

'KILL' YOURSELF FOR TORAH

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"This is the Torah [the law]: when a person dies in a tent, all who come into the tent, and anything in the tent, shall be impure for seven days." [19:14]

There is a famous teaching in the Talmud, Tractate Brachos 63b: "words of Torah are firmly established only within one who 'kills himself' over it." From where do we learn this, asks Reish Lakish? From the verse above: this is the Torah: a person, when he will die in a tent." The House of Study is called a tent; our forefather Jacob was called a "dweller in tents."

There is, however, an apparent contradiction to this concept, contained in Lev. 18:3: "and you shall observe My decrees and My judgments, which a person shall do and live in them, I am G-d." A person shall live in them, not die in them!

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Mayer Kagan, explains: in general, people set aside the performance of Mitzvos and good deeds because they are busy, and have no free time. But when it is time for a person to leave the world, then there are no excuses. That is when a person must set everything else aside.

This, then, is the meaning of the verse, that a person must "kill himself" over Torah -- that when a person has set aside time to learn, he must think of himself as if he were "removed from the world" during that time. In that case, other demands on his time will hardly appear so pressing!

I translated the full parable of the Chofetz Chaim several years ago -- it resides in the archives at <http://www.torah.org/learning/lifeline/5757/chukas.html> .]

I did not know Manah Yitzchak ben Yehoshua, Dr. Mark Rozen, but I was able to hear much from those who did. He was always involved in community affairs and his own spiritual growth, but in recent years his attachment to Judaism blossomed. He read and searched for a very long time, looking for deeper meaning in the world. And the more he read, the more it took him to Judaism. And more and more, Mark Rozen turned to Torah and Mitzvos over day-to-day distractions.

Judaism became the focus of his existence. He moved to New York just a few years ago, but quickly became a well-known and respected member of the community. He was everywhere. Rabbis from several different synagogues remarked on his tremendous dedication -- his consistent attendance at both prayers and a large number of classes most every evening, and above all his innumerable acts of kindness. And besides all of his other activities, he always had time for other people. He was

involved in a great number of projects for the benefit of others and for the Jewish people. He had Torah, he had Divine Service, he had Good Deeds.

He passed away while still relatively young -- he was only 49. It may appear that he still had much to accomplish, but I was immediately reminded of a parable taught by the outstanding teacher of ethics, Rabbeinu Yonah, in his Yesod HaTeshuvah, or Foundations of Repentance.

Imagine 100 people working, carefully tending the fields of the King. One morning, the King emerges from his castle to go for a walk, and he calls one of the workers over to him. "Come with me," he says, "and let us tour the gardens." So this worker spends the day walking through the delightful gardens of the King, while all the others remain at work.

At the end of the day, all the workers come to claim their pay, and this worker who had been singled out comes with them. The other workers say to him, "what can you take? You did not spend the day doing work!"

The chosen one replies: "where I was, there was no work to be done." And the King sees that his response is correct, and pays him in full measure.

So, too, when a person sets himself upon a path of Torah, Mitzvos and good deeds; as it says in the Chapters of the Fathers 2:16, "it is not upon you to complete the work." A person can accomplish what he needs to accomplish in a very short time.

This was a fitting description of Mark Rozen, a"h.

Good Shabbos,

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