

You shall observe the Shabbos, for it is holy to you. (31:14)

Shabbos is to the Jew much more than a *mitzvah* imperative. *Shabbos* is a holy day, consecrated from the beginning of time by the Almighty Himself. This is an idea which we often do not consider. If Hashem made this day holy, what right do we mortals have to desecrate it? People tend to offer two common excuses/answers to this question. First, "I do not care." This is the response of the individual who disregards the Torah. It has no bearing on his life. Such a person simply does not fit into the equation. He has written himself off from the Torah. He has divorced himself from the centerpiece, the nucleus, of Judaism. Second, is the Jew who claims to be a Jew at heart. He cares, but it is difficult for him to accept the yoke of *mitzvos*. He is a sort of non-practicing Jew. Regrettably, he is very much like a flashlight without its battery. It is still called a flashlight – but, without the battery, what function does it have?

If we keep in mind that *Shabbos* is holy and that devout Jews embrace this idea, we will better understand and appreciate the following vignettes:

One *Shabbos* morning **Horav Avraham, zl, m'Kopichnitz** was walking to the *Mikveh*, to immerse himself prior to *davening*. He chanced upon two young Jewish men who were not wearing headgear (hat or a *yarmulke*) standing outside the *Mikveh*. One of them held a lit cigarette between his fingers. The righteous *Kopichnitzer* turned to him and said, "I do not know you well, but I am certain that within your chest pounds a good Jewish heart. If you would realize how much pain you are causing me by smoking on *Shabbos*, you would surely not smoke."

The young man was moved by the *Rebbe's* sincerity, and immediately disposed of the cigarette. His friend, however, was not so acquiescent. "If we want to smoke, what is it your business? We are not in Europe. This is a free country. If I have no problem with your *Shabbos* observance, why then should you deprive me of my pleasure?"

The *Rebbe* smiled, "I recognize you, too," he said. "You also have a good heart. If you see someone fall and hurt himself, you would immediately run to help him. Why? Why do you simply not say, 'This is a free country, I do not have to help him!' You should know that one who profanes *Shabbos* breaks not only his leg; he endangers his entire spiritual dimension. He is punished with Heavenly excision. If I walk down the street and notice a Jew bleeding to death – will I not do everything to save him? Surely, I would be wrong to say, 'It is a free country!'"

The young man understood fully well where the *Rebbe* was going with his critique. "*Rebbe*, what should I do?" he asked.

"Keep *Shabbos*, observe it properly." The *Rebbe* said.

"I cannot do that. I already take off on Sunday. There is no way I can be free for two days."

“I understand,” said the *Rebbe*, “but, at least, observe this *Shabbos*.” The young man acquiesced and observed that *Shabbos*. Sometime later, he visited the *Rebbe* and said, “Once I observed that one *Shabbos*, my entire outlook was altered, and I now accept upon myself to observe *Shabbos* every week.”

The second story takes us back seventy years to the Lodz Ghetto. Unique among Polish cities, Lodz was able to secure an agreement with the accursed Nazis to allow its Jewish citizens to work for the Third Reich. In return, the city would be designated as a labor camp, rather than an extermination camp. This, of course, did not prevent its inhabitants from succumbing to starvation, deprivation of health, infection and disease. Furthermore, every once in a while, the Nazis selected the infirm and sickly and sent them away to the dread extermination camps. So, yes, Lodz was not as dreadful a ghetto as the others, but it was a ghetto no less, and far from a happy place. In 1944, when it was clear that the tide had turned against them, the Nazis saw the Russians breathing down their necks and poised for an attack on Lodz, they began liquidating a good portion of the Jewish population. In the end, only 10,000 Jews remained in this once beautiful Jewish city.

There was a factory in Lodz which, prior to the occupation, had belonged to a Jew. Now it was under Nazi control. Its workers, however, were all Jewish. Among the workers was an individual who was nicknamed *Reb Shabbos*, because he related everything to *Shabbos*. Each day of the week was *Shabbos* related – either to the previous *Shabbos* or to the coming *Shabbos*. No one knew his origins. They knew only that his knowledge of Judaism seemed to be limited, but his knowledge and passion concerning *Shabbos* were prodigious.

Now that the Nazis had assumed ownership of the factory, the work week included *Shabbos*. This troubled *Reb Shabbos*, who rallied the men around him saying, “If we work an hour or two extra each day, we will fill our quota without having to work on *Shabbos*.” His suggestion was accepted. The workers would show up on *Shabbos* at the designated time, but, instead of working, they *davened*. A worker stood guard at the door to notify them if any Nazis were coming to visit. One day, catastrophe struck. The guard had dozed off from sheer exhaustion and was not awake when one of the camp guards came visiting – during *Mussaf Shemoneh Esrai*.

This guard grew up in Lodz close to the Jewish neighborhood. He, therefore, was quite knowledgeable of Jewish tradition and conversant in *Yiddish*. “Ha! You are *davening* with such *kavanah*, concentration,” the guard began. “Have you begun *laining*, reading the Torah? Who is the *Baal Korei*, Torah reader?” he asked with a devious smile across his face.

The men realized that they were in a very serious predicament and were resigned to accepting the worst. Suddenly, *Reb Shabbos* came forth, approached the Nazi, and, with a sense of self-confidence, said, “Honored sir. Last night I had a compelling dream. My saintly father, may he rest in peace, appeared to me in the company of my departed mother. He implored me, ‘My son, tomorrow is my *yahrtzeit*. I beg of you to somehow convene a *minyán* and recite *Kaddish*. If you do not do this, I will descend from Heaven and take your life!’ He reiterated his request and once

again emphasized the punishment.

“It is because of this dream that I convinced nine other Jews to join me in prayer. Please do not hold them responsible. They are here because of me.” The men could not believe what they were hearing. Essentially, *Reb Shabbos* was relinquishing his life for them. What was all the more shocking was the guard’s reaction: “Good, but this better not happen again. The next time, you might not be so fortunate to have a ‘nice’ guard like me.”

The men breathed a sigh of relief. They could not believe what had just transpired. It was a miracle. Nazi guards were not understanding people. They were cruel fiends. Apparently, there was something more to this *Reb Shabbos* than people realized. Indeed, as soon as the Nazi guard left the block, *Reb Shabbos* said, “*Nu*, let us return to our *davening!*”