

Good Shabbos Everyone. This week's portion, parshas Kedoshim contains much of the ethical mitzvahs of the Torah, such as: "love your neighbor as yourself," "don't speak bad about others," "give others the benefit of the doubt," "don't lie," "don't steal" "don't hate your brother in your heart," etc. Almost everyone is willing to accept upon themselves these ethical mitzvahs. However, Judaism is more than just ethical teachings. There is also a ritual side to Judaism, which we all must also observe, such as Tefillin, Kashrus and Shabbos. Let us focus this week on Shabbos, as Hashem tells us in this week's parsha "and you shall observe My Shabbos, I am Hashem your G-d." (Vayikra 19:3) One could argue that Shabbos is the most important mitzvah in the entire Torah. This argument is bolstered by the fact that Shabbos is the most often mentioned mitzvah in the entire Torah. More than any other mitzvah in the Torah, observance of Shabbos is the determining factor in defining a Jew. In fact, throughout the history of Jewish existence, Jewish law has categorized Jews as being members of one of two groups: Shomer Shabbos (Shabbos observant) or Mechalel Shabbos (Shabbos desecrator). The recent efforts to reform, conserve and reconstruct Judaism have failed to create new divisions. Rather, the two main categories stand: Shomer Shabbos (Shabbos observant) or Mechalel Shabbos (Shabbos desecrator).

It is interesting to note that Jews are categorized according to their Shabbos observance, rather than any other mitzvah in the Torah. We do not refer to a Jew as Shomer Tefillin, for example. (Rabbi Boruch Gradon) Rather, Shabbos is the gauge of observance. Why is this? The Sages tell us that Shabbos observance is weighed against observance of the entire Torah. This is because Shabbos observance symbolizes belief in Hashem. We rest on Shabbos to proclaim to the world that "in six days Hashem created the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day He ceased [creating the world] and He rested." (Shemos 31:17) One who keeps Shabbos proclaims his belief in Hashem; while one who does not keep Shabbos, leaves his belief in Hashem in question.

It is also important to note that Shabbos observance does not just mean resting and relaxing. If so, then one may argue that if he is not tired on Shabbos, he need not keep Shabbos. We know that the Torah calls for the death penalty for one who violates Shabbos. This punishment hardly makes sense as a punishment for not resting and relaxing on the Seventh day. Rather, resting on Shabbos means refraining from the 39 categories and subcategories of forbidden creative labor. Hashem stopped creating on Shabbos, and so do we.

Most of all, Shabbos is Hashem's gift to the Jewish people. It is a time when family and friends gather together, to eat special foods, sing special songs and speak holy words of Torah. What could be better than that? Only Shabbos has such a power to rejuvenate (reJEWenate) the Jewish soul. The following inspirational story shows one Jew's struggle with keeping Shabbos. Several years ago, on the occasion of the Chofetz Chaim's yahrzeit, Rav Boruch Schwartz (not his real name) lectured in a shul in Miami on the life and accomplishments of the Chofetz Chaim. Rav Schwartz mentioned the many sefarim the great Torah sage had authored, both in halachah and in mussar. He described his sterling character, and recounted numerous stories that stood out in his mind depicting the Chofetz Chaim's deep concern for his fellow Jew. There was one story that Rav Schwartz had wanted to tell, but he was troubled, for he only knew part of it. As he stood at the lectern, he thought for a moment and then decided that he would tell it anyway. He rationalized that even an unfinished story about the Chofetz Chaim would certainly have a message.

He began to relate an incident about a bochur (yeshiva student) in the Chofetz Chaim's yeshiva in Radin, who was found smoking a cigarette on Shabbos. Some students in the yeshiva had caught him in this act of desecrating the holy day. It was decided that the boy should be expelled. However, when the Chofetz Chaim heard of this he asked that the bochur be brought to his home.

At this point, as Rav Schwartz was recounting the story, he interrupted the narrative and said, "I don't know what the Chofetz Chaim said to the boy. I only know that they were together for only a few moments. I would give anything to know what he said to the youngster, for I am told that the boy never desecrated the Shabbos again. How wonderful it would be if we could relay that message - whatever it was - to others, to encourage them in their keeping Shabbos, and get the same results!" Rav Schwartz then continued with his lecture.

After the speech, the hall emptied of everyone except for one old man. This gentleman remained in his seat, alone with his thoughts. From the distance it seemed he was trembling, as if he was either crying or suffering from chills. Rav Schwartz walked over to the elderly gentleman, sat down beside him and asked, "Is anything wrong?"

"How did you know that story of the cigarette on Shabbos?" the man said by way of response. He did not look up, and was obviously still shaken and upset. "I really don't know," answered Rav Schwartz. "I heard it a while ago. I don't even remember who told it to me." The old man looked up at Rav Schwartz, somewhat embarrassed. "I was that bochur," he said softly. The rav - who just moments ago had delivered an articulate speech, and from whom words usually flowed so easily - was now speechless. The two sat quietly for a few moments, and then the gentleman said, "I'll tell you what happened... This incident occurred in the 1920s, when the Chofetz Chaim was in his eighties." Began the older man to retell. "I was terrified to have to go into his house and face him. But when I did go into his home, I looked around with disbelief at the poverty in which he lived. It was unimaginable to me that a man of his stature would be satisfied to live in such surroundings. Suddenly he was in the room where I was waiting. He was remarkably short.

At that time I was a teenager and he only came up to my shoulders. He took my hand and clasped it tenderly in both of his. He brought my hand in his own clasped hands up to his face, and when I looked into his soft face, his eyes were closed for a moment. When he opened them, they were filled with tears. "He said to me in a hushed voice full of pain and astonishment, 'Shabbos...' and then he started to cry! He was now holding both my hands in his, and he repeated with astonishment, 'Shabbos ... hailige (holy) Shabbos!'

My heart started pounding and I became more frightened than I had been before. Though he held my hands loosely, I felt as if I were tied by chains of iron. "Tears streamed down his face and one of them rolled onto my hand. I thought it would bore a hole right through my skin. When I think of those tears today I can still feel their heat. I can't describe how awful it felt to know that I had made the Chofetz Chaim cry. But in his rebuke - which consisted only of those words - I felt that he was not angry, but rather sad and disappointed with me for having personally betrayed his confidence. He seemed frightened of the consequences of my actions." The old man became silent, lost in a river of thoughts. The man never forgave himself for having caused the Chofetz Chaim such torment, and now, an old man himself, he caressed the hand that bore the invisible scar of a precious tear. It had become his permanent reminder to observe Shabbos for the rest of his life. (Around the Maggid's Table, Rav Pesach Krohn p.147)

Let us all celebrate the beauty of Shabbos. Then perhaps we will understand why it is the determining factor in defining a Jew. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**