

At Home With

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HAMODIA WEEKLY MAGAZINE



A COIN, A CURSE AND A CARING HEART

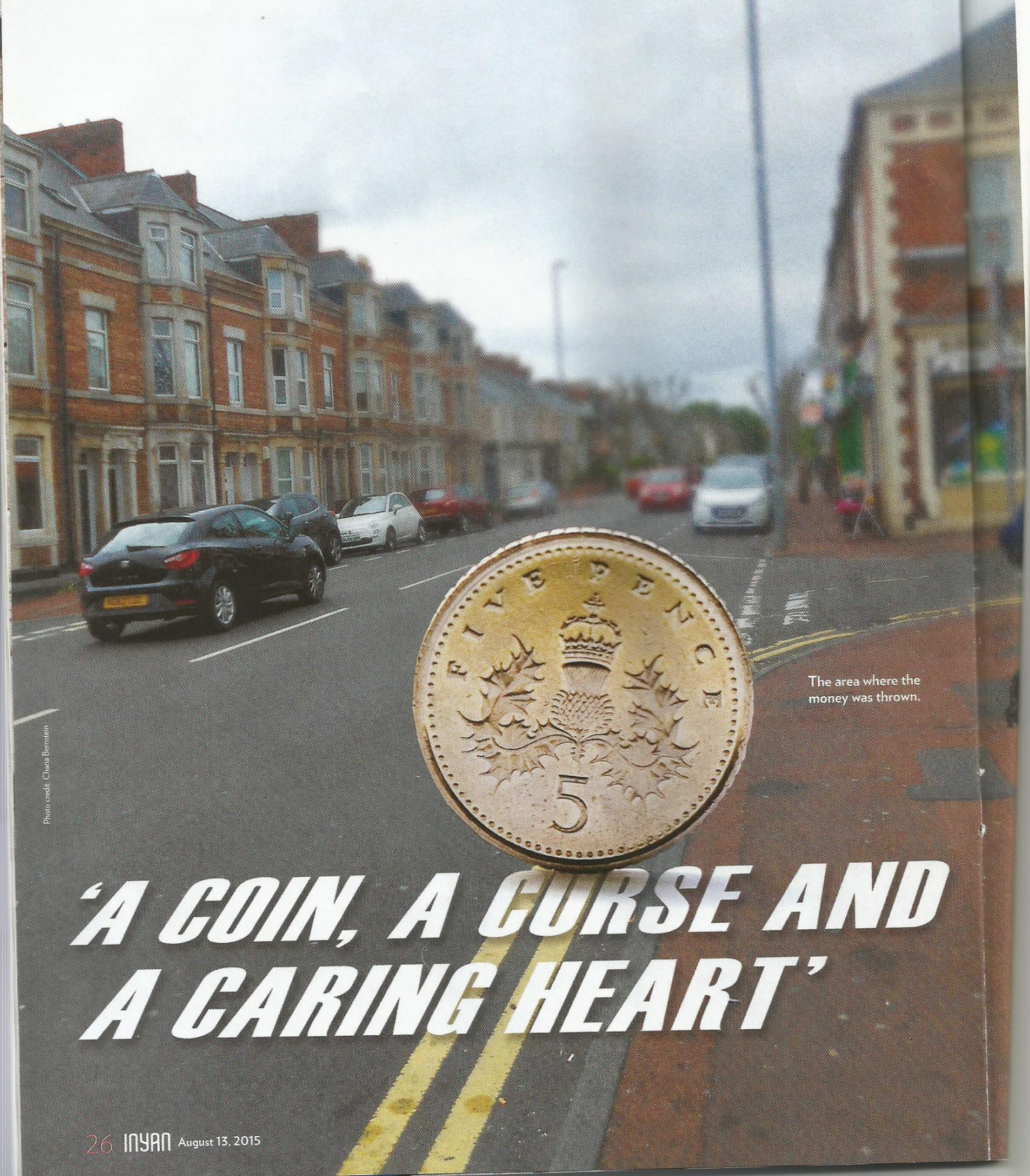
Kiddush Hashem in Gateshead

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THROUGH THE EYE OF A LENS

Turning Photography Into Art
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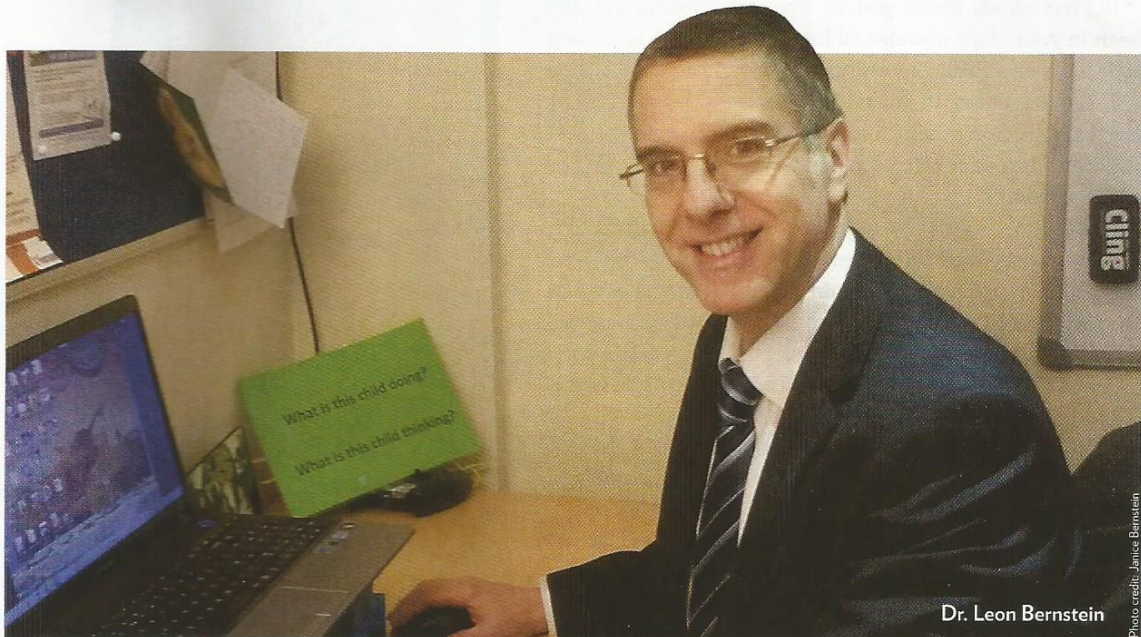
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The area where the money was thrown.

'A COIN, A CURSE AND A CARING HEART'

Photo credit: Chana Bernstein



Dr. Leon Bernstein

Photo credit: Janice Bernstein

I felt great excitement as my wife and I drove up to Gateshead on a Thursday to spend Shabbos with our daughter and hear her speech in sem on Friday night.

Friday morning after shul, I was walking behind three primary school children from a local non-Jewish school. The two boys walked on either side of a girl, and they were talking quietly among themselves. I overheard one of the boys saying to his friends, "There's one of them behind us." I was somewhat taken aback and sincerely hoped he was not referring to the fact that I was Jewish. They were, after all, just young children.

A moment later I heard a sound that I hadn't heard for some 40 years — a light, tinkling sound on concrete.

In a split second, memories of my school days came flooding back to me. There I was at 14, the only Jewish boy in a rather tough comprehensive school of a thousand boys, standing in the playground. A small crowd had gathered around me and began chanting, "Yiddo, Yiddo!" — with an occasional "Jew boy!" thrown in for good measure. They were pitching half-pennies at my feet, and I was motionless as I heard the sound of coins falling around me. Of course, this was done as part of a Jew-baiting culture, based on the assumption that all Jews were money-grabbing, tight-

fisted cheapskates who would seize any chance to run around and pick up coins on the ground.

But now, as an adult who wanted to give the children the benefit of the doubt, I called after them and said, "Excuse me, you've dropped something." I was hoping for, "Oh, thanks, mister!" Unfortunately, all I received was, "Oh, that's all right!"

A little shocked and more than a little disappointed, I returned to the guest house, thinking about the incident that by now was beyond hurtful; it provoked anger.

Suddenly, a thought struck me: "You've come too far to sit here while some little kid throws coins at you!" Consequently, I decided to do something to ease the pain from all those years ago.

I went into the street, picked up the five-pence coin and started walking.

As I neared the gates of West Side Primary,* my daughter called from Eretz Yisrael. She pleaded with me, "Daddy, don't do it! You won't come out alive! Why are you bothering?" By this time, the coin I was clasp was burning a hole in the palm of my hand, and I was determined to return it to its owner!

At the school, I pressed the buzzer of the security door that opened into a small vestibule. To my surprise, I soon found myself in the head teacher's

office. Mrs Campbell' asked how she could help, and, with the coin still tightly held in the palm of my hand, I explained why I had come:

LB: First of all, thank you so much for seeing me. I've been in your chair myself and know how busy it is for you, especially on a Friday morning.

I haven't come to make a fuss, complain or stir up any trouble. Something happened to me involving three children from your school today, and I thought you'd want to know about it.

HEAD: Go on.

I then proceeded to tell her about the incident. When I reached the part about the coin being thrown at my feet, she looked very puzzled and said she had no idea what I was talking about! I explained what Jew-baiting was, expressed delight that she had obviously had a pure upbringing (which broke the ice and caused us both to laugh), but then pointed out that in the past acts like this helped fuel wars.

She looked at me directly, listening intently, and was astonished by my story.

I then related to her my time at school as a boy, and how the tinkling sound of the dropped coin reminded me of those days. Our conversation, which became more and more genial as the minutes passed, continued:

LB: Thank you for listening to me, Mrs. Campbell.

HEAD: Please call me Jackie.

LB: Thank you. The thing is, Jackie, I know they're just kids, but they've got to be careful. They don't know the people they're taunting. I mean, I could be anybody — an aggressor, a lunatic, even a school inspector.

Leaning precariously on the edge of her seat, her eyes widened as she asked, almost in a whisper:

HEAD: Are you a school inspector?

LB: OFSTED (see note at the end of this article)

HEAD: *[Covering her face and looking up towards the ceiling]* "Oh, no! Oh, my gosh!"

LB: Jackie, stop! I'm off duty. You could tell me to leave right now and you'll never see me again. I just want to make the point that these kids have got to be careful. All I want to do is return this money to its rightful owner.

(I placed the coin on her table.)

HEAD: Dr. Bernstein, it's a pity you'll not be here next week. We have an assembly scheduled.

LB: Assembly? Now there's an idea!

HEAD: I don't know whether you'd feel comfortable—

LB: Jackie, I can't fix a plug and I can't change a tire. But assemblies I can do.

HEAD: Can I call you a bit later?

LB: Sure. I really appreciate the time you've given me and the way you've listened.

I stood up, left her my card and arrived home at 9:15 a.m.

At 9:30 a.m. the phone rang. It was the secretary asking



Scene just outside where we were staying in Gateshead.

if I'd be able to come back to school and speak at a special assembly at 11 a.m. that morning. I replied that it would be my pleasure.

At 10:50 a.m. I was back in the school, walking to the auditorium where Mrs. Campbell had spontaneously arranged a special assembly for the fifth- and sixth-grade students, along with all their teachers. She handed me the coin, which I held in my pocket. As we were walking, Mrs. Campbell addressed me.

HEAD: Dr. Bernstein, I told my staff what you reported to me this morning and they were mortified! And, I must confess that as I spoke to the staff, I had a terrible thought: *I've just invited a stranger back into the school, and what's more, I've allowed him to address the children in an assembly!*

LB: And what happened next?



“YOU SEE, IT’S SOMETIMES QUITE HARD TO BE HONEST WITH OTHER PEOPLE, BUT IT’S MUCH HARDER TO BE HONEST WITH OURSELVES. SO IF IN THE LAST WEEK OR SO YOU HAVE SAID OR DONE SOMETHING TO SOMEBODY THAT REALLY WASN’T VERY NICE, PUT UP YOUR HAND.”

HEAD: Well, we looked you up. Dr. Bernstein, you’ve done a lot. It’s a very impressive profile.

We stood in the auditorium watching the children file in. Their studies had been interrupted, and they

were accompanied by their teachers.

HEAD: [Whispering] Please let me know if you recognize them, and tell me where they’re sitting.

LB: [Whispering] Actually, I’d rather not. Would you mind if they were presented with an ethical challenge?

HEAD: It’s your call.

As more children filed in and looked at the visitor standing next to their head teacher, I waited for the three offenders to walk through the door. Just at that moment, I saw the first boy walk in. He saw me, looked shocked, bent his head and, reading his lips, I notice he muttered an expletive under his breath.

Silence reigned in the auditorium. Mrs. Campbell looked at them and said, “Good morning. I have a visitor for you. I hope he leaves with a smile on his face,” and with that she

left to attend a meeting. The following is a précis of what followed:

“Good morning boys, girls and teachers! Thank you for hosting me at your lovely school, and thank you to the staff who have given up precious time from their teaching so that I may speak to you.

“I’ve been greeted by some very polite children, who have wished me good morning and have held doors open for me. This is impressive!

“Now, I want to find out if West Side Primary School is an honest school, and to do this I’m going to invite you children, and the staff, to respond to the following two requests:

“Here’s the first: If somebody has said or done something to you that really wasn’t very nice during the last week or so, please put up your hand.”

All the children and the staff put up their hands, and so did I.

“Marvellous! This shows me that West Side Primary is definitely an honest school.

“Now, for my second request: You see, it’s sometimes

quite hard to be honest with other people, but it's much harder to be honest with ourselves. So if in the last week or so you have said or done something to somebody that really wasn't very nice, put up your hand."

Once again, the children and adults in the audience put up their hands, as did I.

"Oh, this is very good indeed! Well done, everybody. Give yourselves a clap."

I then asked them why people say and do nasty things to others, and explained the two ways of growing — either to work on ourselves, and therefore really grow, or to put others down and thus deceive ourselves by feeling greater than we really are.

"Now, can anyone tell me anything about me?"

BOY 1: Are you Jewish?

LB: Wow! How did you know that?

BOY 1: Because you're wearing one of those skullcaps.

LB: Very good. Does anybody know why I wear this on my head?

BOY 2: Is it so you don't feel you're putting yourself above others?

LB: Another great answer! Not quite. It's to remind myself that G-d is always above me. Now, let me tell you something else about me.

I told them about my school days and noticed one of the offending boys looking rather nervously at the floor, and his friend's face changing color as she listened to my story.

"Now, as I was walking along the street this morning, just listen to what happened."

Of course, none of the children, apart from three, knew that the incident referred to students in their school, and they all listened intently as I told them about the coin being thrown on the ground and that I could not believe how this could have happened in today's Britain, with its insistence on tolerance, understanding of others' cultures and its belief in a free, equal society. I then continued:

LB: Now, in our religion, we have a law that says we must return lost items to people. And so... [I slowly drew my hand from my pocket, and then held up the five-pence coin for all to see] I've come to return the coin to its owners.

To quote the phrase, 'you could hear a pin drop' would be an understatement. It was so silent that a dropped feather would have made a hole in the floor!

"Yes. I'm very sorry to say that the two boys and girl not only go to this school, but they're in this auditorium right now. You see, I know exactly who those children are and where they're sitting. I *could* walk over to them, make them stand up in front of everybody and return the coin to them. But that's not what we people do. I wouldn't want to embarrass them and make them feel awkward, the way they did to me this morning.

"I could, instead, simply tell your head teacher where



Outside a Gateshead school.

they're sitting and let her deal with this after this assembly is dismissed. But I'm not going to do that, either.

"What I'd like to do is present a challenge to these pupils. (Here I addressed the three students directly, but without looking at them.) If the last 15 minutes of this assembly has made any impression on you, or any difference to you, I want you, the honest children of West Side Primary School, to go to your head teacher yourselves some time after this assembly, claim your five pence and own up to what you've done.

"I'm going to leave this school in just a few moments and you'll never see me again. But let's just see if you've got it in you to grow, and show yourselves in your best form.

"Oh, and just one more thing: before I arrived at school this morning, I had a phone call from someone. When I told her what I was about to do, she said, 'Don't go. Why are you bothering?'

"And now I'll tell you why I'm bothering — because every one of you children is worth bothering about. You are all going to grow up as citizens of this country, and I know that



you will want to be good, honest people who treat others properly, politely and with respect. You have such amazing potential to be outstanding people, and I know, having spent some time with all of you this morning, that you'll want to live up to those expectations and be the best people you can be.

"I want to thank Mrs Campbell for allowing me to talk to you, your teachers for stopping their lessons and joining us, and most of all, I thank you children for welcoming me so beautifully into your school and for listening so well. Have a great weekend, and good luck!"

There was spontaneous applause. One of the teachers approached me and said, "That was absolutely fantastic!"

I went back home, made myself a coffee and soon heard my wife and daughter come in.

Looking rather worried about me, my wife asked, "Are you okay? Have you been all right here, alone all morning? What have you been doing?"

I replied, "Oh, you know, I've learned a bit, made myself some breakfast, spoke at a school assembly..."

"I COULD WALK OVER TO THEM, MAKE THEM STAND UP IN FRONT OF EVERYBODY AND RETURN THE COIN TO THEM. BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT WE PEOPLE DO. I WOULDN'T WANT TO EMBARRASS THEM."

They both stared at me inquisitively.

After a few days I received an email from Mrs. Campbell, which read:

I just wanted to let you know that your assembly had the desired effect! Three children came to me afterwards and admitted everything. They apologized. I spoke to their parents, who appeared distressed and were also very apologetic.

Thanks. I think the children learned a lot.

My reply email read as follows:

Dear Jackie,

Thank you so much for taking the time to write to me. I'm so pleased they came to you and am impressed with the action you took by contacting their parents. I'm also impressed with your professionalism, and that you did your due diligence by checking me out.

Looks like we've ended up with a 'win-win.' I must thank you again, and please convey my thanks to the staff and children of West Side Primary for their warm welcome.

Keep up the good work!

All the best,

Leon Bernstein

Dr. Leon Bernstein B.Ed (Hons), MA, PhD, NPQH [National Professional Qualification for Headship] Educational Services, is an ex-head teacher in primary and secondary schools. Currently, he is an educational consultant, teacher trainer and an OFSTED and Pikuach inspector. Dr. Bernstein also runs parenting sessions.

OFSTED = Office for Standards in Education. OFSTED is the national Schools Inspection Agency.

* Name has been changed.