

The Purse That Became a Thief

I reached into my purse to pull out a five-shekel coin in order to get a grocery cart. Nothing. I dug my hand in deeper, hoping, clawing around for spare change. A woman standing nearby saw my anguish and nudged her free cart in my direction. I thanked her and made my way into the store.

As I placed some apples into a bag, I began to wonder what had happened to all my coins. I knew I had at least 20 shekels worth of coins in my bag. Then a thought entered my mind. I tried to push the thought away, but it had already made itself comfortable. My daughter had asked for a few shekels the other day and I gave her permission to take some from my purse. Could she have taken more? As a parent, I want to think well of my children.

My grocery shopping continued. I went down the snack aisle, which had turned into the guilt section. Guilt for buying them snacks they shouldn't eat, and guilt that I failed as a parent. And I must have failed if my daughter could act this way.

When I got home from the store, I pulled my daughter aside. I told her that money was missing from my purse. Tears sprang to her eyes. This is not the first conversation I have had with her about trust and respecting others' belongings. She insisted that she was innocent, and I wanted to believe her — I really did. But 20 shekels was missing, and none of her other siblings were old enough to even consider such an act.

The day was tense; my daughter was avoiding me. I tried to tell myself that I was doing the right thing and that she could come clean when she's ready. During the day I found a ten-shekel piece on the floor and stuck in my purse, hoping it would be there when I needed it in the future.

A few more hours passed. We needed more milk; I hadn't bought enough at the store. I grabbed my purse and headed out the door. I checked the pocket where I had placed the ten-shekel piece. The coin was missing. I took a breath and returned home, heading straight towards my daughter's room. I tried hard to hold back my temper, disappointed that my suspicions were correct.

"I didn't take it, Mommy," my daughter pleaded when I confronted her. "You have to believe me!"

I wanted to believe her — I really did.

She took my purse and felt around, her little hands able to reach into places mine could not. I held my breath, wondering how long this charade would go on.

"I found them," she cried.

"Where?" I asked, hovering over her.

"There is a hole in one of the pockets," my daughter explained.

We made a small incision in the bottom of the pocket. The coins were so deeply embedded into the lining that we had trouble retrieving them all. I placed the coins into my wallet, then I took my daughter into my arms and apologized, tears falling from my eyes.

"I thought we are supposed to judge others favorably," my daughter replied. "You are always saying how I shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"You're right," I said. *If only I had listened to my own words.*

"Who knew a purse could be a thief," my daughter added with a laugh.

I pulled her close, agreeing, "Who knew?"

I now know a purse can be a thief and that my children are listening when I impart Torah lessons, even if their attention seems elsewhere. The real question is, am I listening? Time has passed since that incident. When something goes missing around the house, we joke that the purse took it. My purse is a constant reminder that first impressions should not be our last.

I used to check my purse for coins before leaving the house; now I check my assumptions: assumptions about my friends, my family, myself. I learned how important it is to judge others favorably — especially our children. ■

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