

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** In this week's parsha *Vaaira*, the Torah tells us how Hashem promises to redeem the Bnai Yisroel from slavery in Egypt. Hashem tells us *"and I will take you for a Nation..."*(6:7) The Ibn Ezra explains that the Bnai Yisroel will become a nation when they received the Torah at Har Sinai. Thus we see that the only thing that makes us Hashem's people is our observance of the Torah.

The following interesting and exciting story shows how one Jew realized that he belongs to Hashem's chosen Nation.

Vietnam in the late 1960's was a dangerous place. Especially for a Robert Silverman, a Jew from Bayside, New York. As Robert lay in the jungle on that hot and humid night in Vietnam, many thoughts raced through his mind.

The real question just now was, should he do *netilas yadayim* or not? There was a stream about 800 feet away; he could get water there. Then again, the enemy, the Vietcong weren't far away either. Crawling even that far could cost him his life. As Robert weighed the options, he began to wonder how he had ended up in such a bizarre situation. Until shortly before being drafted into the army, Robert had heard neither of Vietnam nor of *netilas yadayim*.

As he looked up into the Southeast Asian sky, he thought back to Bayside and his childhood. He had attended public school, and three times a week went for *"Hebrew instruction"* at the local Conservative Hebrew School. The main purpose was simply to learn enough Hebrew to read his "half-Torah" which he eventually learned from a tape recorder. Graduation from Hebrew School and his Bar Mitzvah marked the end of his involvement with Judaism.

He never set foot in a shul again until his grandfather passed away. Then his father, by no means a religious man, suddenly started going to minyan every day. When Robert questioned his father about his sudden resurgence of interest in religion, his father replied, *"I'm saying Kaddish for my father. His soul won't get rest unless I say Kaddish every day for him."* Robert figured that his father would abandon this ritual after a week or two. To his astonishment he was mistaken. His father took the responsibility quite seriously and made sure to go to shul every day. A few times Robert accompanied his father. Overall, Robert was impressed that his father took on such consistency for 11 months.

In the fall of 1965 Robert left for college in Oneonta, New York. The summer following his graduation, Robert was hit with misfortune: his father's sudden heart attack. Robert rushed from his job to the hospital. Looking down at his father who lay in bed, Robert knew the condition was serious. He took a seat at his father's right. *"Dad. I'm here. Can you hear me?"*

Mustering the little strength left in his body Mr. Silverman responded in barely audible tones, *"Bobby, Thank G-d you're here. I..."* The strain of talking seemed too much for him. Yet like so many times before, he persevered: *"I want you to make one promise to me. You're my only son. Say Kaddish for me if I don't make it this time."* Through his tears, Robert said he hoped the occasion wouldn't arise for many years to come. But he knew he could not refuse the request, and finally choked out, *"I promise."* His father seemed suddenly at peace, and closed his eyes in easy sleep.

Unfortunately his Kaddish duty took effect only a few days later. Robert felt the loss, and also remembered the promise he had made. Just as his father had, following the *shiv'ah* he went to synagogue to say Kaddish. He found that the only shul in his neighborhood which had daily services was the local Orthodox shul, Ahavas Torah.

Rabbi Jacobs, the rav of the shul, immediately took a liking to the young man who struggled so hard with his Kaddish, and seemed so intent on keeping his father's last wishes. During Shacharis the young man seemed lost, only catching himself when it came time for Kaddish. He even needed signals from Rabbi Jacobs to know when to start, and thankfully, the Rabbi willingly gave them.

Little by little, with Rabbi Jacob's encouragement, Robert became more active in the shul. He first attended a few of the Rabbi's classes, then began accepting Shabbos invitations. Had there been a *baal-teshuvah* yeshiva at the time, Robert would have been a prime candidate. This was ten years too soon, however, and America was busy waging war in Vietnam. Soon after, Robert received his draft notice.

Shortly following his eleven months of Kaddish, Robert knocked on Rabbi Jacobs' door. *"Rabbi, I just came to say goodbye. It looks like the [military] will be shipping me to South Carolina soon for basic training. It's going to be real hard for me to keep any of the 613 mitzvahs. So tell me, Rabbi - pick one for me. Which one of the mitzvahs should I keep no matter what?"*

The Rabbi thought for a while. Who could answer such a question? Too difficult an assignment would end in failure. Shabbos? Kashrus? Tefillin? Robert clearly wasn't ready to tackle these. Suddenly the Rabbi's face lit up. *"Robert, I have just the right one. Make sure you do netilas yadayim every time you eat bread, even if you don't say the blessings over the food, even if you don't bench, and even if the bread is not kosher."*

*"Netilas yadayim?"* said Robert with trepidation. *"Yes. It's a mitzvah that won't put undue pressure on you, since nobody will think twice about your washing your hands before eating. Keep that one mitzvah as well as you can, and remember, any mitzvah will protect you even in the direst circumstances. Best of luck to you, and write me when you get the chance."*

During basic training, and even when he was shipped out to the base in Vietnam, Robert had little difficulty in performing this mitzvah. Nobody noticed anything strange about his desire to wash his hands before eating bread. But finally about six months after being stationed in the jungles of Southeast Asia, the first real difficulty developed.

One night, the platoon was sent for a late-night raid on the fringes of the enemy lines. It wasn't long before the shooting began, and it soon developed into a full-scale battle. A few of his comrades had dropped and the remainder of the unit was trapped behind enemy lines. After a few hours' lapse in the fighting, some of the soldiers recalled their hunger: in fact, they hadn't eaten for the major part of the day. They began to take out their combat rations of oranges, sardines, and bread. Robert was about to join a few of his colleagues when he remembered... *"netilas yadayim!"*

He quickly and quietly broke from the camp, to his destination, a small stream he had seen about 800 feet away. It didn't matter that this excursion was insanely dangerous; no argument could convince Robert to abandon it. He had promised the Rabbi, and it was in memory of his father, too. That was that.

He slipped, silent and alone, towards the stream. Crawling on the ground like a snake slithering through the forest, Robert quickly reached his destination. He poured water over his hands, delighted that even in this combat situation he was able to keep his mitzvah. It was just after he finished pouring the cup of water over his other hand when he heard the gunfire. There was the rapid-fire of machine guns, piercing the stillness of the jungle in a long barrage of thunderous noise. For what seemed like hours, Robert remained hidden in the grass, long after the last sounds of the bullets had faded. Mustering up his strength, he slowly slithered back to his unit to find not one of them alive...*(The Monsey-Kiryas Sefer Express, R.Z. Roth. p.124 names have been changed)*

Hashem tells us *"and I will take you for a Nation..."*(6:7) We are Hashem's nation by the nature of our mitzvah observance. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**