

## Heart to Heart—Theodore Schofield

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Even in the Darkest Moments

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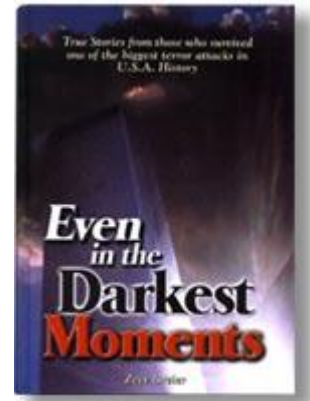
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*Theodore Schofield's hair's-breadth escape is one of the epic stories that emerged from 9/11. If just one of the remarkable miracles he experienced that day had occurred in isolation, it would have been a sensational story on its own. All the more so does hearing this story of a complex interweaving of miracles heighten our awareness of the Infinite Unseen Hand, which guided him that day.*

When he heard a thunderous explosion coming from above, Theodore Schofield's heart stopped beating for a moment. He was not aware how close he and his fellow-workers had just come to receiving a fatal blow from a Boeing 767. Mr. Schofield was employed as the chief financial officer for Hyundai Securities (America) Inc., a stockbrokerage firm based in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The jet struck the north side of the 95<sup>th</sup> floor at 8:46 AM, directly above Mr. Schofield's 78<sup>th</sup> floor office; the occupants of his floor trembled while the building rocked violently for about a minute. *How stupid can those guys be?* Mr. Schofield thought, *We must have been hit by a small plane, similar to the commuter planes that fly up and down the Hudson River, usually at altitudes substantially lower than our floor.*

At that moment, Mr. Schofield's elder son, Scott, decided to switch channels after losing interest in an old movie rerun. Within the first moments of seeing the newflash on CNN, Scott realized straightaway that this was serious, and immediately phoned his father. Although the news reporters had not yet ascertained the cause of the fire on the upper floors, Scott emphatically urged his father to drop everything and leave the building.

Mr. Schofield's fellow workers waited for an official announcement on whether to evacuate the building. The announcement never came, however. For years, the tenants of the building had been required to participate in a monthly fire drill. Now, just when it was really needed, the central security warning system was not working. All of the windows panes were still intact, and they could now see papers gently fluttering down from above. The eerie scene from the window seemed to take on the surrealistic dimension of a ticker-tape parade. And, what an irony: across the world in Gaza and Ramallah, children were throwing sweets!

The tenants on the floor decided collectively to evacuate. There was little panic, as most of the concern about the building collapsing eased after the initial rocking had ceased. Due to the absence of set guidelines for handling this crisis, the office staff took about twenty minutes to organize themselves to leave the building. The other tenants evacuated concurrently. Mr. Schofield was concerned about the blind man with a guide dog that worked on the other side of their floor. Occasionally, he used to see them in the elevator, but now, he had no chance of checking if they were OK. Hopefully, somebody would take care of them.

The evacuation was performed in a calm orderly fashion. At 9:05 AM, Mr. Schofield's six fellow-workers had assembled by the fire escape and were ready to go. By then, smoke was starting to fill the hallway. There was no time to waste; but just at that moment, the phone in Mr. Schofield's office started ringing again. Instinctively, he returned to his desk to take the call. It was Scott.

"Dad, what's going on? What are you still doing there?"

"We're evacuating. There's smoke in the hallway. I'll call you when I'm out of here."

Mr. Schofield hung up the phone. It was now too late for Scott or his mother to exchange a parting "I love you" with their loved one, and the painful anxiety of that brief interchange of words became indelibly etched into Scott's heart.

It seemed hard to believe that less than one month before, Mr. Schofield was not capable of walking fifty feet. Two major arteries in his heart were blocked: one 50%, and the other 98%. Everyone had been so hopeful that his previous open-heart surgery would solve the problems, but his life still seemed to be hanging in the balance. Something had to be done very quickly, or there would be no hope of him surviving.

The hospital recommended he take a particular treatment, known as angioplasty. On 8/17, Mr. Schofield received a stent in a previously grafted bypass. The surgery was complicated but successful, and Mr. Schofield received a new lease on life. The future was still precarious, as medication was required to ensure that the artery previously 98% blocked would function properly. Mr. Schofield was able to lead a somewhat normal life for the first time in years. Everyone in his firm was happy to see him back on board, just a few days after he had been released from hospital.

This time, when Scott returned to CNN, he realized that his father faced two equally frightening possibilities, staying in the burning building, or having to hurry down seventy-eight flights of stairs in his vulnerable condition. The silhouette of an airplane coming into view from the right of the screen caught Scott's attention. Within seconds, a huge explosion occurred; it was the South Tower. Scott and his mother now were nervous about his father being trapped on the floor opposite this terrible fireball. Their fear had reached new heights.

Meanwhile, Mr. Schofield's daughter, Lisa, was sitting in her office in Midtown Manhattan, enthusiastically reviewing major advertising contracts, when she received a call from a close friend to tell her that a plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers. She immediately thought of her father, and became stricken by panic and a choking sense of fear. Lisa quickly dialed his number, and all she heard was a busy signal. Like a robot that was quickly short-circuiting, she hung up and redialed in a rising state of desperation, while telling herself, *My dad cannot be gone. There is too much unfinished business.* She was scared and in shock, and couldn't think about the possibility of the infernal horrible demise of her dad. Her instincts told her he was OK; as she later explained, "I have always been a spiritual person and have a great love for G-d and for His creations. As such, I believe I am gifted with a strong instinctual spiritual sense that guides me. I felt that my dad was still alive—I still felt his life." A sharpened sense of realism was mounting, and in her mind, Lisa cried out to G-d, "Please don't take my dad!" She trusted with all her heart that her prayers were heard in Heaven and her dad was safe. She envisioned a shield of protection around him; this turned out to be a shield of protection for her too. Lisa's faith in Hashem's goodness sustained her through the most terrifying day of her life.

The greatest torture a person can suffer is uncertainty. Scott analyzed the situation. It would take a person in good condition about thirty minutes to descend the seventy-eight flights. He wondered how long it would take his father to reach the exit of the North Tower. What would his father do if he did manage to escape from the blazing building? He prayed that his father would leave the area, rather than remain near the building and watch what was going on a thousand feet above.

For Scott, uncertainty was cruel; for his father, it was merciful. No one in the office knew that a second plane had just crashed into the South Tower. The rest of the staff in Mr. Schofield's office waited until their colleague returned from his phone call. Three colleagues from the firm, Minsong Yi, Sung-Jung Cho, and Ick-Soo Choo, accompanied him, two of them taking him gently but firmly by the arms and helping him down the stairs.

Everybody on the staircase was descending in a calm and orderly manner, with the three kindhearted co-workers remaining by the side of their dear friend all the way. Those who did acts of loving-kindness that day, irrespective of their fate, live on today in the memories of those who witnessed their shining examples.

The four were frequently passed by firefighters on their way to higher floors. Then, close to the 34<sup>th</sup> floor in Stairway B, they met a very nice Port Authority Police officer of Chinese descent. He kept patting Mr. Schofield on the shoulder and giving him words of encouragement: "Keep up the good work. You're doing fine." Mr. Schofield watched with a mixture of admiration and fearful concern when the officer left them to go upstairs and evacuate the other floors. For a full nine months afterwards, Mr. Schofield feared the worst. One day though, his spirits were lifted when he learned that the kindly Port Authority officer had survived. The demonstration of self-sacrifice left such a permanent mark that he says, "I can't forget his face or his voice. They are permanently engraved in my soul."

The descent from the 78<sup>th</sup> floor to the ground-level concourse took them three-quarters of an hour. They found the place deserted except for police and EMS workers. The water from the fire extinguishers was already a few inches deep around the entrance, and only hollow frames were left of what were once doors and windows. Debris was strewn across the ground outside. Mr. Schofield's friends tried to divert his attention in order to prevent him from having the added trauma of seeing the hideous remains of those that had tragically perished.

The rescue teams directed everyone down the steps to the underground concourse, where a shopping complex connected the North Tower with the exits from the adjacent buildings. A rescue worker led them through the lit-up shopping mall towards the exit. After that awful scene with the body parts, their hearts were filled with fear and trepidation about venturing outside. Mr. Schofield knew the shopping mall well. When they took the escalator, he thought, *We must be getting close to the exit from the 5 World Trade Center building.*

The exit onto Vesey Street was completely open too, as all the glass from the doors and windows facing onto the street had been smashed—and then, only twenty feet before they reached the exit, tons of debris suddenly hit the street outside in a black cloud of dust and ash-gray pulverized concrete. The force of the cloud was like a hurricane that blew them down and covered them with a gray coating of gritty dust. The building was plunged into complete darkness. The ear-piercing thunder was overpowering; the closest thing you could compare it to was being close to a Jumbo Jet with its engines at full thrust. It was difficult to breathe in the dust-permeated air. Mr. Schofield thought this was the end.

The hysteria in the Schofield home was building up to a crescendo. At 10:00 AM, Scott and his mother watched the TV, as a cloud of orange-brown smoke filled the air with explosive force. When the cloud began to dissipate, it became startlingly evident that the South Tower was gone. In spite of all this, Scott clutched to the hope that his father was still alive. Had he underestimated the time that it takes to climb down 78 flights of stairs? He was counting on his father still being in the North Tower.

In the mall, minutes that seemed like eternity passed, and a rescue officer appeared with a searchlight; he called for everyone to get up. Mr. Schofield shouted out to his three Korean friends, fearing the worst. His heart was filled with thankfulness when he heard them respond. The wind had abated, allowing them to stand up and form a human chain in the dark, led by the rescue officer. Time had

dissolved into the darkness, and survival was all that mattered. The group edged slowly through the pitch-black dust, which became lodged in their eyes, causing a terrible burning sensation. Eventually, they perceived a faint hint of light at the end of the tunnel. They had arrived at the edge of the outside world.

The exit from 5 World Trade Center opened onto the northeast side of the complex. A cloud of orange-brown smoke filled the air outside. The rescue officer told the group that each person should leave the building and run north as fast as he or she could. Visibility was still poor, but thankfully, breathing was easier than it had been inside the building. The four ran side-by-side as best they could, the Koreans assisting Mr. Schofield. After crossing Vesey Street, they felt they were out of immediate danger, and slowed down to a walk. Mr. Schofield was amazed that he was able to keep up with the pace. Just when they thought they were out of trouble, a huge rumbling could be heard coming from the direction of the Twin Towers.

The image on the TV screen suddenly changed again. Scott and his mother watched in disbelief as the North Tower collapsed into nothingness. In their minds and hearts, they felt it was all over. Mrs. Schofield began to cry. Scott hugged her in realization of their devastating loss.

At that moment, the four escapees realized to their horror that one of the towers was collapsing, bringing in its wake another destructive cloud of ash and dust. *Which tower was it? they thought. Was it the remains of what once had been their office building?*

Just when Mr. Schofield felt he had no remaining strength left to run away from the new frightening clouds of destruction, they caught a glimpse of what looked like an oasis through a desert dust storm, the welcome sight of the Tribeca Grand Hotel. The hotel management compassionately attended to the needs of the four friends along with scores of other people. The frightening scene on TV at the hotel quickly made it apparent how close they had been to the South Tower when it collapsed. It was a very chilling thought to have been so near to the center of the devastation and yet have no idea what was actually happening. The questions were endless: *How many people from their building perished when the towers collapsed? Did their friends manage to escape? What about the other people from their firm who descended the stairs....*

The Schofield home had become the focus of attention of the community. People were calling at the house every few moments: friends, family, co-workers. The phone rang again. Scott's mother answered, and suddenly began crying hysterically. Without a doubt, it sounded to everyone like she had just received confirmation of the worst. After the devastating news of the collapse of the North Tower, Scott still hoped that somehow his father would emerge from the catastrophe. *Dad did, after all, have a track record for beating the odds, didn't he?* The very worst alternative was that this was a confirmation of death, but it seemed unlikely to receive that so soon. Scott's eyes filled with tears, even before his mother stopped crying to tell him, "Yes, Yes, it really is Dad on the phone!"

Mr. Schofield had tried repeatedly to call his family, but the phone lines were jammed. He used his time in the hotel to catch his breath, and wondered how he had made it through the ordeal. Finally, at 11:30 AM he succeeded in reaching his family for the first time in more than two terrifying hours.

When she first heard her husband's voice, Mrs. Schofield felt as though she had just spoken to someone returning from the dead. She urged her husband to catch the next ferry home and not to stop for anything. That was easier said than done, as it was a three-and-half mile hike for the four to the corner of East River and 34<sup>th</sup> Street.

After exchanging a parting embrace, Mr. Schofield's three cherished friends went to the West Side Ferry Terminal, while alongside throngs of other frantic city workers at the East Side terminal, he boarded a ferry. When he arrived at Jersey Shore, the rest of the family was standing eagerly waiting. They cried tears of joy at seeing their beloved husband and father alive. Once Mr. Schofield was safely home, his wife lovingly washed out his eyes.

The next day, during the morning news, Mr. Schofield became fully aware for the first time of the astonishing Divine Providence of his escape. Later, the doctor gave him a full medical examination and confirmed that his health was still holding up. It became clear to him that any one of the multiple circumstances of his awesome escape would have been special in itself:

**Firstly:** The jet hit the 95<sup>th</sup> floor of the North Tower; many of the people working on the 80<sup>th</sup> floor and above did not survive.

**Secondly:** Mr. Schofield, a cardiac patient, was able to descend all seventy-eight floors of the North Tower with a balloon in his artery. A month prior it would have been impossible. What's more, the dust-clogged air near the collapsed South Tower posed a serious threat to his total cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

**Thirdly:** The three Korean co-workers risked their own lives to care for their dear colleague and lead him to safety. If not for their loving-kindness, Mr. Schofield might never have made it.

**Fourthly:** Had the three coworkers arrived at the exit to 5 World Trade Center a mere thirty seconds earlier—the thirty seconds Scott had delayed his father with the second phone call, Theodore Schofield would likely be dead—and for that matter, so too would his three Korean colleagues! He thinks they would not have returned to the building, but would have run through the rain of lethal debris. Instead, they were able to shelter themselves in the lobby, twenty feet from the torrent of destruction from the collapsing South Tower.

**Fifthly:** After the four reached the concourse of the North Tower, their window in time was just adequate to permit them to escape far enough away from the North Tower before it, too, collapsed.

Two days later, Mr. Schofield's younger son, Shraga, took his father to the Yeshivah Gedolah in Passaic, New Jersey to recite the *gomel* blessing of thanksgiving for Hashem's deliverance from the deadly disaster. As Mr. Schofield carefully pronounced each word of the blessing, tears rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time that he had cried since his escape from the Twin Towers.

It was the season of *teshuvah* (repentance), the time for doing personal stocktaking. Mr. Schofield always believed in G-d and Divine Providence. The terrible ordeal he went through convinced him more than ever of his special connection with His Creator. In a sense, his awesome experiences brought him to spiritual "Ground Zero," a place where every day is a brand new beginning and every added moment a special gift from Hashem.

Slowly life returned. All six staff members of the stockbrokerage company survived, and Mr. Schofield and the three Koreans who helped him are in his own words, "as close as a band of brothers could be." Mr. Schofield's trials were not over; thirty days after the surgery and just one week after 9/11, the stent began to clog up again. In a further two months, the artery was again 100% blocked, and he received new medication to alleviate the effects of the blockage. The Jews are a nation of survivors, and Theodore Schofield is no exception.

The *Motzei Shabbos* (evening after the Sabbath) following 9/11 marked the Schofields' wedding anniversary. Mrs. Schofield's spiritual appreciation blossomed with a fitting response to the great miracle performed for her husband. The two of them organized a *seudah hoda'ah* (thanksgiving meal recited after miraculous deliverance from a dangerous situation) with the whole family to celebrate together the precious gift of life. The family was overjoyed. It seemed hard for them to believe that just one month before they were wondering if they would ever have any more *simchos* (celebration) with their dad. Now, he had inspired them all with renewed hope for the future.