

Good Shabbos Everyone. The Sages have taught us that the time of *Sefiras HaOmer* is a time of special spiritual importance. Specifically, the Sages tell us that this is a time to work on our character. This is hinted to in the gematria - numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word "*Omer*" which is 49, which is also the numerical value of "*midah*" - character.

Historically, a great calamity befell the Jewish people during this period. Namely, 24,000 students of Rebbi Akiva died during *Sefiras HaOmer* because they did not treat each other with respect. (See, Yevamos 72b) Therefore, this is a special time of the year to work on ourselves. Rav Boruch Yadler has worked for several years for the organization "*Yad L'Achim*," an organization which works tirelessly to help bring Jews closer. Unfortunately, Rav Boruch was not well for many years of his life, and he therefore was forced to spend much time in hospitals. During one of his hospital stays, Rav Boruch noticed that there was a man in the bed next to him "Yecheiel Kruger (not his real name)," whose children regularly visited.

Rav noticed that the man's children were seemed to be very fine, respectful, attentive to his needs, as well as being religiously observant. One evening, when the room was quiet and the last of the day's visitors had gone, Rav Boruch remarked to Mr. Kruger, "I've been working with children of all ages for years, and I can tell that your children are very special. How did you raise them that way?" Mr. Kruger was surprised and pleased at the sudden compliment, although it was not the first time he'd been so complimented. He smiled sheepishly. "I've been very fortunate. Hashem has been very good to me. Years ago I wouldn't have imagined that my children would grow up this way." "Oh, really?" said Rav Boruch sensing a story. "Yes," said Mr. Kruger. "I've noticed that you like stories, so you might find this one interesting." Yecheiel Kruger then told his amazing story: He had been living in an anti-religious, atheistic kibbutz, sponsored by Shomer Hatzair, in northern Israel. Shabbos had no sanctity on the kibbutz, except as a day off from work.

One Shabbos afternoon Yecheiel, or Chiki as he was called, took a leisurely drive to see the sights in Jerusalem. The ride was uneventful until he got into the heart of Jerusalem's Geulah neighborhood. Suddenly his jeep was pelted with stones, and youngsters were yelling, "Shabbos! Shabbos!" Chiki had no idea what they were yelling about. When another stone hit his car, he jumped out to chase the boy who had thrown that last rock. But as he got out of his jeep, a well-dressed man came over to him and calmly took him aside. "I see you're not from around here, so perhaps you don't understand what these people want from you," he said. "Leave your car here - they won't harm it - and come with me." The man was very gentle and courteous and he put his arm around the young driver as they walked. The man, Rav Shapira, the rav of a local shul, invited Chiki into his home. After the initial pleasantries of introduction, Rav Shapira began explaining some of the laws of Shabbos. Without justifying their actions, he tried as best he could to explain how strongly the rock throwers felt about violations of Shabbos in their midst. And then the rav added, "It's almost nightfall, stay with us until after Shabbos." Chiki agreed and in the course of the evening, the two became friends and exchanged addresses. Rav Shapira assured Chiki that he would stay in contact with him. Within six weeks, Rav Shapira (the one who befriended Chiki when he mistakenly drove into the religious neighborhood on Shabbos) made his first visit to the kibbutz. Rav Shapira looked up Chiki Kruger and his family. Chiki was surprised that the rav had made such a long trip just to see him and invited him to stay for a meal. Rav Shapira explained that because of kashrus laws he could not eat there, although he agreed to have a cup of tea. Chiki and his wife and the rav chatted amiably for a while.

Mrs. Kruger was interested in continuing the conversation, for she was more religiously inclined than her husband. Although totally non-observant, she had an interest in Yiddishkeit (Judaism) and asked many questions about halachah (Jewish law) and customs that she had not been taught in her irreligious upbringing. Rav Shapira realized that the woman was searching to bring meaning into her life. The more he spoke to Mrs. Kruger, the more he became convinced that there was a spark of Yiddishkeit that was waiting to be fanned into a fire of faith. Rav Shapira only question was whether he could kindle it. When Rav Shapira was about to leave and was invited to return, he knew that the spark of Judaism would eventually ignite. Within three weeks, Rav Shapira came back. Once again he and the young couple spoke about the purpose of life, the basic tenets of Judaism, and the possibility of leaving this particular kibbutz for a religious one. "If you are a socialist," said Rav Shapira, "be a religious socialist." The Krugers couldn't see themselves moving from their comfortable surroundings, especially since they lacked the funds for such a move. However, just a day or two after one of Rav Shapira's visits, Mrs. Kruger received a letter stating that her request for restitution from Germany would be granted. The Wiedergutmachung Agency had helped her file a claim for damage to her family's property and for valuables lost during the Holocaust years. Now that her claim had been processed she would be getting a stipend every month. With their new-found fortune, the Krugers, who were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the emptiness of their life on the non-religious kibbutz, decided that indeed the time had come for a change. With the help of Rav Shapira they resettled on a religious kibbutz. On the first Shabbos there, one of the Kruger children put on the light and caused an uproar, but they soon became accustomed to the religious rules and regulations and to their new and friendly surroundings. They began to enjoy a happy and fulfilling life.

Chiki, now sitting up in his hospital bed, ended by saying, "It was the pleasantness and diligence of Rav Shapira that persuaded us in the end. Right from the first day we met in Jerusalem, Rav Shapira never talked down to me. He understood my background and never held it against me. Instead, his warmth and genuine concern led our family back to the ways of our ancestors. Eventually we left kibbutz life and settled in Jerusalem, where my children attended wonderful schools." Rav Boruch Yadler who was now also sitting up in his bed shook his head to and fro. "It's a beautiful story," he said, "with a very nice ending. Rav Shapira was exceptionally nice to you. But, in my experience, I have come to realize that not every non-religious person gets the opportunity to become religious and then go on to have such wonderful children. I get the feeling that there was something more, something unique that made you deserve this exceptional gift from Hashem." Chiki knew that Rav Yadler was right. At first, he had not planned to mention the other part of the story because it was a personal matter. But everyone seemed to tell Rav Yadler everything, so he decided to tell him the rest. Rav Yadler would probably find a way to make good use of the story. Chiki smiled and told another story from an even earlier period in his life. "Well, maybe Hashem was watching us for another reason, too. You see, I was one of the 'Yaldei Teheran,' the refugee children gathered from the concentration camp survivors who were transported through the Balkans and Turkey on the way to Teheran..." To be continued... **Good Shabbos Everyone.**