

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** The Torah tells us this week, "...you shall observe them (the mitzvahs) and perform them with all your heart and all your soul." (Devorim – Deuteronomy 26:16) The verse is hinting to a foundation of Jewish belief: We must serve Hashem with an intense feeling in our hearts. As the mystical Zohar teaches us "*Hashem wants the heart.*" (Parshas Ki-Seitzei, part 3, page 281b) Practically speaking, when we do mitzvahs, we should always do them with a feeling and a knowledge that we are fulfilling Hashem's will. The following interesting story will inspire us to do mitzvahs with feeling.

This true story happened during the Jewish month of Elul 5749 (September 1989). I was driving home from a bris in Elizabeth, New Jersey. On the way I stopped at a branch of the bank that I use to make a deposit. I parked in the lot behind the bank. I got out, locked the door and then remembered that the check was in the car.

I opened the door, found the check, turned to close the door, and gasped. Three men surrounded me. They wore tattered jeans and filthy t-shirts. Though it was before noon, they reeked of alcohol. The guy on the left was clutching a whiskey bottle like a hammer. He had a desperate, mean look in his eyes. The guy on my right almost looked friendly, but a little scared and hungry. He was about my size. But the one in the middle--he was big, bad and ugly. He loomed above. He had tattoos up the entire length of his bare arms. "Got some change?" he said, extending his huge hand towards my neck.

Three teeth were missing from his grin. A deep scar ran from his chin to his cheek. Thoughts raced through my head. Think fast, stay calm. Everything happens for a reason. All is for the good. Only fear Hashem. All the Chasidic dictums about life were running through my mind. They made sense in yeshiva. But now?

Now it was Elul, when Hashem is supposed to be very accessible, like the King who leaves his palace and is in the fields and streets listening to the requests of the ordinary folks. "Yes, I have some change for you," I said, while dropping the check back in the car, locking and closing the car door behind me.

Everything happens for a reason. "Any of you Jewish?" I asked. I knew it was next to impossible. "Yeh, I'm Jewish," the big guy said.

"You're Jewish?" I said in disbelief. It must be a ploy. "You have a Jewish name?"

"Shmuel Yankel ben Moshe," he said with pride, like a boot soldier responding to his officer. In his eyes I probably looked like a rabbi. "Did you have a Bar Mitzvah?"

I asked. "Yuh. Baruch ata..." The big guy, nee Shmuel Yankel, began singing the Haftarah blessings. "Why are you asking for a few cents? You should be asking for millions. It's right before Rosh Hashana and you can ask Hashem for anything. He's here in the streets with you and me and we can ask Him for anything now. On Rosh Hashana, Hashem goes back into His palace and it's not so easy for us to get in, but now He's taking requests. I might have some change, but Hashem has millions.

"You know what tefilin are? Put them on, Shmuel Yankel. I'm sure Hashem will hear you." As I spoke I slipped the car key out of my pocket and got my tefilin out. "Put out your arm." The sleeve was torn off his shirt. That made it easy to slide the tefilin over his arm, past the chorus line of tattoos and rows of little holes. Those must be needle tracks, I thought.

"Here," I said, as I took off my yarmulka from beneath my hat. "Let me put this on you so you can say the blessing with me." He lowered his head so I could reach it. "Baruch ata..." We said the blessing and then I reached up and put the tefilin on his head. Shmuel Yankel said the Shema and his eyes became wet.

"Hashem's right here with you, Shmuel Yankel. Ask Him whatever your heart desires." He was quiet. A tear rolled into the scar groove. One of his partners was pacing back and forth on the asphalt, like a shark swimming in front of his prey. "Let's go already," the Shark snapped. "You just wait. I'm praying," Shmuel Yankel said. The Shark backed off like a guppy. The third guy looked with amazement at the whole ceremony. Why was he so interested? I asked him his name.

"Michel," he said with a slurred French accent. "Are you Jewish, Michel?"

"No, I'm Catholic. My mother was Jewish but she became Catholic. The Nazis killed her parents and a Catholic monastery raised her."

"You're Jewish," I told him. "If your mother was born Jewish, then nothing can take that away. Once a Jew, always a Jew," I said. "Today is like your Bar Mitzvah. Put on these tefilin and we'll make a Bar Mitzvah celebration." Michel repeated the blessings for tefilin as best he could. The tefilin sat on his greasy, long, black hair. His eyes sparkled with life, and Michel began to look like a scraggly Jewish boy, like the lost prince who had been dragged through the mucky alleys of medieval Europe, beaten and abused, and now has finally stumbled across his royal home. The King met him in the streets, and Michel recognized his Father. "You can take them off now," I said.

Michel held out his arm and let me unwrap them as if he were a gentle baby. I had some cake with me from the bris. The four of us split the two slices of cake. "L'Chaim. To life," I said, raising my cake. My two Jewish friends thanked me. We shook hands and hugged. "Wait," I said, running after them, "here's some change." "No, that's all right," Shmuel Yankel said as he waved good-bye. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**