next to a perek that wasn't hers.

One hundred and fifty perakim. Thirty girls. Five each - nothing. Except it was never really five each. It was six girls carrying twenty-five each and twenty-four girls fading, and the six were the same six every week, and one of them was Aidy, and even the six were getting slower and duller and tired.

Enthusiasm, she writes in her planner, is not a plan.

She thinks about the things that actually happen every day in her life. Her locker combination - hers, memorized, one small thing. Bus stop, same corner. Chumash homework, due Tuesday, small enough to hold. The things that last are the things that are small and owned. The circle asked everyone for a big thing, new every day, with no owner and no floor under a missed day - so a missed day became a guilty day, and a guilty day became a girl who avoids the chart.

She writes one more line: the sefer doesn't need heroes. It needs a hundred and fifty ordinary girls - five classes of them - each holding one perek, and still there in week six.

Chapter 4: One Perek Each

She brings the redesign to the mechaneches on a single sheet, and it fits in three rules.

One: one perek each. Not five. The same perek, every day, yours the way your locker is yours. You learn it in the first week the way you learn a combination, and after that it costs you four minutes and zero decisions. Daily is the whole trick - the sefer was never hard; needing to be a hero was.

Two: every girl gets a buddy. Quietly - the pairs are written on the grid and nowhere else. If you miss a day, your buddy says your perek with hers. No announcement, no apology, no debt.

Three: a missed day is resumed, never confessed. Nobody reports their misses. Nobody owes the circle a speech. You just say your perek today, because today is the only day the sefer is ever made of.

"One perek is small enough to ask anyone," Aidy says. "That's the whole arithmetic. Five classes - a hundred and fifty girls, one perek each - and the sefer happens every day. Not five perakim squeezed from thirty tired girls. One from a hundred and fifty steady ones. A perek a girl can hold is worth more than five she can't - because the five become zero in week three, and the one is still there in Sivan."

The mechaneches reads the sheet twice. "It's smaller," she says finally. "Girls are going to say it feels small."

"It's smaller per girl," Aidy says. "It's the same size sefer - spread across five classes instead of one. And it's built to still exist in Sivan."

Chapter 5: "It Feels Like Nothing"

The objection comes exactly where the mechaneches said it would - from the girl who took ten perakim in week one, whose enthusiasm is real and whose follow-through has been, lately, three.

"One perek?" she says, when the new grid goes up. A few girls turn to listen, because she is saying the thing half of them were thinking. "That's nothing. Her mother needs the WHOLE sefer. We were finishing it by lunch."

"We were," Aidy says, "for nine days out of twenty-one. I counted. The other twelve days it finished at night, or didn't finish, or got finished by the same six girls galloping. The sefer doesn't need us impressive. It needs us there."

The girl crosses her arms. "One perek isn't a sacrifice."

"No," Aidy says. "It's a practice. Sacrifice is what you do once. Practice is what you still do in week six." She hears the mechaneches go very quiet at the door, and keeps going anyway, because it is the whole argument: "Chessed that blazes is beautiful for a week. Chessed that lasts is beautiful for as long as it takes. Blimi's mother doesn't need our blaze. She needs our Tuesday. And our next Tuesday."

The grid goes up anyway. Name, perek number, buddy. Three columns. It looks, the girl says, like a locker list.

Exactly, Aidy says.

And because one perek is an ask you can make of anyone, the circle widens the way the blaze never could: four more classes take rows on the same chart inside of two weeks. A hundred and fifty girls. The sefer, daily, by design instead of by bonfire.

Chapter 6: Week Six

The test comes in Sivan, because Sivan is when everything comes.

Finals. The class trip - two days of nobody near a chart. Production practice running past five, girls falling into bed over their shoes. The old circle would have died in a day, and Aidy knows it, because the old circle DID die in easier weeks than these. She watches the first week of Sivan the way you watch a bridge you built, waiting for the first truck.

The new one does not die. A hundred and fifty girls in five classes say their one perek on the trip bus, in the production hallway, in the four minutes before davening starts, because four minutes is all it costs and zero decisions is all it takes. The sefer completes every day. Twice, a girl misses - one to a fever, one to a cousin's chasunah - and both times the buddy says two perakim instead of one, and nobody announces anything, and the missed girl resumes the next day without a speech, exactly as designed. Aidy watches it happen and thinks to herself: the floor held. That's what a floor is for. Not for the girls who never slip - for the girls who do.

And in the middle of week six, Blimi comes back to school. Her mother is home now - weak, improving, with doctors who are pleased and still careful. On her first morning back, Blimi stands at the grid for a long time, and Aidy, watching, realizes what she's reading. Not the names. The dates.

"Seven weeks," Blimi says. Her voice does something on the number. "You're all still doing it."

"It's one perek," Aidy says. "It's not hard. That's the point."

Chapter 7: The Traveling Grid

The mechaneches counts, because she is the kind of mechaneches who counts, and at the end of Sivan she shows Aidy her notebook.

"The blaze circle: the sefer finished nine days out of twenty-one. The one-perek circle, five classes: the sefer finished every day for five weeks, with exactly two buddy covers." She closes the notebook. "I thought you were lowering the standard. You lowered the size. The standard was every day, and you were the only one who saw it."

By Tammuz, two other classes have grids. The tenth grade starts one for a rebbe's father; the seventh grade starts one for a girl recovering from surgery, and their mechaneches comes to ask Aidy how the buddies work, and Aidy gives her the three rules on a single sheet, because the whole design still fits on a single sheet. The seventh-grade mechaneches looks at the single sheet and laughs. "I expected a binder," she says, and copies it onto one page. The tenth-grade grid has one improvement that isn't hers - the buddies sit near each other, so the cover is a whisper, not a walk - and Aidy adds it to her sheet with a credit, because designs should travel the way chessed does.

The grid for Blimi's mother keeps running into the summer, by quiet agreement, because "as long as it takes" turned out to be the one part of week one that everybody meant.

Chapter 8: One Mishnah

In Tammuz, the design comes home, as designs do.

Aidy has a list on her wall - she has always had a list on her wall - of the things she is going to start keeping. It is a magnificent list. It has failed, in various months, at everything written on it. Learn all of Pirkei Avos. Say birkas hamazon from a card, every time, with kavana. Write to Savta every week. The list is the blaze of a girl who means it on Sunday.

She takes it down.

In its place she writes one line, in the same letters as the grid: ONE MISHNAH, EVERY DAY, YOURS. Pirkei Avos, from the beginning, one mishnah a day - small enough to survive a Tuesday. And underneath, because she knows the design now: a buddy. She asks her sister, who is twelve and has watched the grid work all spring, and her sister says yes so fast that Aidy understands she has been waiting to be asked. They write their own three rules on an index card, because the house runs better when even a mishnah has a floor under a missed day.

The first mishnah takes them three minutes, at the kitchen table, after supper. It is not a blaze. It is better: it is a Tuesday, and Tuesday is what things are made of.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Remember the story

1. How does the original circle work, and what happens to it by week three?
2. What does Aidy mean by "enthusiasm is not a plan"?
3. List the three rules of the redesign.
4. What happens to the two girls who miss days in week six, and what does Blimi read on the grid?

Activity 2: Fact or guess

1. The blaze circle finished the sefer every day for three weeks. Fact / Guess
2. In the redesign, a missed day must be confessed to the class. Fact / Guess
3. The buddies are written on the grid and nowhere else. Fact / Guess
4. The tenth grade adds an improvement to Aidy's design. Fact / Guess

Activity 3: Think and write

1. "The sefer doesn't need us impressive. It needs us there." What is the difference, and why is it hard to accept?
2. "Sacrifice is what you do once. Practice is what you still do in week six." Give an example of each from your own life.
3. Why does the story never say the Tehillim caused the recovery? What would the story lose if it did?

Activity 4: Apply it - Laya's list

1. Laya's class wants to visit a lonely senior from shul every Shabbos. Week one, fifteen girls sign up. (a) Design the visiting the way Aidy would - size, ownership, backup, and what happens after a missed week. (b) A girl says, "One visit a month each is barely anything." Answer her in two or three sentences.
2. Why does the shame-free rule ("resumed, never confessed") matter? What does confession debt do to a circle?
3. Name one commitment in your own life that is sized for your Sunday self. What would the one-perek version be?

Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. KEREP
2. FREES
3. DRIG
4. DUBDY

Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. blaze
2. practice
3. resumed
4. grid

a. the chart of names, perakim, and buddies b. what you still do in week six c. a strong first start that cannot last d. started again without a speech

Activity 7: Word search

Find the eight words hidden in the grid. All words run left to right.

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T E H I L L I M F Y
P E R E K M N O R S
S E F E R I Q Z X J
G R I D F Y G H U P
B U D D Y S T C D E
D A I L Y J K V W B
C I R C L E L M N O
R E S U M E D I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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The eight words: TEHILLIM, PEREK, SEFER, GRID, BUDDY, DAILY, CIRCLE, RESUMED.

Activity 8: Your turn - your one perek

Pick one commitment you have started and dropped more than once. Write five lines: redesign it the Aidy way - what is the version small enough to survive a Tuesday, what makes it owned, who or what is your buddy, and what is your rule for the day you miss?