

Good Shabbos Everyone. Our portion this week Eikev contains some of the most powerful spiritual lessons of the entire Torah. For example, the Torah tells us this week, "Now, O Yisroel, what does Hashem, your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d to go in all his ways" (Devorim 10:12) The commentator the Chinuch explains that this verse is the source of the mitzvah to fear Hashem. (Mitzvah #432) In his commentary on this verse, Rashi quotes the Sages who saying "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for Fear of Heaven." (Brachos 33b) The Vilna Gaon explains the meaning of the words of the Sages in a very inspirational way: (As heard from Reb Ephraim Wachsman) Hashem is the master of the Universe and everything in it, as Dovid HaMelech (King David) tells us in Tehillim (Psalms) "To Hashem belongs the earth and all it's fullness" (24:1) Thus, there is nothing we can give to Hashem because everything is His. However, there is one thing that Hashem does not have, that is fear of Himself. Therefore, we now re-read the words of the verse: "Now, O Yisroel, what does Hashem, your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d" The only thing we can give Hashem is our fear of Him.

The Chinuch explains that the mitzvah to fear Hashem is one of the "continuous mitzvahs" which a person must fulfill 24 hours a day 7 days a week. What does it mean to "fear" Hashem? The Chinuch explains that it is a fear of punishment for violating the Holy Torah. The Holy Rambam explains that one of the foundations of the Jewish faith is believing that the wrongdoers will be punished. The essence of fearing Hashem is having in mind that Hashem is watching us constantly and that there are spiritual consequences for all of actions. If uncorrected, a violation of the Torah will require rehabilitation in a place in the spiritual world called Gehinom. Gehinom is primarily a place of cleansing, where violations of the Torah are scrubbed off of the soul.

Thankfully, we can avoid being punished for our misdeeds by doing Teshuvah - repentance. The power of Teshuvah is so strong that it can fix a whole lifetime of violating the Torah. As the Rambam tells us, even someone who has for his whole life violated every mitzvah in the Book, can do Teshuvah at the end of his life, and he will not have any of his violations mentioned in his case above in the Supreme Court in Heaven. (Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah, 1:3) The following incredibly inspirational story illustrates how one Jew did Teshuvah.

Sam Zeitlin of Brooklyn, New York was one of the most successful Jewish members of the American National Cycling Team. Sam competed professionally and won many competitions in contests across America in the 1960's. Perhaps because Sam was so successful, he suffered from occasional incidents of anti-Semitism.

A turning point in Sam's life came in 1967 when he competed in the Grand Prix of the Americas, one of the most important races in America. Sam finished first - later to be disqualified. Citing a rule, which had never been enforced either before or since, the officials claimed that Sam had raised his hands in victory prior to crossing the finish line; the officials argued that by taking his hands off the handlebars of the bicycle, Sam had endangered the safety of the nearby spectators. Sam recognized the officials' decision for what it was: pure anti-Semitism.

Sam decided to leave America to pursue his sports career in another country. Although totally secular, Sam felt a connection to Israel, so he decided to move there. Soon after his arrival in Israel, he contacted the local sports federation, which was more than happy to offer Sam a position on the cycling team. Sam began training again. One night, after strenuous training, Sam went to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He had never been there before, but he knew that it was a place where people prayed. When he arrived at the Wall, he saw that people seemed to be praying endlessly. What were they saying? He walked over to two religious-looking young men and began asking them religious questions. After a lengthy conversation, the brothers recognized that Sam was genuinely searching for guidance and inspiration. The two brothers recommended that Sam contact Rabbi Gershon Weinberger, a Chicago, Illinois native who had resettled in Jerusalem with his family.

Rabbi Weinberger and Sam became close friends. Sam, Rabbi Weinberg and his family spent hours together around the Shabbos table singing and saying words of Torah. Eventually, Rabbi Weinberger suggested to Sam that he enroll in a yeshiva to learn more about his heritage. Sam agreed. Sam moved to Bnei Brak, where he began attending yeshiva. In the morning Sam would learn Torah, while in the afternoons, he would continue his bicycle training. As time passed, Sam grew in his Torah and mitzvah observance, at the same time improving his cycling skills. He enjoyed riding on the flat highways up and down the sunny Mediterranean coastline. As he road his bike, he would sing his favorite Shabbos song: Shabbos Hayom L'Hashem. As the Olympics drew near, trials were to be held to determine which cyclists would represent Israel's team. The Israeli Sports Federation announced that the cycling trials were scheduled to take place on Shabbos. Sam was shocked. Participating in the cycling trials would involve violating Shabbos. Sam tried in vain to convince the organizers to change the day of the trials; however, the schedule was set. There would be no changes.

Sam was torn. He had trained for several years to reach the Olympics. However, Shabbos was a holy day for Sam. In the end, Sam's decision was clear: He could not bring himself to violate the sanctity of the holy Shabbos. Life as a religious Jew meant more to him than that one blazing moment of fame. In the summer of 1972, Israel did not send a cycling team to the 20th Summer Olympic games in Munich, Germany. The Israelis realized that their cycling team was not good enough to compete. During the games, Palestinian terrorists attacked the Olympic village. When the smoke cleared, several Israeli athletes lay dead. Back in Bnei Brak, Israel, Sam reacted to the tragedy with shock, outrage and sadness. As he reflected on the events of the previous couple of years, Sam thought of a phrase from another Shabbos song: If I safeguard the Shabbos, Hashem will safeguard me...

Today, more than 30 years later, Sam and his family sit around his own Shabbos table. As they come to sing the words of the song: If I safeguard the Shabbos, Sam says a silent prayer of thanks to Hashem for becoming a Shomer Shabbos Jew (a Shabbos observing Jew). (from, Echoes of the Maggid, R'Paysach Krohn p.105-9) Since none of us knows how long we will live, we really should do Teshuvah every day. As the Talmud explains, "Rebi Eliezer says, 'do Teshuvah one day before you die.' His students asked him rhetorically: 'Does a man know on which day he will die?'" Rebi Eliezer answered his students, 'It then makes even more sense to do Teshuvah every day, on the chance that perhaps you should die tomorrow. Such a person will then live all his days in Teshuvah. (Shabbos 153a) **Good Shabbos Everyone.**