

## If his offering is a feast peace-offering. (3:1)

A *Korban Shelamim* is unique in that it is self-motivated, brought voluntarily, because a person has been moved to express his gratitude to Hashem for favors granted, and to enhance his closeness with Him. *Shelamim* is derived from *shaleim*, wholeness, perfection and *shalom*, peace. It increases good will, since so many people – the *Kohanim*, the family and friends of the donor – participate in its consumption. *Ramban* focuses on the relationship of the *Shelamim* with *sheleimus*, wholeness. He observes that the donor who offers a *Shelamim* is doing so freely, not to atone for an infraction on his part. He is a person who seeks spiritual growth on a positive trajectory, not because he is running away, but because he is surging forward.

In way of explanation, I will digress with a story and elaborate afterwards. The Holocaust was a devastating cataclysmic tragedy during which six million of our brothers and sisters were systematically murdered – their only “offense” being their religion – leaving its survivors traumatized for life, some physically and others spiritually. The following story, related by *Rabbi Elimelech Biderman, Shlita*, is about one such *Yid* who was observant prior to the war’s outbreak and, although he survived physically, he became a victim of the spiritual questions he had after the war.

He arrived in America, a young, broken survivor, seeking to distance himself as much as possible from the communities that were home to organized Jewish religious observance. After his experiences, he sought distance between himself and Judaism. He moved to a small village in southern United States, married a like-minded third generation biologically Jewish American, and together they raised their only child, a wonderful young boy, happy, inquisitive and totally oblivious to the religion of his ancestors. Despite his father’s antagonistic relationship to religious observance, when his son approached his thirteenth year, the father told him that, for a Jewish boy, his thirteenth birthday holds unique significance as a rite of passage. Thus, his father, who was by now a prosperous businessman, wanted him to pick out a present of his liking; money was no object. The problem was that the village where they lived was so far off the beaten path that they did not even have a “dollar store.”

Father and son drove to the closest city, where they could visit its shops and select a suitable gift of his son’s liking. Money was not an issue, but the boy was not the usual spoiled, American boy who only sought electronic diversions which lack substance. He was a child whose emotions went beyond the puerile, shallow games and toys that excite the unsophisticated mind. When they passed a Judaica store, the boy suddenly became enthusiastic and wanted to go in. He could not see enough. He had questions about everything – from books to Judaica. He was curious concerning the tradition beyond the religious objects that he saw. His father made every attempt to convince him to leave the store that sold religious “antiques,” tributes to a no longer vibrant religion. The father was ill at ease, anxious that his son was expressing an interest in Judaism.

Suddenly, his son feasted his eyes on a clay *Chanukah menorah*. It was old, but, by the intricate

artwork, it was evident that its creator had put his heart and soul into its conception. "This is what I want!" the boy excitedly informed his father. "I will buy you anything but that," the father countered. His son pleaded with him, "I did not ask for anything from the previous stores. I finally found something that I like and want. Please, let me have it."

The father asked the storekeeper to tell them the *menorah's* history. "This precious *menorah*," the man began, "was discovered in a concentration camp. Apparently, it was made by an inmate, concealed from the eyes of the SS guards. This *menorah* was to illuminate the darkened lives of the Jewish inmates." When the boy heard the story, he wanted the *menorah* even more. His father relented and purchased it. The boy spent hours staring at the *menorah*, going over its intricacies, imagining the danger and sacrifice experienced by the inmate who risked his life to make it. As *Chanukah* loomed closer on the Jewish calendar, the son told his father that he would like to light the *menorah* in memory of its creator. Unfortunately, as he was carrying the *menorah* to its honored place on the table, it slipped from his hands, fell on the ground and broke into many pieces.

When the father saw how distraught his son was, he offered to help him glue it back together. As they worked on the *menorah*, a small yellow piece of paper fell out of one of the hollow branches which the father picked up, read and promptly fainted. When he was revived he explained, "This paper has a message written in *Yiddish* that related the story of its creator and his purpose in making the *menorah*. He wrote, 'I am forced to work fourteen hours a day. The work is backbreaking, but, at the end of the day, rather than go to sleep, I abstain from sleep and instead devote myself to my labor of love – to make this little *menorah*. In a few months it will be *Chanukah*, and, if I am still alive, I will light the *menorah*. If Heaven-forbid, I do not survive this misery, I ask that whoever finds it light the candles on *Chanukah*, and this way my *neshamah*, soul, will have an *aliyah*, spiritual elevation. The letter is signed...'" and the father read the name. It was his name! He had made the *menorah* years earlier during the Holocaust. With *Hashgachah Pratis*, Divine Providence, it had returned home.

The story ends on a bittersweet note. The father never ended up doing *teshuvah*. Nonetheless, the story produced an emotional tug on the son's heart which became stronger until he eventually did *teshuvah*, became fully observant, and raised a beautiful, *frum*, observant family, a credit to *Klal Yisrael*. I digressed from the original *dvar Torah*, because I was troubled about the story's ending: Why did the father not return? He saw clear, unequivocal *Hashgachah Pratis*. For what more could he ask? Indeed, the story had a good ending in the fact that his legacy was preserved through his son, but I wonder what prevented him from returning. I think the answer may well be gleaned from the *Ramban's* understanding of the *Korban Shelamim*. There seem to be two variant approaches towards serving Hashem: the positive, wholesome approach employed by the one who offers a *Korban Shlelamim*, and the guilt-ridden manner in which one brings a *Korban Chatas*, sin-offering.

I think that these variant approaches, likewise, break down into the manner and reason one does *teshuvah* and continues on to become a fully observant member of *Klal Yisrael*. Part of the *baal*

*teshuvah's* struggle is to erase the past, to see to it that his previous life does not come to haunt him. *Teshuvah*, return, gives new and exciting positive meaning to life, but it also casts a shadow of disapproval, a harsh light, on the past. The residue of the past often surfaces, unless one breaks his ties, not out of anger, but out of a positive change of direction. Penitence leads to atonement and absolution, which, in effect, is the expunging of one's sin, allowing the *baal teshuvah* to sort of become reborn. *Teshuvah*, thus, has two essential phases: disengagement from the past, followed by rebirth. The process takes as long as the *baal teshuvah* allows it to be drawn out. As long as he hides in shame, anger, weakness, the process will remain negative; the joy of rebirth will not begin. Some people, like the father who made the *menorah*, cannot make that break with the past. This man experienced unspeakable suffering, which left him superficially angry at his religion, but essentially angry at himself. This emotional negativity did not allow him to turn the corner, to act positively, to alter his life's trajectory. He feared his son's gravitation to observance, because he knew it would awaken within him feelings that would haunt him. He loathed himself for what he had become, but he was not sufficiently at peace with himself to extricate himself from these feelings. Without *shalom*, peace of mind, he could have no *shleimus*. The *Korban Shelamim* is the product of positive energy, positive emotions, gratitude emanating from a wholesome feeling of knowing that everything we have is good, because it comes from Hashem.