

Good Shabbos Everyone. One of the most heart-wrenching jobs that a Rabbi does is visiting the sick in the hospital. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman of Atlanta, Georgia often visited ill people in local hospitals to encourage them and to pray for their recovery. Rabbi Feldman tells of one particularly memorable experience visiting a woman who was very ill.

Mrs. Mary Lichtman was suffering from the horrible disease in many parts of her body. The disease had spread to her lungs and her throat. Rabbi Feldman happened to visit the woman the day before the woman's larynx would be removed in surgery. This was Mary Lichtman's last day on earth with the power of speech. Without the larynx, speaking would be impossible for Mrs. Lichtman.

When Rabbi Feldman entered the hospital room, Mrs. Lichtman was surrounded by close family members who had gathered to show their love and support. Mrs. Lichtman appeared to be in good spirits. Soon, the family members withdrew and left Rabbi Feldman to speak with the ailing woman. Mrs. Lichtman became very upset; she could no longer hold in her emotions.

Rabbi Feldman tried to assure her, but to no avail. Rabbi Feldman then suggested that Mrs. Lichtman might feel a little better if she prayed to Hashem. Mrs. Lichtman said that she did not know any prayers. It was her last day with speech on this earth and she did not know any prayers.

Rabbi Feldman suggested that the two say the Shma together. Rabbi Feldman led Mrs. Lichtman saying slowly, word for word "Shma, Yisroel, Ad-noi El-heyenu, Ad-noi Echad!" The first Hebrew words that she ever spoke were also the last Hebrew words she ever spoke. (p.213-5 Tales out of Shul, R'Emanuel Feldman)

The only Hebrew words Mrs. Lichtman spoke are perhaps the most important words in the entire Torah. We read the Shma in this week's portion Va'Eschanan, as the verse says "Hear O' Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the one and only." (Devarim 6:4) The Shma is the most important verse in the Torah because it defines the Jewish Nation. We are a nation which believes that Hashem is the Master of the Universe. Rambam explains this principle of Jewish faith in the following way: "I believe in perfect faith that Hashem is One. There is no unity that is in any way like His, He alone is our G-d -- He was, He is, and He will be." (Maimonides' Principles, Aryeh Kaplan Anthology I, p.30)

Before World War II, the mayor of Kosznitz was an assimilated Jew who had even married a non-Jew. His name was Joseph Gonchor. The Jewish mayor Gonchor was not particularly friendly to the local Jewish population. When the dreaded war finally reached Kosznitz, the Germans rounded up all the Jews, including Gonchor. On the day after Rosh HaShana 5704 (1943) the Germans burned down the Kosznitzer Shul.

Mayor Gonchor was taken in for interrogation. Soon, all the Jews were forced to gather in the town square. A car drove up and the Germans led the mayor out into the square. A large fire was prepared.

The Germans then brought out a sefer Torah.

As the local Jews gathered around, the Germans told the Jewish mayor: "Throw this sefer Torah into the fire or we will throw you into the fire." The assimilated Jewish mayor hesitated. His non-Jewish wife pleaded with him to give into the Germans and throw the sefer Torah into the fire. The mayor thought for a moment and then said out loud for all to hear: "My grandparents and great-grandparents sacrificed their lives to uphold this Torah, and should I now throw it into the fire?" The Germans then took the Jewish mayor and wrapped the sefer Torah around his body and then set the flame to the sefer Torah. As the flames grew higher, the heretofore assimilated Jewish mayor cried out "Shma Yisroel, Ad-noi El-heinu, Ad-noi Echad."

The deceased mayor's non-Jewish wife later produced a letter which her husband Gonchor had written shortly before his demise. "I left my religion because of my need to make a living and to advance my profession. But as much as I tried to forget my origins, I could not. My *girsu deyanusa* the Torah that I learned as a child, remained with me and followed me, not willing to leave me alone. Regrettably, I did not live my life as a Jew. But I beg you the Al-mighty, to let the Torah that I learned as a child protect me so that at least I will die as a Jew."

Every Jew eventually comes to recognize Hashem's unity and His mastery over the whole world. Hashem is One and He is the only One. He rules the world. He was, He is, and He always will be. He has no beginning and no end. He is not limited by time or space or corporality.

It is a mitzvah from the Torah to read the Shma twice a day, once at night and once in the morning. Jews also have the custom to read the Shma before going to sleep at night. The mitzvah of reading the Shma two times a day, includes all three paragraphs of the Shma as found in every prayer book. The Great Code of Jewish Law tells us that one should read the Shma intending to fulfill the mitzvah of announcing Hashem's oneness. (Shulchan Aruch, 61:1) The Shma should be read with fear and trembling. (Ibid)

When one looks at the first sentence of the Shma in a Torah scroll, one notices that two letters are larger than the others. The final letters "ayin" of the first word Shma and "dalet" of the last word Echad, are in large print. The Hebrew letters "ayin" and "dalet" spell the Hebrew word "Eyd," which means 'witness.' By reading the Shma, a Jew is testifying to Hashem's mastery over the world.

For poor Mrs. Lichtman and the Gonchor, the Jewish mayor of Kosznitz, it took the angel of death to awaken within them belief in Hashem's oneness. Hopefully, we will never have to be in the position of those poor souls. Let us not wait for our last breath to say Shma with conviction. Rather, let us recite the Shma everyday and cry out our perfect faith in Hashem, the One and Only G-d. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**