

This is the law of this meal-offering. (6:7)

In *Parashas Vayikra*, the Torah addresses the laws of the *Korban Minchah*. The Torah (2:1) begins the laws of *Korban Minchah* with a word not used regarding any of the other *korbanos nedavah*, voluntary offerings: *Nefesh*, soul (*v'nefesh ki sakriv*). *Rashi* explains that, concerning a *Korban Minchah*, the Torah makes an exception, since this inexpensive *korban* is usually the offering which a poor man brings. Hashem says, "I will regard it (the *korban* of an *ani*, poor man) as if he had offered his very soul. Concerning the *Korban Minchah*, *Chazal* (*Menachos* 110a) teach, *Echad ha'marbeh v'echad ha'mamit, ubilvad she'yichavein libo la'Shomayim*, "Whether one does a little (brings a *Minchah*) or one does a lot (brings an animal sacrifice) (what matters most) is that one's *kavanah*, intent, in bringing the *korban* is *l'shem Shomayim*, for Heaven's sake."

We no longer have *korbanos*; nonetheless, the imperative, "*Echad ha'marbeh v'echad ha'mamit u'bilvad she'yichavein libo la'Shomayim*," has not changed. Whether it is with regard to our *avodah she'b'elev*, service of the heart, prayer/supplication, or any spiritual activity for that matter, it is all about intent. One who acts for Heaven's sake fulfills the *mitzvah/tefillah* meaningfully. Otherwise, it is a *mitzvah* that lacks completeness and perfection.

A well-known story about the *Baal Shem Tov* gives us insight into how our *tefillos* will gain entrance to the Heavenly gate of prayer. It took place on *Yom Kippur*. The saintly *Baal Shem Tov* was leading the services, when he abruptly paused in middle of a chant. He appeared troubled, his countenance presented a strained, troubled image. When the *Baal Shem Tov* stopped, so did the rest of the congregation. The people knew something was out of sorts. Their revered *Rebbe* did not just stop in the middle of his service. During the wait, a young shepherd boy who was sitting in the back of the *shul* was troubled that he was unable to express his yearnings through prayer. He so wanted to *daven* like everyone else, to articulate his love for Hashem and supplication for the coming year. Alas, this boy had never been availed religious instruction. Sadly, he still could not read the Hebrew letters of the *siddur*. His lack of knowledge would not prevent him from expressing himself to his Heavenly father. He took his shepherd's whistle out of his pocket and decided to pray in the form of a tune. After all, Hashem "understands" the yearning and love behind the tune. Why should it be different than oral expression? As soon as the boy blew the first sound, the congregation turned around and silenced him. How could he make a farce out of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar year?

Suddenly, the *Baal Shem Tov's* visage changed, as a smile brightened his face. The holy *tzaddik* resumed the service and brought it to a joyful conclusion. His students asked him for an explanation. They were acutely aware that every action which the *Rebbe* performed was profound and well-thought out. He explained, "I sensed the Heavenly gates were sealed to our pleas. When Hashem heard the sincere prayer emitted by the shepherd boy via his whistle, the gates were opened in our favor."

The following story has three versions – that I am aware of. Indeed, it supposedly took place with

three different rabbis. In any event, the message remains the same: *Davening, avodah she'b'lev*, is all about sincerity and intent. Some of us are more well-versed than others, and, as such, we have a deeper knowledge of *pirush ha'milos*, meaning of the words. Without sincerity and intent *l'shem Shomayim*, however, knowledge of the words alone comprises imperfect prayer. As we saw above, what we say is overshadowed by how we say it. Now for the story.

One of the students of the *Tzemach Tzedek*, himself a scholar of note, was sent by the *Rebbe* (*Horav Menachem Mendel Shneersohn, zl*, third *Lubavitcher Rebbe*) to travel throughout Russia, visiting the small far-off villages where the few Jews who made these places their home would be availed some spiritual inspiration and encouragement. It was *Erev Yom Kippur* when he arrived at a village far off the beaten path to discover that its Jews, about one hundred in all, had all gone to Vitebsk to join in the services at its large *shul*. While he did not blame them, he was still stuck in a village nowhere in the proximity to a *shul*. One of the villagers told him that two hours away there was a Cantonist village with a small *shul*. The Cantonists were a unique group of Jews whom we would refer to as bordering on the fringe. These men had been kidnapped as young children and forced to serve in the Czar's army for 25 years. The goal of this forced incarceration was to distance these children from Judaism. In most cases, the accursed Czar's diabolical plan succeeded. Those who withstood the emotional, physical and spiritual challenge emerged as changed men, hollow, broken shells of humanity. Having survived a quarter century of debasing, cruel treatment – with their commitment to Hashem still pulsating within them – these men kept to themselves and served Hashem in the manner that they could.

When the disciple heard that a Cantonist *shul* was within a two-hour walk, he practically ran all the way. He entered the "village" comprised of a few broken down wooden shacks. The first person to see the *Rav* immediately called the rest of their group. Within a few moments, a small, motley group assembled around their honored guest. They were beyond excited. To have such a distinguished scholar visit their outpost was an honor. They asked him if he could lead them in the *Yom Kippur* service. They looked at him in such a pleading manner that he saw they really meant their request. How could he refuse? They made, however, one stipulation: one of them had to lead the *Neilah*, closing service. The *Rav* agreed, and they all went to the makeshift *shul* to usher in the Day of Atonement.

The *Rav* was amazed by the way these men *davened*. After suffering for 25 years, to be able to maintain their faith and *daven* the way they did required almost super human effort and a connection with, and love for, Hashem that only they could have. These simple men were giants of spirituality. The *Rav* felt honored to have the privilege of joining with them in prayer.

Finally, the closing moments of *Yom Kippur* was upon them. It was time to recite the hallowed *Neilah* service. Regardless of a person's affiliation, *Neilah* is the most compelling prayer of *Yom Kippur*. As they closed the service of the holiest day of the year, it was laden with emotion and trepidation. One was either successful, or he was not. No other avenues existed. As such, the individual who leads the service must be one who understands the enormity of the moment, such

that he is able to inspire the congregation. These men had chosen one of their own. The *Rav* was in for a life-altering surprise. After this *Neilah*, he would no longer be the same person.

The *chazan*, leader of the service, ascended to the lectern and proceeded to unbutton and then remove his shirt. When the *Rav* saw this, he was about to yell "Stop!" One does not remove his shirt in a *shul*. When the shirt fell to the floor, however, he saw hundreds of scars and welts on the man's back and shoulders. These scars were the result of 25 years of refusing to give up his Jewish faith. These scars represented a badge of courage. When the *Rav* saw the *chazan's* scarred back, he broke down in tears. He knew that he was standing in the presence of greatness.

The Cantorist then raised his hands to Hashem and, with a loud voice, began his supplication, "Hashem! Please send *Moshiach*! I do not ask for the sake of our families, because we have no families. I do not ask for the sake of our futures, because we have no futures. I am not asking for the sake of our livelihoods, our comfort, our children, or our reputations, because we have none of those. We are asking *L'Maancha; Asei l'maan Shemecha*; Do it for Your sake; Do it for Your Name." He then put on his shirt and began *Tefillas Neilah*.