Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza 1800-1854
Rabbi Michael Balinsky

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת ה׳ אֱלֹקיךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדֶךָ׃

וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמֹעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה׳ אֱלֹקיכֶם וּלְעָבְדוֹ בְּכָל־לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם׃

ואהבת את ה׳ אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך, ובפרשׁ׳ שמע לא נאמר, ובכל מאודיכם, כי מאודך היינו מאד מאד למסור את נפשו על קדושת שמו יתׁ, היינו למסור נפשו אף בחיי עוה״ב, וזהו רק קודם שיתברר לאדם חלקו השייך לו בשורשו, כי לכל נפש שייך מצוה מיוחדת שעל ידה יגיע לעוה״ב כפי המצוה וכפי אשר יקיימה וזה עיקר לאל נפש, וקודם שנתברר לאדם חלקו צריך לעבוד את ה׳ בזה האופן שלא ימצא אצלו דבר שלא יוכל מסרה על קדוש ה׳, אך אחר שיבורר לאדם חלקו לא יחפוץ השׂ״י מן האדם שיעבוד אותו בזה האופן, כי לא ירצה השׂ״י ליקח מן האדם מה שסיגל, וגם האדם מצדו אף שאינו מחויב למסור נפשו רק על הג׳ דברים הידועים, אבל על המצוה הידוע לו שזאת שייכת לו בשורשו מחויב למסור נפשו עלי׳ כמו שמצינו בדניאל שמסר נפשו על התפלה אף שלא היו מחויב עפ״י דין, וכן מרדכי שלא רצה לכרוע להמן שהיה דבר קטן. רק שהבינו שזה שייך להם בשורשם

(And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

This is in the first section of the *Shema.* And in the second section, And it shall come to pass, if you shall give heed diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 11:13) but it does not say and "with all your might".

For "your might" is literally "your *much."* This means to be so greatly (much) willing to deliver over your whole life for the sanctity of God's name, even if this means sacrificing your life in the world to come.

Yet this is all only before it is entirely clear to a person his portion connected to him at the root of his soul. For everyone has a particular mitzvah that by fulfilling he thereby achieves the world to come, and according to this mitzvah and its fulfillment is the essence of that person's whole existence. Before one's portion is clear to him, he must serve God in such a way that there is nothing that he would not give over to sanctify God ("and all your *muchness").* Yet after it is clear what his portion (and particular mitzvah) is, God no longer wants him to serve in the previous manner, for God does not want to take away from him this quality for which he had been suited. From man's point of view even though he is only required to give his life for the three prohibitions of idolatry, incest, and murder, yet for the particular mitzvah known to him connected to him at the root of his soul he must give his life to fulfill it. This is reminiscent of Daniel who was willing to give his life to stand and pray, though he was not required as such by the law. Similarly Mordechai would not humble himself before Haman, which would have been a small price to save his life. Yet they understood that that particular mitzvah was connected to

them at the root of their soul, (and worth dying over,)… Translation Betsalel Philip Edwards

There are many who comment on the relationship of the three paragraphs that make up the *Shema*. Classically, the first paragraph is an acceptance of the "yoke of Heaven", while the second paragraph is an acceptance of the "yoke of *mitzvot*". For Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the first paragraph of the *Shema* is the model of serving God "*lishmah*", and the second paragraph is a model of serving God "*shelo lishmah*", as there is the emphasis of reward and punishment.

The Isbitzer moves in a different direction. For him, the first paragraph is for one who has not yet clarified what is his or hers particular *mitzvah*. All of us have one particular *mitzvah* which we can discover through a process of *berur*, clarification. This *mitzvah* is so vital to our existence that even though it is not one of the three for which we would allow ourselves to be killed, we would give up our lives for it. It should be noted that in other teachings, the Isbitzer says that each of us also has a particular *hisaron*, defect, and that the discovery of one's particular *mitzvah* is the act of personal redemption for that defect.

As potentially radical as some of his ideas are, the Isbitzer certainly advocated observance of all the commandments. However, even within this context, there is a task that we as rabbis can perform in helping our congregants, students and ourselves, in encouraging people to discover what is their particular mitzvah that is the root of their being. The midrash quoted below offers another window to this question in challenging people to define their occupation not in terms of the actual work which was done, but the actual *mitzvah* the work enabled them to accomplish.

Midrash on Psalms 118:19, Buber p. 486, from Gym Shoes and Irises, Book Two, Danny Siegel, Town House Press: New York, 1987.

"Open the Gates of Righteousness for me..."

At the time of Judgment in the Future World
Everyone will be asked
"What was your occupation?"
If the person answers,
"I used to feed the hungry,"
they will say to him,
"This is God's gate;
you, who fed the hungry, may enter."
…
"I used to clothe the naked,"
they will say to him,
"This is God's gate,
you, who clothed the naked, may enter."
and similarly with those who raised orphans,
and who performed the Mitzvah of Tzedakah,
and who performed acts of caring, lovingkindness.

David said,

"I have done all of these;
let all the gates open for me."
That is why the verse says,
"Open the Gates of Righteousness for me,
I shall enter them, thanking the Lord."