

Good Shabbos Everyone. In our portion this week Vayikra, the Torah describes the various korbanos - sacrifices which were brought in the tabernacle and later in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The root of the word korban - (sacrifice) is karov which means close. The essence of the korbanos was that they brought Jews closer to Hashem. The korbanos are sacrifices for Hashem. Our lesson this week is therefore the following: Whenever we make sacrifices for Hashem, we grow closer to Hashem and His Holiness. The following amazing and touching true story illustrates how two people grew closer to Hashem.

Binyomin Greene grew up in a divided home - his mother was observant and his father secular. On Friday nights, his mother lit her Shabbos candles and his father came home from work and turned on the television. However, Binyomin's father was tolerant and did not object to his wife observing any religious laws she wanted, nor to sending the children to Hebrew day schools.

Little Binyomin followed his mother's guidance until he was eleven years old; then he became very friendly with Clarence, whose family had moved onto his street. Clarence was a boy of African descent and was a year older than Binyomin was. Unfortunately, at the tender age of 12, Clarence was already taking drugs, and had been arrested for theft, and regularly skipped school. Binyomin admired Clarence's courage in doing all the things he wanted, and though Binyomin did not follow Clarence's illegal actions, Binyomin became very influenced by Clarence and slowly drifted away from all his mother's teachings.

Eventually Binyomin left Hebrew school and attended a public high school. Binyomin kept up his close friendship with Clarence, who had already served several short prison terms.

When Bennie, as his friends now called him, graduated from high school, he left home and went to college in another city. He had completely left his Jewish roots, but remained a decent person. One evening he received a call from Clarence, who had just been released from prison. "Bennie," Clarence announced, "I've had it! My life is a sorry mess, and if I don't do a turn-about, I'll end up in the electric chair. I've been doing some real serious thinking," he went on. "Ready for this, Bennie? I've decided that I like what I see about the Jews. I remember your Mom and how you grew up. I would like to convert, if the Rabbis will accept a black man and an ex-con who wants to become a Jew." Binyomin was astonished.

But Clarence meant what he said, and made inquiries until he found an understanding Rabbi who spelled out the many conditions he would have to meet in order to convert. He got right into it and as Clarence became more and more engrossed in his studies, he changed significantly and found the truths he had been lacking. He met Binyomin from time to time, and even tried to encourage him to go back to his Jewish roots.

When Clarence's conversion was final, he telephoned his old friend, saying "my name's Avrohom now." Clarence then told his friend, "Listen, Bennie, I have a great idea for you - why don't you go to Israel and try to find yourself over there among our people?" Something clicked for Binyomin, and he did just that. Shortly after he arrived in Jerusalem, he was directed to a yeshiva for ba'alei teshuuah, and there in yeshiva Binyomin began to reconnect with his Jewish roots. Slowly he realized that he felt peace of mind for the first time in years.

After a few months in Eretz Yisroel, Binyomin decided to enter a higher-level yeshiva and he settled down to study Torah diligently. A few years later he met a very fine girl who had converted to Judaism several years before, and they were married. They have a son and are at this writing awaiting the birth of their second child. Binyomin now teaches in a yeshiva in the afternoons, and studies in a kollel (a yeshiva for married men) in the mornings. It was a long road back that Binyomin traveled, but it was his African American friend, Avrohom, who opened his eyes, heart, and soul to that path, which led to his becoming the Torah Jew he is today. (From, Shining Lights, P. 75 R. Shain)

We can be inspired by this story to strive for spiritual growth. We see how much trouble some people are willing to go through in order to become Jewish. How much more so then should those who were born Jewish make efforts to grow close to Hashem through making sacrifices in life. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**