

“When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem from animals, from the cattle or from the flock shall you bring your offering.” (1:2)

If Reuven slaps Shimon across the face for no reason, Shimon’s physical pain will not be as great as his emotional pain. Being slapped for no apparent reason is truly an emotional trauma. On the other hand, if Shimon had first struck Reuven with a powerful blow, and then Reuven reciprocated – Shimon would not be that upset. He would understand that he deserves what he has received.

Horav Baruch, z.l., m’Kosov applies this analogy towards explaining the concept of *mesiras nefesh al Kiddush Hashem*, dedication to the point of self-sacrifice for the purpose of sanctifying Hashem’s Name. If a person realizes that he belongs to the Almighty, Who can do with him what He pleases, he will understand that he is obliged to give of his life to sanctify His Name. This is the underlying meaning of the *pasuk*: “When a man among you brings an offering” – Hashem says to His chosen People, “It should not be difficult for you to sacrifice yourselves for Me, or from the animals – from the cattle or from the flock. Learn from the animals, from the cattle and sheep which you freely slaughter to be used as food. They undergo the pain of *Shechitah*, ritual slaughter. You understand that they must go through this process in order to become food, because this is their *raison d’etre*, the purpose of their creation. Therefore, surely, you must understand your own obligation to give up everything in your lives for Me.” The *pasuk* concludes with the words, “shall you bring your offering”: If you understand your position vis-à-vis Hashem, then you will be able to give yourselves up as a sacrifice to Hashem – with love, devotion and a pure heart.

A Jew who has realized that Hashem is the source of all can cope with his own suffering. Conversely, for the Jew who cannot grasp the positive manifestation of suffering, it becomes a two-edged sword, a source of both physical and spiritual pain, a truly depressing force. *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem’s Name, is a privilege which can elevate the simplest of Jews, even the sinners, to an unparalleled spiritual zenith. One who is willing to die for Hashem demonstrates his true love of the Almighty. *Horav Yisrael, z.l., m’Rizin* interprets the *pasuk* dealing with sacrifices as presenting the fundamental significance of *Kiddush Hashem*: “When a man among you brings an offering” – Only he who brings himself to Hashem as an offering can be called a man.

Despite the apparent readiness of a Jew to die *Al Kiddush Hashem* with *mesiras nefesh* when put to the test, we must note that the purpose of man’s creation is that he live – that he observe the Torah and its *mitzvos*, and “live by them” and “not die by them.” Indeed, the *Kotzker Rebbe, z.l.*, emphasizes that *Kiddush Hashem* is *kiddush ha’chaim*, sanctifying life. He interpreted the *pasuk*, *V’anshei kodosh t’heyun li*, “People of holiness shall you be to Me” (*Shemos* 22:30), to mean that Hashem says to us, “Let your holiness be human, and may your human acts be holy.” This is the holiness demanded of man. Hashem has no need for angels in Heaven. The other world is not to be seen as an escape from the responsibilities of life in this world. To paraphrase *Horav Naftali, z.l., m’Ropshitz*, “No Jew can possibly inherit the World to Come except by means of this

world.”

While the Jew’s commitment to *Kiddush Hashem* is unequivocal, what may be of greater significance is the Jew’s willingness to sacrifice himself for the Torah and Jewish values, as well as his commitment to transmitting the heritage of Moshe *Rabbeinu* to the next generation. I take the liberty of citing a story by *Rabbi Zecharyah Fendel* concerning a handwritten page of *Ashrei* which he found in the archives of the *Kibbutz Lochamei ha’Ghetto*. The caption beneath the page indicated that this had been written by a concentration camp inmate, as a means to teach his son how to pray.

“A Jew sits engulfed by the dark despair, the overriding gloom of the concentration camp. He is one of the fortunate ones, for, indeed, he is privileged to have his son by his side. He cannot satiate his son’s craving for food, but, yes, he can give him something else – something perhaps more satisfying – surely more enduring. As indispensable as bread itself, he can give his son something that a Jewish father is instructed to transmit to his son.

“The concentration camp does not supply the materials needed for this endeavor. He looks around and finds a small, dirty scrap of paper. Now, he must fashion a makeshift pencil. With a trembling hand, he etches out the magic formula upon the paper. He looks back and gazes upon his handiwork, “*Baruch Hashem*, I have completed one more link in the chain.” He takes his little son gently by the hand and points to the scribbled letters before him, and he begins to recite the letters. “Read after me, my child,” the father coaxes his son. Together they read, “*Aleph, Bais, Gimel, Daled...*”

What a powerful example of *mesiras nefesh*. They do not know how long they will live, but as long as they breathe as Jews, a father has the *mitzvah* of transmitting the heritage to the next generation. This is more than a *mitzvah* – it is our source of survival!

Horav Ephraim Oshry gave the following eyewitness account of *mesiras nefesh* for Torah in the Kovno Ghetto. It was February 8, 1942, and the Nazis had issued an order for the confiscation and destruction of all *seforim*, Torah literature, of any kind. After the issuance of the order, many Jews – young and old – took extreme measures to protect whatever *seforim* they could. Young and old, they dug pits in which they hid *Sifrei Torah*, Tractates of the *Talmud*, various volumes of *responsa*, *Chumashim* and *Siddurim*. It was the children of the ghetto, however, that exhibited the greatest degree of self-sacrifice.

Rav Oshry remembers, “Upon concluding my classroom lesson on the day the order was issued, I turned to my students and queried, ‘Where will we obtain *Chumashim* and *Gemoras* for our studies?’ They replied with an indomitable spirit shining from their faces, ‘*Rebbe*, do not worry, we will each hide a *Chumash* and *Gemora*, so that we might continue our studies without interruption.’ When I heard their response, my eyes welled up with tears. And I reminded my students, ‘*Kinderlach*, what you are about to do is fraught with danger.’ ‘*Rebbe*,’ they countered, ‘it does not

matter. If they shoot us with our *Gemoras*, we will at least have died *al kiddush Hashem!*”

The next time we hold a *Chumash* or *Gemora* in our hands, we should try to remember this narrative. It might make a difference in the way we learn. If it does not, it might be a good idea to consider why.