

Good Shabbos Everyone. The verse in this week's portion Acharei states "You shall observe My decrees and My laws... and become alive through them -- I am Hashem." (Vayikra 18:5) The commentator Ramban, one of the foremost Torah commentators in the history of the world, has some deep insights into the meaning of this verse.

The Ramban explains that one of the highest levels of serving Hashem is one who observes Hashem's mitzvahs out of love; such a person will merit the good life in this world and in the world to come. Serving Hashem out of love can be compared to a faithful son serving his dear father. The son serves his father out of a deep love for his father who has done everything for him. We owe everything in life to Hashem's kindness. We should therefore strive to serve Hashem out of love. The following story involving the great Talmid Chacham and Tzadik Reb Yonason Eibshuetz (c.1690-1764) author of "Yaaros Devash," shows the extent to which a few Jews were willing to go in their dedication to doing mitzvahs out of a love for Hashem.

R' Yonason Eibshuetz was married in his late teens into a wealthy family. Reb Yonason's father-in-law gave him three thousand gulden as a wedding present. The generous gift was meant to enable the outstanding scholar to study Torah undisturbed and realize his fullest potential.

As was (is) the norm in Europe, it happened to be that the gentiles of R' Yonason's town had very little tolerance for Jews and their customs. Appropriately, the gentiles decided to build a huge church right across the street from the synagogue that would overshadow and dwarf the Jews' place of worship and study. The Jews were enraged at having to face a church the moment they stepped out of their shul, but being a minority in both numbers and power, they could neither do nor say anything. That is, all the Jews except Aryeh Leib, R' Yonason's hot-headed, temperamental young chavrusa (study partner). While the church was being built, Aryeh Leib seethed with anger at the audacity of the church officials. The constant flow of priests and nuns who looked at the Jews with contempt evoked a terrible fury in R' Aryeh Leib. He promised himself that someday he would avenge the insult.

R' Yonason could not calm his hot-headed friend. Even R' Yonason's insistence that any attempt at reprisal would jeopardize other Jews went unheeded. Aryeh Leib was adamant. When the building was finally completed, ceremonies were held for the inauguration of the church, and services began. Many gentiles moved into the neighborhood to be closer to the new church, and Aryeh Leib decided that he had had enough. Late one night he entered the church and climbed the winding stairs to the steeple top, where there was a huge cross. Equipped with a hammer and chisel, he managed to break off and shatter the cross.

The noise woke up the resident priest, who raced up the stairs to investigate what had happened. Another priest joined him and when they caught sight of an "accursed Jew" in their church, they ran after him in hot pursuit. In his blind rush to get away from the scene of the crime, Aryeh Leib lost his way in the dimly lit halls of the church. The priests caught him and beat him mercilessly. They then decided to lock him up until the morning when they would decide how to deal with him further. In the morning, at a conclave with other church officials, it was decided to burn Aryeh Leib at the stake for desecrating their church.

When Aryeh Leib did not appear for learning the next day, R' Yonason was surprised but not particularly worried, but when he did not come the next day either, his friends really began to worry. The next night, as R' Yonason and a few others were learning in shul, they heard a knock on the door. It was the priest in charge of security at the church across the street. He knew that Jews are charitable, and had devised a plan that would net him a large amount of money. He told the small group that if they would agree to give three thousand gulden, he would see to it that Aryeh Leib was set free, as long as he agreed to leave town forever. The sum was a very large one, but pidyon shevuyim (redemption of the captured) is a great mitzvah.

R' Yonason and his friends reluctantly agreed to the priest's price. There was only a small chance that the Jews could raise such a large sum of money before Aryeh Leib would be killed. The priest might change his mind about the deal if the ransom was not paid on time. He decided that he would use the three thousand gulden that he had received from his father-in-law to redeem Aryeh Leib.

The next morning he went to the church and met with the priest. "I have the money," R' Yonason told him, "but first let me see Aryeh Leib." "How did you get the money so quickly?" asked the incredulous priest. "It's my own money," said R' Yonason. "My father-in-law gave it to me as a wedding gift, but I'm glad to give it up to save my friend." The priest could not help but be in awe at the selflessness of the young scholar. He brought Aryeh Leib to a back door. R' Yonason embraced his friend and gave the priest the money.

Aryeh Leib was set free and told to leave town immediately. That evening a group of men came to the synagogue and told R' Yonason that they had collected a large sum of money for the release of Aryeh Leib. R' Yonason told them that it wasn't needed anymore because he had already paid the ransom and Aryeh Leib was safely out of town. The men tried to convince R' Yonason to keep part of the money, but he refused. "But we too would like to share in the mitzvah," they argued. "Save the money for a future emergency," answered R' Yonason, and he refused to take a single gulden of their funds.

Meanwhile, at the church, the other priests found out that Aryeh Leib was missing. They were infuriated and tried to find out how he had escaped. They confronted the priest in charge of security who claimed that he had found the cell open and the young man gone. The others did not believe him, for he had not reported the escape to them. They unanimously decided to put the scheming priest to death, for they suspected that he might have arranged for ransom money which he kept for himself.

The priest overheard their conversation and the death sentence they had pronounced on him. Now he would have to escape before his colleagues would be able to execute their sentence. He quickly took R' Yonason's money together with other money and jewelry that he had amassed over the years and made his way to R' Yonason's house. There he told the young wife how her husband had given his own money to free his friend, and then said to her, "I have no one to trust. I must get away quickly. Here, you hold the money and my gold and silver items. If I come back, I know you will return everything to me. I never saw such integrity as your husband showed. I'm sure you are the same. If I don't come back, it's all yours."

Later that day the priest's body was found in the river, under the town's bridge. Three days later R' Yonason returned home, somewhat uneasy about the reception he would receive. To his pleasant surprise, his wife greeted him with smiles, praise and warmth. "What a tzaddik you are. I know the whole story. I'm proud of your willingness to fulfill the great mitzvah of pidyon shevuyim, even at such great cost to yourself! But look how wonderful Hashem has been to you. He has returned all your money and even given us a great fortune."

R' Yonason couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What are you talking about? How do you know about the mitzvah?" His wife told him how the priest had had to flee for his life, how he'd given her the three thousand gulden plus other things, with instructions to hold everything until he returned. "He said that if he doesn't return, everything belongs to you. Today I found out that he'd drowned under the town bridge. Everything belongs to you, now," said R' Yonason's wife. R' Yonason's face fell, and he began to cry. His wife understood that these weren't tears of joy. "Why are you so unhappy," she asked, "when the whole incident has ended so well? Aryeh Leib is saved, we have our money back ..."

R' Yonason couldn't be consoled. "G-d has thrown the mitzvah back in my face," he wept. "For some reason he doesn't want me to have my reward in the World to Come, where righteous people enjoy their true reward (see Avos 2:21). That is why He gave me my reward here and now." For three days R' Yonason fasted.

After the third day he beseeched G-d to reveal to him in a dream why his mitzvah hadn't been accepted. That night he was told the answer in a dream. Because he had refused to share the mitzvah of pidyon shevuyim with others and had kept it for himself, it was not acceptable. He should not have refused his friends' money. By "giving" all the money on his own, R' Yonason had been "taking" - that is taking the whole mitzvah for himself when others wanted a share in it. He had not used proper judgment in fulfilling the mitzvah. (R. Pesach Krohn, The Maggid Speaks, p. 52)

Let us be inspired by this amazing true story to strive always to do mitzvahs "Ishaim shomayim" - for the sake of heaven, and out of a love for Hashem.

Good Shabbos Everyone.