



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# “Don’t Take Down the Sign!”

Times were very different then. When one of our books was torn, we didn’t junk it. We took it to a little shop where a bookbinder rebound it.

When our briefcase (we didn’t have backpacks then) was falling apart, we didn’t discard it. Instead, we took it to that same shop where the proprietor stitched it and fixed it.

The proprietor of the shop that my friends and I frequented, down on the Lower East side of Manhattan, was an old man named Yossel.

Looking back, I now realize that Yossel, who was arthritic physically and far from genial emotionally, was a Holocaust survivor who eked out a meager livelihood by binding books, fixing broken zippers, and repairing all sorts of everyday tools and trinkets.

I remember once bringing some books to Yossel for rebinding and finding that the shop was closed. There was no sign on the door indicating that he was out to lunch, or that he had gone to pray, or when he would return.

So I came back to Yossel’s shop several times that week, and then but occasionally for the next two or three months. His sign, advertising his services, was still suspended over his doorway. I had every reason to assume that he would eventually reopen.

Finally, one day I approached his shop, and saw that the sign over his door was taken down. Now I knew that Yossel was out of

business.

This experience, hardly significant in its own right, took on a very profound meaning for me when I first heard an explanation, given by the great sage known as the Chofetz Chaim, of why the Torah calls the Sabbath a sign in this week’s portion, *Ki Tisa*.

“The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath... It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel...” (*Exodus 31:16-17*)

The Chofetz Chaim explained that the Sabbath is like a sign on a shopkeeper’s door. However far a Jew might stray, he is still connected to the Jewish people as long as he keeps the Sabbath in some manner. As long as there is a sign on the shopkeeper’s door, he may one day return and reopen for business. But once the sign is removed, once Sabbath observance is totally abandoned, then even that tenuous connection is severed.

It occurs to me that just as there are all sorts of signs, and Yossel’s makeshift shabby sign was certainly very different from signs on more luxurious stores, so too do Jews differ in the way in which they observe the Sabbath.

There are those who focus on every *halachah* involved in Sabbath observance. They are punctilious in following every rule contained in our code of laws.

There are others whose observance is a more spiritual one. They may keep the basic

Sabbath laws in some fashion but find the joy of the Sabbath more personally rewarding. They enjoy the festive meals, and they heartily sing the Sabbath songs.

Still, others take delight in intellectual indulgences in celebration of the Sabbath. They study, they read, they converse, they teach.

Then there are those of a more mystical bent who use the Sabbath for introspection, meditation, and contemplation, and maybe even as an occasion to delve into the classics of Jewish mysticism.

For some the Sabbath is something entirely different. It is merely a day of rest, a physical respite from the toil and stress of a busy week.

Whatever your Sabbath is like, dear reader, as long as it is a special day for you in some way, the sign of Sabbath is suspended over your door. You are, at least potentially, a Sabbath observer, and that is a sign of your connection to God and to the Jewish people.

But there is a lesson here for all of us: None of us can say that our Sabbath observance is a perfect one. None of us is innocent of some minor halachic infraction. Certainly, none of us can say that our Sabbath is one of pure and untainted spirituality. We all have “a way to go”.

Yet the vast majority of Jews whom I know, of whatever level of observance or denominational persuasion, have the sign of Sabbath on their shop door, in some manner or another.

As long as that sign hangs suspended over our doorway, we can confidently look forward to that day when each of us will celebrate a Sabbath worthy of the ultimate redemption of which our sages assure us. For they have said the *geulah*, the final redemption of our people, will come about when we fully observe two Sabbaths in succession.

Don't take down the sign! ■



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