



The Total Before the Receipts

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: A Number Worth Announcing

The number at the bottom of Elkanah's page is larger than anyone expects.

"We can buy both sets," he says.

The boys around the table stop sorting tickets.

Both sets means the large reference books and the smaller volumes for the weekday study group. For six weeks, they help organize a supervised secondhand-book sale to raise money for the community study hall. Elkanah, seventeen, keeps the figures.

He likes the figures. Unlike six boys with different ideas about where tables belong, a column of numbers can be made to stand straight.

Mr. Weiss, the adult responsible for the sale, comes over in his white shirt and plain kippah.

"Is that after expenses?"

"Yes."

"Have all the receipts come in?"

Elkanah looks at the small envelope beside his notebook.

"The big ones."

"Then it's a working figure. Let's check the rest before we place an order."

Elkanah nods.



By the door, his friend Ezriel tells two younger boys that both sets are coming.

Elkanah hears him. He does not correct him.

The number is so close to being a fact that it feels petty to hold everyone back.

Chapter 2: The Borrowed Tables

The next afternoon, Mr. Weiss brings a receipt for the hired tables.

Elkanah knows the amount. He puts it in his budget before the sale. All he needs to do is mark it paid.

He opens the notebook.

There are three columns: sales, expenses, and donations. The figures look orderly. The figure for the tables sits near the top of the last column.

He reads it again.

On the day he makes the sheet, someone says, "Put down the tables too." He means to enter a cost. Instead, Elkanah writes it beside a donation from a neighbor and carries both into the same total.

The tables are counted as money coming in.

They are also not counted as money going out.

The result is wrong by twice the hire charge.



He subtracts. Then he adds the columns again. Then he subtracts again, in case the arithmetic has something generous hidden in it.

It does not.

There is enough for one set, with some money left. There is not enough for both.

Elkanah looks toward Mr. Weiss, who is speaking to a visitor.

He can fix the page now. The announcement is harder.

Chapter 3: Three Possible Explanations

By supper, Elkanah has thought of three explanations.

The first is that the late receipts change the total. That sounds reasonable, and some small receipts are late. But they are not the main reason.

The second is that they are still deciding which books are most useful. That may become true. It is not why they can no longer buy both.

The third is to say exactly what happens.

He dislikes the third most.

Tatty notices that he is moving peas from one side of his plate to the other.

"Are they being sorted for a reason?"

"No."

"Then eat them or leave them."



Elkanah eats a spoonful. Later, when the younger children leave the table, he asks Tatty to look at the page.

Tatty follows the pencil marks.

"Does Mr. Weiss know yet?"

"No."

"Is anyone placing an order?"

"He says not until we check everything."

"Then tell him before that changes."

"I know."

Tatty waits.

"I already told the boys," Elkanah says. "It was the best moment of the whole sale."

Tatty looks at the number. "You can tell me that part. You still need to tell him the figures."

Elkanah closes the notebook, then opens it again. He writes the original total, the mistake, and the corrected working total on a separate sheet. Underneath, he lists the receipts still needed.

He does not write, Everything is ruined.

The page would not balance better if he did.



Chapter 4: The Small Office

Mr. Weiss reads the sheet in the study hall's small office.

Elkanah sits opposite him. The wall clock clicks louder than a clock has any right to.

"I put the table hire in donations," he says. "That makes the announced figure too high by twice the charge. The receipt is late, but the mistake is mine."

Mr. Weiss places the corrected sheet beside the notebook.

"Thank you for bringing it before we order. Now we need to check the whole account."

Elkanah expects anger. He also expects, foolishly, that the lack of anger means the conversation is nearly finished.

It is not.

They compare each entry with a receipt or a record of money received. Mr. Weiss handles the actual money and confirms the amounts. Elkanah reads the notebook aloud. A second adult checks the sums independently.

One small expense is missing. A donation is written twice because Elkanah enters the pledge and then the payment.

His face burns as they find it.

"Another one," he says.

"Another entry to fix," Mr. Weiss says. "Keep reading."

The final available amount is lower again.



They write a checked account. Mr. Weiss signs it. He explains what will go into the organizers' report and who needs the corrected figure.

"Can I pay the difference?" Elkanah asks.

Mr. Weiss looks up.

"With what money?"

"My savings."

"We are not deciding that in this room because you are embarrassed. You made an account error. You did not take the money. The funds are here, and the purchase hasn't happened. We need a clear report and a sensible plan."

Elkanah folds his hands under the desk.

His offer feels large and noble for about ten seconds. Then it feels like a way to buy back a conversation he does not want to have.

Chapter 5: A Correction in Front of Everyone

Mr. Weiss calls the volunteers together before their next sorting afternoon.

Elkanah asks to explain his part.

He stands beside the table where he announces the first total.

"I said we had enough for both reference sets. That was wrong. I counted a cost as money coming in, and one donation was counted twice. We checked the records with Mr. Weiss. This is the amount actually available after expenses."



He names it.

The room is quiet.

"But you had it all written down," Ezriel says.

"I did. Writing it down didn't make the entries right."

Another boy looks at Mr. Weiss. "Does that mean someone lost the money?"

"No," Mr. Weiss says. "The money received matches the checked records. The error was in the account Elkanah used for the announcement."

Elkanah is grateful for that sentence. He cannot have supplied it just by defending himself.

Ezriel leans back in his chair.

"I told the younger group."

"I heard you," Elkanah says. "I should have said the figure was still being checked. I'll correct it with them too."

Mr. Weiss explains that the adult committee will choose the purchase using the checked amount. The boys can give their views about which set they would use more.

Nobody claps for Elkanah being honest. The work still needs doing.

He sits down and helps sort the remaining books.



Chapter 6: The Job He Still Has

Afterward, Ezriel finds him by the coat hooks.

"Why didn't you tell me when I repeated it?"

"I liked hearing it."

Ezriel pulls his coat off the peg.

"I looked foolish too."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Elkanah wants to add that he looks much worse. That would turn Ezriel's complaint into a contest Ezriel never asks to enter.

He leaves the apology where it is.

"Are you still doing the accounts?" Ezriel asks.

"Mr. Weiss says I can help with them. Not announce unchecked totals."

"I'd check them more than once."

"We are. With the records."

Ezriel nods. He does not offer to tell the younger boys himself. Elkanah does that the following afternoon, with Mr. Weiss nearby to confirm the correction.

One boy asks whether the smaller set will ever come.



"I don't know," Elkanah says. "That depends on another decision. We don't have money for it now."

He dislikes disappointing a boy who is looking straight at him. He does not soften the answer into an invisible promise.

Chapter 7: A Sheet That Someone Else Can Read

At the next planning meeting, Mr. Weiss asks Elkanah to help prepare a better account sheet.

There are separate spaces for money actually received, money promised but not received, and costs. A total cannot silently include the promises. Receipts have numbers that match the entries. Another person can follow the page without needing Elkanah to explain what he remembers.

"I should have known how to do this," Elkanah says.

"You needed a clearer system and someone to check it," Mr. Weiss says.

"You also needed to wait before announcing. Those are different things."

Elkanah writes WORKING TOTAL at the top of the practice page. Beneath it, he leaves a place for a checked date and the checker.

Ezriel joins them. He takes a copy and tries entering a made-up set of figures. He puts a promised donation in the received column.

"Wrong place," Elkanah says.

"I know. I want to see if the page makes that obvious."



They change the label.

For the first time since the receipt arrives, Elkanah thinks about the account without wishing the previous week away.

Chapter 8: One Set on the Shelf

The committee buys the larger reference set. The checked balance stays in the study hall's fund. Mr. Weiss provides the final report to the people responsible for it.

When the books arrive, the volunteers unpack them. Elkanah puts the last volume on the shelf and steps back.

There is no second row.

He notices it every time he looks.

Ezriel opens one of the books at the table. "This is the map section I wanted."

Elkanah sits beside him.

He is glad the book is here. He wishes he never announces a second set. He can be both glad and embarrassed without making either feeling the book's fault.

A younger boy comes through the door.

"How much did we raise?"

Elkanah almost gives the first number. It is still easier to remember because everyone looks pleased when he says it.



He gets the checked report instead.

"This is the sales amount," he says, pointing. "This is what remains after costs. And this is what the books cost."

The boy follows the lines with his finger.

"So they're different totals."

"Yes."

Mr. Weiss calls for help with the empty cartons. Elkanah closes the report and puts it in its folder.

The smaller number stays on the page.

The books stay on the shelf.