

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

The Talmud (Yoma 85B) expounds on the words, v'chai bahem, "and live by them," that pikuach nefesh, saving a life, takes precedence over all mitzvos, except for the three cardinal sins: murder; idolworship; adultery (and shmad, when gentiles force a Jew to choose between Hashem and his own life). Under such circumstances, one forfeits his life. Rashi interprets v'chai bahem to mean that, as a result of one's adherence to mitzvos, he will achieve eternal life in Olam Habba, the World to Come.

Horav Hillel Vitkind, zl, explains v'chai bahem homiletically as applying a mussar, character refinement, approach. A person says to himself, "Shabbos observance is difficult. There are a multitude of laws in which one must be proficient if he is to properly observe Shabbos. Nonetheless, I accept Shabbos observance, because, after all, what choice do I have in the matter? I either believe or I burn in Gehinnom, Purgatory. There are those who spend Shabbos at the beach. It must be fun, but what can I do? The choice was made for me. So, I might as well accept it like a man and live with it."

"Woe is to such a shmiras Shabbos, and woe is to such a person." V'chai bahem, explained Rav Hillel, means that this is one's own life. An entire week goes by, and I wait every day, hour, moment for the opportunity to observe Shabbos. I wait all night for the moment when I can put on my Tefillin. A well-known baal teshuva, returnee to Jewish observance, once said, "There are those who, instead of having 613 mitzvos, have (instead) 613 questions: 'Why do we need this? Is this really necessary?'"

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl, relates that a man once came to the Brisker Rav with an elixir for life, an innovative idea for achieving longevity. Shlomo Hamelech writes in Sefer Mishlei (27:18), Notzeir te'einah yochal piryah, "The one who plants the fig tree will eat from its fruit." This implies that until one completes his purpose in life, he continues to live, since he "planted" the tree and only he eats its fruit. If one is not "ready" to eat its fruit, no one else can take his place. Therefore, he will not complete his function/purpose in life, so that he will live forever.

The Brisker Rav listened, then looked up at the man, and asked, "Is that called living? Such a life whereby one does not learn Torah (which is our purpose in life) is not living! V'chai bahem – life is called living only when one is involved bahem – in them, in Torah study and mitzvah observance! Otherwise, he is not alive!"

I wrote this while I was on board a flight to Eretz Yisrael. Next to me was a successful businessman, gentile by religious persuasion. After about an hour of watching me, he took a break from his movie to ask, "Don't you people ever stop?" "Stop what?" I asked. "All of this studying! When we took off you were reciting a prayer (Tehillim, I do not fly well!). Then you started with your

evening prayer (someone must have told him the purpose of our minyan).” Finally, I sat down to write because that is what I do. I explained that I am an author of theological expositions, and I work whenever the opportunity avails itself. It was his parting words that struck me, “Well, you seem to be enjoying your work too much!” My parting words to him were, “I do this for a living, not a livelihood. It is my life. Why should I not enjoy it?”

Yiddishkeit, i.e. religious observance, should be vibrant, because, after all, it is our life. It defines us. Otherwise, what distinguishes us from anyone else? Religion should be passionate, not a drag, not something we must do because we were born “that way.”

Survivors of the Holocaust who had been deprived of all physical basics -- starved, beaten, persecuted physically and emotionally -- would have been expected to make a bee-line to the first morsel of decent food available. Some did, but others just wanted a Gemorah, a Chumash, a Shulchan Aruch. They had not learned for so long; they felt deprived of life. Their approach to the meaning of life was different. They understood that physical sustenance was critical, but, without spiritual sustenance, the life that one would lead would be purposeless and without meaning. Now, make the choice.