

You shall not desecrate My Holy Name; and I shall be sanctified among Bnei Yisrael. (22:32)

The above *pasuk* is the source of the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Shem Shomayim*, enjoinder to sanctify Hashem's Name. This *mitzvah* applies to all Jews – not simply a select few. Our willingness to sanctify His Name is the determining factor in measuring our level of commitment and faith. If this is the case – and if *Kiddush Hashem* is of such overriding significance – why does the Torah not write it in a more “commandment like” vernacular, such as, “Sanctify My Name!” Instead, the Torah presents it in such a manner as to be describing an unrelated future event that will occur when Hashem's Name will be sanctified among the Jewish People. “And I shall be sanctified” – *V'Nikdashti* – is not an enjoinder; it is a description of what will be.

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, posits that the *pasuk* is deliberately worded, actually presenting a fundamental lesson concerning the nature of *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, in general and *Kiddush Hashem* in particular. We must first analyze the motivation for *mesiras nefesh*. One does not simply decide one day that he is willing to sacrifice himself for his faith. *Mesiras nefesh* is a process. A sane adult who is in control of his faculties does not just give up his life without prior conditioning, consisting of thinking through his faith and acknowledging his commitment by achieving an elevated level of spiritual connection to the Almighty. One does not relinquish his life just because one day he has discovered the existence of the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem*. It is also not the result of a solitary decision. It is a major decision which is the consequence of considerable spiritual development.

Only one who has lived a life of dedication to *kedushah* and *taharah* (holiness and purity), *taharas ha'mishpachah* (family purity), *kashrus* (laws of forbidden foods), ethics in business, care concerning one's speech and maintaining a Torah-appropriate lifestyle, both in his private and communal life, can say that he yearns to come closer to Hashem. If and when he sins, he is sincerely filled with regret, seeking to atone for his errant behavior. The bottom line: Is he for real? Is he sincere in his beliefs? Or is it all based upon comfort and convenience? Is he fully committed to Hashem, His Torah and His *mitzvos*, or does he carry out only those *mitzvos* which do not cramp his style?

One who has “checked” positive to the all-around commitment demanded of an observant Jew, he – and only he, upon being confronted with the ultimate test of commitment, the test of *mesiras nefesh*, will be motivated by the *kedushah*, holiness, from within himself, choosing to give up his life to sanctify Hashem's Name. It will be the natural consequence of a committed life.

We now understand the meaning of *V'Nikdashti b'soch Bnei Yisrael*, “And I shall be sanctified among *Bnei Yisrael*.” It will not happen as a result of being commanded, but rather, as a natural extension of a life lived as an observant Jew in accordance with Hashem's prescribed demands of us.

Rav Alpert suggests that this is the underlying meaning/message of the episode concerning Rabbi Akiva, a scenario that played itself out during the final moments of his life. *Chazal* (*Talmud Berachos* 61b) teach that, when they brought Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was the time for *Krias Shema*. They began raking his flesh with metal combs. Yet, despite this excruciating painful ordeal, he was in the midst of reciting *Krias Shema* and accepting upon himself the *Oi Malchus Shomayim*, Yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom. His students asked him, “Our master, even to this extent? (Must one recite *Krias Shema* amidst such debilitating pain?)” Rabbi Akiva replied, “All of my life I was troubled by this *pasuk*, *b’chol nafshecha*, ‘With all your soul,’ which is interpreted as even if He takes your life. [The *mitzvah* of serving Hashem with all your soul means literally even if you must give up your life in His service]. I thought, ‘When will this opportunity be given to me so that I can fulfill it?’ and now that the opportunity is here, should I not fulfill it?”

Observing Rabbi Akiva at the moment of ultimate truth and sacrifice, even his students (who were themselves distinguished scholars and had achieved an extremely high level of service to Hashem) were amazed. They asked, “*Rebbe*, even to such an extent?” Although acutely aware of Rabbi Akiva’s greatness and holiness, they wondered how it was possible to ignore, to transcend one’s terrible pain and meditate with clarity the acceptance upon oneself of the Heavenly Kingdom. There are some instances that are beyond human capability.

Rav Akiva’s response was that this was not a thought that had come to him only at this point in his life; rather, it had always been on his mind. The thought of *mesiras nefesh* accompanied him through his mortal sojourn. This moment – his reaction to the *raison d’etre* of his life – was the natural continuation of the way he had lived every moment of his life.

With this in mind, the notion of *Kiddush Shem Shomayim* as a lifelong process of *avodas Hashem* until one achieves the ultimate *deveikus*, clinging to the Almighty, allows us to better understand the words of the **Maharam, zl, m’Rottenberg**. In his *Teshuvos*, Responsa, the *Maharam* writes that once a person has decided to give up his life for *Kiddush Hashem* – regardless of the form of death to which he is subjected – he will feel no pain – whatsoever! This is substantiated by the fact that people have gone to their death by fire which is the most excruciatingly, painful form of death – without uttering a sound. How is this possible? A person who puts his finger in a flame will scream. It is impossible to control the expression of emotion under such conditions. We have heard, however, that *kedoshim*, holy martyrs, have sustained this terrible pain – in silence.

Rav Yosselman, zl, of Rosheim, the famous *shtadlan*, intercessor, on behalf of Jews during the sixteenth century, would accompany those martyrs for whom his advocacy was unsuccessful, on their final journey. He personally attested to the following. “I attended the crucifixion of a number of our brethren. As they went out to the gallows, they accepted the yoke of Heaven upon themselves with great love. They suffered much pain, some of them living up to ten days on the cross (their hands and legs pierced with nails, their bodies suspended on the nails); yet, they never for a moment reneged their acceptance of the yoke, until the moment that their holy *neshamos*, souls, departed from them *b’taharah*, with utmost purity” (paraphrased from *Umasuk Ha’or*).

Horav Shlomo Leinstein, Shlita, quotes from one of the *Golei Sfarad*, Spanish Inquisition exiles, *Rav Avraham HaLevi* in his *Megillas Amrafel* (*Rav Avraham HaLevi* was the author of one of the *Kinos* of *Tishah B'Av*). "It is a *mesorah*, tradition, handed down from our sages, that one who decides to give up his life to sanctify Hashem's Name will feel no pain. He will be able to undergo much pain and suffering without exhibiting any outward expression of hurt." He quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma*, "Why is *Klal Yisrael* compared to the *yonah*, dove?" As the dove neither struggles, nor exhibits any painful death throes when it is slaughtered, so, too, *Klal Yisrael* does not struggle when they are slaughtered. In his *kinah*, lamentation, for *Tishah B'Av*, *Rav Avraham* writes, "See the great and exalted wonder; My children enter into the flames amidst song and joy to unify and sanctify their Creator and praise His Name."

The Festival of *Pesach* has historically been marred with tragedies involving *Kiddush Hashem*. The infamous blood libels of the Medieval ages, which continued on to the twentieth century, was the gentile anti-Semite's medium for inflicting bodily harm and death on the Jewish citizens of Europe. For centuries, Jewish families throughout Europe celebrated *Pesach* in an environment of unbridled terror. They never knew when the forces of hatred would unleash their venom against them. Hundreds of blood libels were the precursor of the pogroms that followed. The fear became so grave that the *Taz* ruled that the traditional red wine that was used for the *Seder* should be substituted with white wine; "In lands where false accusations are made, we refrain from using red wine." Perhaps, when we sit back at our *Seder* tables and drink red wine, we should stop for a moment to think and pay tribute to all those of our brethren who fell victim to the reign of terror that prevailed during this time.

Veritably, why is *Pesach*, the Festival most associated with miracles, freedom and rejuvenation, the time when so much *Kiddush Hashem*, takes place? It is almost an anomaly, as *Pesach* is the time when we became liberated from this persecution. When two brothers, *Rav Yehoshua* and *Rav Chaim Reitzes* of Lvov, Poland, were being led to their execution as a result of a false blood libel, *Rav Yehoshua* turned to his brother and asked this question. "Why has so much Jewish blood been spilled during this time of year – when Hashem has shown us so many miracles?"

His brother, *Rav Chaim*, replied, "Concerning the *pasuk*, 'And I shall be sanctified among *Bnei Yisrael*, I am Hashem Who makes you holy. Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to be a G-d unto you; I am Hashem' (Ibid 22:32,33), the **Toras Kohanim** comments, 'This is the condition for which I took you out of Egypt – so that you will sanctify My Name.'" *Kiddush Shem Shomayim* is part and parcel, the *raison d'etre*, of the exodus from Egypt.

Growing up, my parents would often relate, especially during the *Pesach Seder*, how they survived the Warsaw Ghetto uprising which took place during *Pesach* of 1943 (April 19-May 16, 1943). They "celebrated" the *Seder* by running from burning house to burnt out house – and then back again. I always had difficulty understanding how they were able to conduct a *Seder* during such a period of danger and travail. I now understand, that, actually, this is all part of the *Pesach* ritual. Without our willingness and readiness to sacrifice ourselves for Hashem – there would be no *Seder*, because

we would still be slaves in Egypt.