

Nakedness

A Jew who cannot perform mitzvos should feel inadequate. Something integral is missing from his life. He feels naked. It goes even further than that. A Torah Jew feels that he cannot survive without mitzvos. He feels a gravitational pull toward mitzvos and an overwhelming desire to fulfill them. There is no dearth of stories that emphasize this idea. I take the liberty of relating a famous incident that occurred concerning Horav Gershon Libman, Rosh Hayeshivah of Novordak in France, the man who was most responsible for the rejuvenation of Torah life in France following World War II. At the time of the episode, Rav Gershon was interred in the notorious labor/death camp Bergen Belsen. Subsisting on almost no food and subjected to harsh, brutal labor, it was difficult to maintain the spiritual stamina for which he was well-known in the Novordoker Yeshivah. Yet, he did. He lived in Bergen Belsen, but his mind and soul were soaring in Novordak. Indeed, every challenge was a nisayon, a test, that brought him closer to Hashem, so that he triumphed over the adversity that had confronted him.

One day while he was working in the field, he was grabbed by the SS and taken to the commandant's office. They did this whenever they sought to "break" a prisoner's will. Just being removed from the misery of the "outside" world and brought into the office with its fancy trappings could shock an inmate. The stark contrast between what the inmates had to endure and what this office represented was more than simply unnerving. What Rav Gershon was about to confront, however, was something for which he had never been prepared. He entered a room that was outfitted with plush carpeting, beautiful paintings and, in the middle of the room, a richly carved, ornate mahogany table. On the table were exquisite china, elegant silver flatware, and the main course: a large, roasted pig! While all of this repulsed him, the revulsion did not reach its climax until he noticed the tablecloth. There, spread across the table - beneath the repugnant roast pig- was a Tallis!

This Tallis, that was once probably used by a Jew davening to Hashem with sincerity and feeling, was now a tablecloth for a Jew to eat a pig! This revulsion was unfathomable; the shock too much to control. Rav Gershon forgot where he was and what the ramifications of his actions would be. In one swift move, he yanked the Tallis off the table. The china, crystal, silver and the pig went flying through the air, landing in a heap upon the commandant's lap. Rav Gershon grabbed the Tallis close to him, kissing it, caressing it and crying. "I am so sorry for the indignity that you had to suffer," he "told" the Tallis. "I am so sorry for your disgrace."

Rav Gershon was prepared. He waited for that bullet that would end his misery, but he would die holding the Tallis in his hands, giving it the respect it deserved. The commandant was furious. He had staged this entire scenario in order to push the Jew over the edge. Let him cringe with revulsion and shame, as his religious relic was defamed in his presence. The Jew, however, did not act according to the script. The Tallis meant more to him than his life. How could this be? For some reason, the Nazi did not kill Rav Gershon, settling instead on beating him mercilessly for his impudence. The blood flowed from his wounds, but Rav Gershon survived. He had preserved the dignity of the Tallis, the honor of Hashem. Mitzvos were his life, without which his life was not worth living.