

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 hold Hashem in awe. (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 Wachsmann) 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! Thus, we see that the only thing we can really give the Master of the Universe is our fear of Him. Let us read the following account of one Jew with tremendous fear of Hashem.

For many long years of his life Rabbi Ytzhok Zilber, of blessed memory, suffered from the Communist regime in Russia and its brutal persecution of anything Jewish. When he was eighteen, Rabbi Zilber applied to the Institute of Chemistry and Technology so that he would be able to observe Shabbos. In order to get into the Institute, he had to pass an entrance exam, but he had no means with which to obtain the textbooks, and so he came to the test without ever having seen the material on which he was to be tested! He then uttered a short prayer: Hashem, You know how hard I work in order to keep Shabbos. I will do mine, and so please, do Yours!"

For some reason, he showed up to the test a half an hour late. He was rebuked soundly but they agreed to admit him and ordered him to wait until he was called. As he waited, he saw a student perusing the book "History of the [Communist] Party" and he asked the student to borrow it for a few minutes. Rabbi Zilber opened it randomly to a chapter which discussed the seventh convention of the Communist Party, and which detailed the speeches of Lenin and Bukharin. After reading a page and a quarter he was called in. He "randomly" took a card from the box of questions, and on it was the subject he would have to deliver a lecture. His card stated: "The Seventh Convention of the Party - The Speeches of Lenin and Bukharin." Needless to say, he passed the exam and he was accepted.

Once as a teacher, Rabbi Zilber almost died of starvation. After completing university he began teaching in the village of Stolovichi in the Kazan region, where he would stay the entire week and go home only for Shabbos. One winter day in 1942, he made his way to the village assuming that he would be able to eat breakfast there before beginning school. It was forty-two degrees below zero, and he ran the twelve miles to the village, arriving within three hours. By eight o'clock in the morning he was already at the school, but he found that the bakery ovens could not be fired up because the wood that fueled them could not be transported due to the cold, and that nothing had been baked. Because of the weather the students were also let off from school, but the authorities made sure that the teachers did not remain bored, and sent them to conduct registration for the following school year in nearby villages. Still hungry, Rabbi Zilber set off for the village he was assigned to, three miles away. He began navigating his way through the accumulated snow, but felt his strength waning rapidly. He relates: "I stuck my hand in my pocket and felt an object wrapped in paper: it was a small block of halvah. For three years we had barely seen butter or sugar, and here I was holding halvah! Where had it come from? I didn't know. Later on I found out that my mother had succeeded in purchasing the delicacy from a neighbor, and put it into my pocket. It was the only food item in the house at the time of my departure. I ate it and immediately felt better. I used the last reserves of my energy to get to the village, register the children, and return to the school." Rabbi Zilber did not receive bread that evening, nor the next morning. Only on the second evening did they light the ovens and bake bread. "I took and ate four-and-a-half pounds of bread, but I was still hungry afterwards!" "Davening in Stolovichi was an ongoing difficulty. I couldn't pray where I slept because I shared a room with the landlord's sons; outside, people were constantly passing by. I found an interesting solution- the doors of the school's entrance were extremely wide. I had never seen such wide doors. When I stood behind them, no one could see me. 'Praised be Hashem for creating such doors,' I thought to myself and began to pray.

"After the first lesson, I peeked through a crack in the door and saw the students playing ball in the schoolyard enthusiastically, and decided it was the perfect time to put on tefillin. I did the same thing every day. One day the bell rang just when I was about to begin Shemoneh Esrei (Amidah). I heard someone calling my name and had to stop my prayers, put away my tefillin and come out of my hiding place. How would I teach the lesson — I couldn't speak?!

"I began to explain myself using hand motions. I opened the book, pointed to the problem that I wanted and chose a student to come and stand at the board and work it out. The students began asking me about my strange behavior: "Are you angry at us?" I was quiet.

"Tell us what the problem is and we'll fix it." I was quiet until the lesson was over. Only during the next lesson, by which time I had finished davening, did I "explain" myself to my class.

Eventually he was transferred to Kazan, where he taught history, but here too he continued in his secretive davening. Minchah in Kazan was a serious problem. The lesson finished at a quarter to five, while sunset was a few minutes after five. As such, Rabbi Zilber would leave school to pray at a nearby bus stop, being particular to leave exactly at 4:45 pm. There was a small wooden newspaper stand where Pravda (Truth [sic!]) newspapers were sold.

Fortunately, there weren't inappropriate pictures in the paper at the time, and he was able to pretend he was reading while in reality he was praying. When he reached the passages that required bowing, Rabbi Zilber would lean forward as if wishing to closely examine the names in the ads.

One day while he was in the middle of Shemoneh Esrei (Amida) two teachers from the school approached him: Anna Fodorovna and Fyodor Terasovitz. The latter was a known informer, and no one wanted to get on the wrong side of him, because wherever he worked he made sure to get employees fired on trumped-up charges. And this was the man who was approaching Rabbi Zilber as he davened.

"Yitzchak Yakovlevitz!" Fyodor called out. "What great timing! We wanted to consult with you about the final exams. What do you say? Where and when should we hold them?" Rabbi Zilber did not even dream of disrupting his davening. He pointed to his heart and his mouth, as if he wasn't feeling well and couldn't even speak from the pain. The two panicked and called an ambulance. By the time it arrived, Rabbi Zilber had already finished davening and reassured the doctor and his two colleagues that he was feeling better and could even speak already.

After being imprisoned in 1951 on false charges, Rabbi Zilber continued davening in his prison cell, where his company consisted of criminals and informers. He had to work hard to find a place in the crowded cell that was four cubits away from the waste buckets and their repulsive odor.

A week after he was transferred to a labor camp was Rosh HaShanah. Rabbi Zilber knew the tefillos by heart, but he wanted a machzor in order to show the other Jews with him. He remembered Vishnev, a Jew, who served as the Communist secretary of the camp and decided to enlist his help. Despite his communist education and the fact that he greatly admired Stalin, Vishnev was an honest person by nature and Rabbi Zilber appealed to him: "If I give you an address, will you bring me a sefer from there?"

The man agreed, and brought a machzor, mishnayos, a Tanach and a Hagaddah, but warned Rabbi Zilber: "Even if they tear these books up, don't reveal who brought them to you." Many years later, in 1992, Rabbi Zilber held a Pesach Seder in Moscow, where he retold the story of the Seder night in the labor camp and mentioned Vishnev's name as the one who had brought him the Haggadah. Present at the time was a couple from Kazan. After returning home, they found Vishnev's son and told them the story. The son immediately came to Moscow to meet Rabbi Zilber and told him: "I was only five years old, but I remember my father telling me how he admired this Jew in the labor camp who didn't work on Shabbos." Rabbi Zilber studied some Tanach with the son, and then taught him how to say Kaddish for his departed parents.

"Everything was worth it for this Kaddish," Rabbi Zilber told him. Years passed, and one day the phone rang in Rabbi Zilber's home in Jerusalem. On the line was Josef Vishnev from Kazan, with a request: He was about to undergo a serious operation and wanted Rabbi Zilber to daven for him. After years of davening in secret, he could finally daven at the Kosel, which is exactly what Rabbi Zilber did! And Boruch Hashem, the surgery was a success. (From Mishpacha Magazine, Issue 167) More about Rabbi Zilber next week, with Hashem's help. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**