

"You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live." (18:5)

The *mitzvos* of the *Torah* were given for the sake of life - not death. We generally accept that the concept of *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, is a reference to one who is prepared to give up his life for Hashem. **Horav E.M. Schach, Shlita**, posits that this is not the *Torah's* intent. Rather, *mesiras nefesh* is defined by man's devotion to "live" as a Jew - despite challenging situations. The *Torah* values human life, demanding that we maintain a lifestyle of *Torah* and *mitzvos* throughout our lifetime.

People are frequently prepared to go to war to risk their lives for an ideal or a religion which has been created by human beings. At the same time these people cannot withstand the pressures of their base desires. Hashem does not want us to die for Him. He demands that we live for Him - with *mesiras nefesh* for *mitzvos*!

We find that during his last moments, as they were scraping off the skin of his body with metal combs, Rabbi Akiva, the great martyred *Tannah*, accepted upon himself the yoke of *Malchus Shomayim*, the kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, he prolonged the recitation of the word "*echod*," which proclaims the unity of Hashem, until his soul's departure from his body coincided with his utterance of this word. This was all done so that he could perform the *mitzvah* with remarkable *mesiras nefesh*. One would think that Rabbi Akiva was demonstrating the importance of giving up one's life for the sake of Heaven.

Horav Schach feels that *Chazal* convey a different message. They state, "When Rabbi Akiva was taken out to be executed, it happened to be the time for *Krias Shma*, reciting the *Shma*." Rabbi Akiva refused to permit the debilitating pain and anguish to deter him from reciting *Krias Shma*. Thus, he recited the *Shma* despite the cruel torture which he was undergoing. Hence, we infer that Rabbi Akiva's pre-eminence was not a result of the fact that he gave up his life to perform a *mitzvah*. Rather, his greatness was that he continued to observe the *mitzvos* despite the terrible conditions and pain to which he was subjected.

A Jew's obligation is to serve Hashem and observe the *Torah* his entire life, even under the most desperate situations. Even in his last moments on this world, he was alive and consequently mandated to serve Hashem! Rabbi Akiva did not die with *mesiras nefesh*, he lived with *mesiras nefesh*. *Horav* Schach illuminates for us the focus and perspective that a *Torah* Jew must demonstrate.

This writer remembers that when his *Rosh Yeshivah*, **Horav Boruch Sorotzkin, zl**, was in the hospital prior to his *petirah*, he was undergoing treatments for the disease which ravaged his body. He was subject to the most excruciating pain. Yet, he remained undaunted and continued to study *Torah*. On a day shortly before his death, his son, *Horav* Yitzchak Sorotzkin, *Shlita*, met him as he

was hunched over in his wheelchair, studying from a *sefer*. One look at his shriveled body and the lines of pain on his face told him that his father was in excruciating agony. "Why are you learning now?" his son asked him. "When else will I be able to learn?" answered the *Rosh Yeshiva*. This response characterizes the true essence of a *gadol b'Torah*. We are committed to Hashem's *Torah* and *mitzvos* every minute of our lives. This is the essence of *mesiras nefesh*.