

Good Shabbos Everyone. Mr. Zvi Kahn of Golders Green, a London neighborhood, prepares boys for their bar mitzvahs. He teaches the boys how to read the Torah and the Haftarah, how to be the chazzan, and how to deliver a dvar Torah (Torah thought) in the synagogue or at a reception. Mr. Kahn's reputation as a masterful teacher precedes him, so his clients include a wide gamut of boys coming from all sorts of families - Orthodox as well as non-observant.

In the winter of 1998, Mr. Kahn was contacted by a non-observant family, the Robinsons, (not their real name) to prepare their son Shawn for his bar mitzvah. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were not antagonistic to Orthodoxy, rather, they were just ignorant of traditional Judaism.

Neither of Robinsons had had a formal Jewish education, but their friends had celebrated the bar mitzvahs of their sons, so they were doing the same. All they wanted was that Shawn be able to recite the blessings at the Torah reading and make a little speech at the reception. It sounded simple enough.

After a few weeks of lessons, the Robinsons asked Mr. Kahn if he would grace them by attending the Sunday afternoon reception. Mr. Kahn said he would be happy to attend, but he would do so only if the food was kosher. "What does one thing have to do with the other?" Mr. Robinson asked. "We don't keep kosher at home, so why should we have a kosher celebration outside the home?"

"When I teach the boys," replied Mr. Kahn, "I give them the total package. Becoming a bar mitzvah boy is not merely a 13th birthday celebration, it is a time for commitment. We do not only study the blessings and the speech. I explain the concepts of mitzvos, we discuss Sabbath observance and rules and guidelines of kashrus."

"That's fine," said Mr. Robinson, "but that does not obligate me to make a kosher affair." "Certainly not," said Mr. Kahn respectfully. "But then you must appreciate that I am not obligated to attend a non-kosher bar mitzvah affair which is totally against all I have been teaching your son." "I can respect that," said a disappointed but obstinate Mr. Robinson.

Over the next few months, Shawn (who enjoyed Mr. Kahn calling him Simchah, his Hebrew name), became inspired by his teacher. He told his parents that he wanted Mr. Kahn to be able to attend his bar mitzvah. The Robinsons knew what that meant — they would have to have a kosher affair. They were not happy with that prospect for it would mean that some of their favorite foods could not be served. Reluctantly they capitulated to their son's request and called Mr. Kahn.

Mr. Kahn could tell from the conversation that the Robinsons were not enthusiastic about the change of plans, but nevertheless, they asked him to recommend a kosher caterer. Mr. Kahn suggested they call Mr. Josh Bleier* of Royal Kosher Catering.* Weeks went by and the issue of the kosher catering did not come up again. Every once in a while Mr. Kahn wondered if indeed the Robinsons had called Royal Kosher. He was hesitant to bring up the matter for fear that it might look as though he were questioning their integrity. Yet the question gnawed at him.

On the Sunday morning of the bar mitzvah reception, Mr. Kahn decided to call Josh Bleier and see if indeed he was catering the event. He called Mr. Bleier at home but there was no answer. He called a half hour later and again no answer. This time he left a message on the answering machine that he needed to be called back immediately. He waited impatiently but received no call.

He tried every 20 minutes and each time hung up in frustration at not reaching anyone. He decided to call the office of Royal Kosher, and there, too, all he got was an answering machine. He couldn't understand how a catering outfit could be working at an affair and not have a way of being contacted.

Now Mr. Kahn began debating whether he should go to the reception altogether. If it wasn't going to be kosher, he would have to walk out and that would be insulting. He certainly couldn't stay there he reasoned, for it would be a chillul Hashem — a desecration of Hashem's name, for someone in his position to sit at a table where non-kosher food was being served. If he didn't go, however, and the affair was kosher, the Robinsons would be upset that the Orthodox teacher had lied to them about his coming, and that would be an even bigger chillul Hashem. Mr. Kahn tried Mr. Bleier's home and office one more time and again he reached no one.

By 1:00 p.m. Mr. Kahn decided that he would go to the bar mitzvah. It was the lesser of two evils if he had to leave. At least the Robinsons would see that he made the effort. As he walked into the hall where the bar mitzvah was taking place. Mr. Sandy Pilberg of Prince Prestige Caterers came running towards him. "Zvi," he said excitedly, "it's only because of you that this bar mitzvah is kosher. What a zechus you have that no one here today will eat treif!" (Reflections of The Maggid, p.188 Rabbi Paysach Krohn)

The Torah tells us this week in parshas Toldos, of how Eisav sells his birthright to his brother Yakov for a plate of lentil beans. The verse quotes Eisav as saying to his brother Yakov, "Pour into me, now, some of that very red stuff (the lentils) for I am exhausted." (Bereishis 25:30)

We see from here the character of the evil Eisav, namely, that he was a man of unquenchable physical ta'avos — specifically the desire for food. Eisav was willing to give up his birthright for food. Sadly, we see that many Jews today are willing to give up their birthright in exchange from some good tasting food.

We Jews must take strength in the fact that we are members of a special club. The club has rules of behavior. One set of rules of the Jewish club is the rules of eating kosher. Many Jews exclude themselves from the club and therefore squander their birthright by eating non-kosher food.

Keeping kosher is a paradigm for all of Judaism, in that it involves putting the will of Hashem above our own individual desires. Making a decision to keep kosher means taking a step in the direction of controlling our desires. Keeping kosher means making a statement to the world that: "I do not eat everything that smells good. Rather, I control my desires by not eating certain foods." Through keeping kosher, we will all merit to retain our membership and to ensure our grandchildren's membership in the Holy Jewish nation. The Jewish club has a lot of rules, and a lot of benefits. Only one who keeps the rules will get the benefits.

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