

# The Slowest Step

## Chapter 1: Three Hours, Hoarse

Everybody who was there remembers last year's packing night the same way: three hours, two hundred and twenty shalach manos bags, and a room that got less patient every forty minutes.

The yeshiva packs for the kollel families every Adar - bags, juice boxes, hamantashen, a card, a ribbon. It is good work and everyone means well, and last year it was still awful. Boys wandered with half-filled bags looking for the hamantashen, which were behind the juice boxes, which were behind the boys. The cards ran out twice because nobody counted. The rebbi in charge lost his voice calling for things, and the last forty bags got tied in grim silence by six boys who had stopped talking to each other.

The bags all got packed. That is the thing nobody says about last year, and it is the thing that makes last year dangerous: it worked, barely, the way a bridge made of hope works, and if it works twice everyone decides the hope is a bridge.

This year, two weeks before the night, the rebbi taps Tzali on the shoulder after davening.

"You notice things," he says. "The way the room works. I want you to run the packing."

Tzali is sixteen, and he does notice things, and he has exactly one relevant memory, which is standing in last year's chaos thinking: this room is working very hard and the bags are coming out very slow. Those are not the same thing. They are almost opposite things.

## Chapter 2: The Watch

The Sunday before, Tzali does not write a plan. He runs an experiment, in the empty cheder room, with two friends, a stack of bags, and a watch.

They drag one table into the middle and set it up like the real thing: a pile of bags at one end, the food in boxes, the cards in a stack, the spools of ribbon.

"Fill a bag," he says. "Just the food." His friend does it in ten seconds. "Add the juice box." Eight more. "Now the card and the ribbon."

The ribbon is where the afternoon goes. Folding the card, looping the ribbon, tying it so it sits flat and pretty - forty seconds, and his friend is GOOD at it. Tzali tries one himself and it takes him over a minute, and his looks like a bandage.

He writes the numbers down: food 10, juice 8, card-and-ribbon 40.

"So?" his friend says, flexing his ribbon fingers.

"So a line of us can only go as fast as the slowest part," Tzali says. "We can be the fastest bag-fillers in the world and the room still moves at forty seconds a bag. The ribbon is the whole night. Everything else is decoration."

He looks at the numbers for a while longer. "And last year there was no line at all. There were thirty boys walking."

### Chapter 3: The Autopsy

That night he does the autopsy on last year, on the back of a math sheet, because he was there and he remembers.

Thirty boys, each making whole bags. Sounds efficient - no waiting, everyone busy. But watch what a boy actually does making a whole bag: he walks to the food table, waits while two others reach, walks to the juice, walks to the cards, finds a clear corner, ties the ribbon, walks the bag to the finished pile. Tzali estimates the walking and waiting at more than the working. The room was full of motion and the bags came out at the speed of congestion.

And the ribbon - the forty-second step - was being done by every boy in the room, including the ones who tie like Tzali, which is to say slowly and badly, while the three boys with quick ribbon fingers spent most of their night walking around with bags.

He thinks about the rebbi's voice going, and the six boys tying in silence at the end. That silence was not a character problem. It was three hours of congestion coming out of people's mouths. Fix the room, he suspects, and the room gets kinder - though he writes this in the margin, because it is a suspicion, not a number.

He writes the conclusion at the bottom of the sheet: WE WERE ALL BUSY. THE BAGS WERE NOT. Then he designs the line.

### Chapter 4: The Line

The design fits on one index card.

Stations, not bags. Table one: food into bags, three boys, they never move. Table two: juice boxes and cards, two boys. Table three: the ribbons - and here is the whole plan - SIX boys, the six fastest ribbon fingers in the grade, doing nothing but ribbons. Bags are passed down the table; boys stay put. A runner carries full bags to the checking table, where two boys count and pack for delivery. The rest of the grade - sixteen more boys - carry the packed cases out and stack them by delivery route, and stacking to a route is real work, not a leftover.

"You're putting the best boys on ribbons," his friend says, reading the card. "That's backwards. The good boys should do the important jobs."

"The ribbon IS the important job," Tzali says. "It's the slowest step. You staff the slowest step like it's the whole night, because it is. And nobody walks. Walking is where last year went."

He takes the card to the rebbi, who reads it twice, asks one question - "what happens when the ribbons get faster than the food?" - and nods when Tzali says, "then I move two ribbon boys to food. The slowest step moves. You watch it and you move your people. The plan isn't the stations. The plan is watching."

## Chapter 5: With Love

The objection comes the night before, from a senior - a good boy, the kind who leads the dancing, and he is not wrong to ask it.

"This is a factory," he says, not unkindly. "Chessed isn't a factory. A boy should make a whole bag - feel it, mean it. You're going to have thirty boys each touching one corner of somebody's mitzvah."

The room listens. It is a real question and it deserves better than a wave.

Tzali answers it two ways. "First way: the love is in the two hundred and twenty bags arriving on Purim morning, full and right and pretty. That's what the families feel. They don't feel how many hands touched the bag." He lets that sit. "Second way: let's measure it. Ten minutes, your way, teams making whole bags. Ten minutes, the line. We count at the end."

They measure it, and the measuring is half the fun - the grade crowds around the cheder room door to watch two systems race. The whole-bag teams make thirty-one bags in ten minutes, with three traffic jams and one spilled juice box, and the senior himself does the counting, fair as a judge. The line makes seventy-four, and the ribbon boys are humming.

"Seventy-four is a mistake," somebody says. It is not a mistake. It is the same boys, minus the walking.

The senior looks at the counts for a long moment, and then laughs, and takes a ribbon seat, and turns out to have the fastest fingers in the room.

## Chapter 6: The Slowest Step Moves

Packing night runs, and it runs like the experiment, for exactly twenty minutes.

Then Tzali sees it: the food table is straining. With six ribbon boys flying, the bags are arriving faster than three boys can fill them, and a small pile of untied bags is forming in the middle like water behind a stick.

Last year's room would have solved this by shouting. Tzali just moves two ribbon boys to food - the two slowest ribbon boys, which is its own little truth: when you rebalance, you move the people the slow step can spare, not its best - and the pile melts in four minutes.

Twenty minutes later the slow step is the checking table, because counting is boring and the checkers are chatting. Tzali doesn't move anyone; he just stands there and counts with them for five minutes, and the chat stops and the table clears.

"How did you know where it would clog?" a boy asks him afterward.

"I didn't," Tzali says. "That's the whole job. The slowest step doesn't stay where you put it. You don't fix the line once - you keep walking it, looking for the pile. The pile tells you the truth."

## Chapter 7: Thirty-Five Minutes

They finish in thirty-five minutes.

Two hundred and twenty bags, checked, counted, stacked by delivery route, and the rebbi - who lost his voice last year - makes the closing announcement in a voice that is completely fine, and says the thing Tzali will remember longest.

"Last year we worked for three hours and we were angry. This year thirty-five minutes and I heard singing." He looks around the room. "Understand what just happened. Nobody worked harder this year. Half of you worked less. The room was just arranged so that the work went into the bags instead of into the walking."

The senior ties the last ribbon of the night - on the last bag, number two-twenty, checked twice - and holds it up like a trophy, and the room gives him the cheer he was born for.

Walking out, Tzali realizes the strangest thing: he barely made a bag himself. He spent the night walking the line, watching for piles. It was the most useful packing night of his life, and his ribbon fingers did nothing at all.

His friend falls in beside him, flexing those same tired ribbon fingers. "Next year I'm putting you on a station," he says. "Watching is cheating."

"Watching is the station," Tzali says.

## Chapter 8: The Basket by the Door

On Thursday night, at home, Tzali watches his own family's Friday with his new eyes, and there it is - the pile, telling the truth.

Every Friday, the whole house runs on time until the last ten minutes, and then six people end up in the entryway at once, hunting: for the thing that goes to Bubby, for a boy's other shoe, for the list, for the keys, for whatever walks away during the week. The entry is the slowest step. Everything else in the house is fast, and it doesn't matter, because the line can only go as fast as the entry.

He does not hurry anyone. He has learned that hurrying is just walking faster.

Instead he finds a basket - the good one, with the handles - and puts it on the bench by the door with a note: IF IT LEAVES THE HOUSE ON FRIDAY, IT SLEEPS HERE THURSDAY. Into it he puts the thing for Bubby, the list, and his own other shoe, which takes some finding.

His little brother inspects the basket and its note with the seriousness of a building inspector. "My glove doesn't leave the house on Friday."

"It leaves when you do," Tzali says. "Thursday night, it sleeps here anyway."

The glove goes in. That is the whole system, and his brother understands it in nine seconds, which Tzali files away: a good station explains itself.

On Friday, for the first time anyone can remember, the family leaves in one group, unstressed, and his mother stands at the door a moment longer than necessary, holding her bag, doing the arithmetic of a house that suddenly works.

"The basket?" she says.

"The pile moved to the entry," Tzali says. "So I moved the entry to Thursday."

## **Eight activities**

### **Activity 1: Remember the story**

1. What went wrong on last year's packing night, and why were the bags slow despite everyone being busy?
2. What do Tzali's timing experiments show, and what is the slowest step?
3. Describe the line he designs. Why six boys on ribbons?
4. What happens twice on packing night, and how does Tzali respond each time?

### **Activity 2: Fact or guess**

1. Last year's packing night finished in thirty-five minutes. Fact / Guess
2. The whole-bag teams beat the line in the ten-minute test. Fact / Guess
3. Tzali moves his two slowest ribbon boys to the food table. Fact / Guess
4. Tzali fills more bags than anyone else on packing night. Fact / Guess

### **Activity 3: Think and write**

1. "We were all busy. The bags were not." Explain the difference, using last year's room.
2. The senior says chessed isn't a factory. Give Tzali's two answers, and say why the second is stronger.
3. "The pile tells you the truth." What does the pile tell you that people don't?

### **Activity 4: Apply it - Minka's breakfast line**

1. Minka runs the seminary's Rosh Chodesh breakfast setup: drinks, plates, food, and the fruit-cutting that takes four times longer than everything else. (a) Where do the extra hands go, and why there? (b) Ten minutes in, the drinks back up. What does she do, and what does she NOT do?
2. A helper says, "Just tell everyone to move faster." Why is that walking faster instead of fixing the line?
3. Find the slowest step in one line from your own life. What would staffing it look like?

### Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. NEIL
2. GABS
3. TUOCN
4. LIPE

### Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. bottleneck a. a row of stations where work passes from one step to the next
2. station b. the slowest step, which sets the speed of everything
3. congestion c. a fixed spot where one step of the work happens
4. line d. too much motion in too little space

### Activity 7: Word search

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

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L I N E K V W B F Y
R I B B O N N O R S
B A G S A I Q Z X J
S L O W E S T H U P
S T A T I O N C D E
P A C K I N G V W B
C O U N T P L M N O
P I L E D E A 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: LINE, RIBBON, BAGS, SLOWEST, STATION, PACKING, COUNT, PILE.

### Activity 8: Your turn - walk your line

Pick one recurring production in your life - a Friday at home, a group project, a job you do with others. Write five lines: the steps, where the pile forms, and one change that staffs the slowest step instead of hurrying the fast ones.