THE VALUE OF PRICELESSNESS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

When Hashem will remove the nations [who dwell in] the land to which you are coming, and drives them away from before you; you shall expell them and live in their land. Be very careful not to fall into the trap of following after them, after they have been destroyed from before you. Lest you investigate [their service of] their gods, saying, "How did these nations worship their gods - I too will do so." Do not worship Hashem, your G-d, in these ways, for these nations performed all sorts of abominations in the name of their gods; they even burned their sons and daughters to their gods. [Rather,] you shall carefully do everything that I tell you... [12:29-31, 13:1]

The above passage warns us not to serve Hashem with idolatrous practices, even if there are elements of their service we find appealing. Why does the Torah find it necessary to conclude the section by telling us that we should serve Hashem in the way we have been taught? Obviously, the mitzvos of the Torah were given to be kept - but how is that a fitting conclusion to our not emulating idolatrous practices?

The winter of 1952 was a joyous time in the Homnick household. Yaakov Yitzchok, their oldest son, was engaged. The Friday morning after the engagement was announced, Yaakov Yitzchok set off to Manhattan on a happy errand; his father had given him a sizeable sum of money with which he was to choose an engagement ring for his kallah from Manhattan's famous diamond district, on 47th street. Yaakov Yitzchok dutifully followed his father's instructions, visiting all the stores he had suggested. Yet he couldn't find the right ring at the right price. It was Erev Shabbos, and Yaakov Yitzchok could not take the risk of getting stuck on his way home for Shabbos.

Eventually, it became so late that Yaakov Yitzchok knew he had to start heading home if he hoped to get back in time for Shabbos. Despairing of finding a ring this time around, he waited in line and boarded the train, his thoughts still occupied by settings and sapphires. A sudden jolt wrenched Yaakov Yitzchok from his contemplation. The train had inexplicably come to a complete halt. "Due to mechanical difficulties, we have stopped the train for a short period of time. We hope to resume service shortly," came the voice of the conductor over the speakers. His fellow passengers sat back and resigned themselves to the inevitable wait. But Yaakov Yitzchok looked at his watch anxiously. Would it really take just a few minutes, or perhaps hours? He did not have much time to spare - Shabbos was coming.

The clock ticked slowly by. Sure enough, it was nearly an hour before the train, with a sudden lurch, finally began moving again. Now what? There was no way Yaakov Yitzchok could make it home in time for Shabbos. He would have to get off at an earlier stop, and walk the rest of the way. Yaakov Yitzchok glanced out of the window. The train was pulling into the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, and time had just about run out. This was going to have to be his stop.

Leaving the station, Yaakov Yitzchok looked around in indecision. He had to act quickly. It is forbidden to carry anything in a public domain on Shabbos, all the more so money. Yaakov Yitzchok needed to find someone with whom to deposit his large sum of money over Shabbos. Yaakov Yitzchok began looking around, hoping to find a Jewish storekeeper in one of the nearby stores. It took only two stores for Yaakov Yitzchok to find a store with a mezuzah on its door. The man behind the counter was clearly Jewish. He was a complete stranger, but Yaakov Yitzchok had no choice but to trust him.

"Excuse me," he said breathlessly, "you're Jewish, right?"

The man eyed him uneasily. "Yes, I am. Why do you ask?"

Yaakov Yitzchok reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope his father had given him. "I am a religious Jew, and I can not carry on Shabbos," he explained. "My train was delayed, and I have to walk home, but I cannot carry this money with me. Could you please keep it for me? I will come back after Shabbos to pick it up." With that, he handed the money to the dumbfounded shopkeeper, and turned and left.

Yaakov Yitzchok arrived home to find his concerned parents waiting for him. His father well understood the concept of sacrifice in order to observe Shabbos - he was the second shomer Shabbos pharmacist in America. He was proud of his son's actions, but he was nevertheless concerned about the money, which was a substantial portion of their savings. On Sunday morning, father and son took the train back to the store, hoping his trust had not been misplaced. Yaakov Yitzchok approached the storekeeper. "Thank you for keeping my money over Shabbos," he said politely. "Could I have it back now?"

"Of course," the man replied. He seemed strangely emotional. "Just a minute while I get it for you."

When he returned, with the envelope in his hand, there were tears in his eyes.

"You know," he said, "when I first came to America from Europe, I really wanted to keep Shabbos, but hardly anyone was. It was next to impossible. But on Friday you showed me that it is always possible to keep Shabbos, no matter how great the sacrifice. I didn't think there were still Jews for whom

Shabbos was so dear." (Adapted from Visions of Greatness, R' Y. Weiss, volume 5)

The Torah prohibits us to learn how to serve Hashem by observing how the heathens serve their idols, but it never forbade us to learn from other G-d-fearing Jews. Perhaps by concluding its warning with the seemingly out-of-place, Rather you shall carefully do everything that I tell you - the Torah is hinting to us that to learn from other Jews, who carefully do everything Hashem tells them, is not only permissable, it's a mitzvah!

What would our price-tag be to desecrate Shabbos? If someone offered you, say, ten million dollars to turn on a light just once on Shabbos, would you do it? Fifty million? One hundred million? How much would we have to pay a Jew not to put on tefillin for just one day? Would any sum of money convince him? How about to eat, just once, without saying a blessing over our food? Or to purposely not recite the Shema?

We may not be used to thinking in these terms, but we all know without hesitation what the answer of any observant Jew would be. The Torah has no price tag. We would not intentionally commit a sin, nor forfeit even one obligatory mitzvah, for any money in the world.

How priceless then are our mitzvos! Imagine if we were to dwell on this thought for just a moment before each Shabbos, before each hanachas tefillin, before each blessing we make. About how this one, little, seemingly insignificant mitzvah is worth more to us than all the money in the world - would it make a difference to how we approach our mitzvos?

The Sages of blessed memory tell us that Shabbos is Hashem's gift to the Jewish people. In parshas Pinchos (Bamidbar/Numbers 28:10), the Torah describes the Shabbos offering, "The burnt-offering of each Shabbos on its own Shabbos." The wording seems redundant. Mefarshim (commentaries) explain that the Hebrew word for a burnt-offering, olah, means elevation - aliyah. The spiritual uplifting we experience each Shabbos is unique - unique to Shabbos, and unique to that Shabbos. We will never again have another opportunity to receive the priceless present Hashem wants to give us this week, Shabbos parshas Re'eh 5764!

Have a good Shabbos.

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****** And by R' Zalman Deutsch, R' Pinchas Goldstein, and R' Isaac Reichman in honour of the Yortzeit of his Rebbe, the Satmar Rebbe zt"l, 26 Av. ****** Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**