

When the Gerrer Rebbe (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter) was on his way to visit the Rizhiner Rebbe (R. Yisroel Friedman) in Bukovina (Austria), he passed through the town of Lemberg. The town of Lemberg was known for its strong antireligious Jewish presence and some of those antagonistic coreligionists wished to have an audience with the Rebbe. The Rebbe's entourage wanting to save the Rebbe from this cumbersome ordeal, sought to prevent the meeting, yet the Rebbe insisted that he meet with them.

When the fellows sat down in front of the Rebbe, he challenged them to answer a question that he had on this week's Parsha. In chapter 19 we find the following troublesome verses. In the second verse of the parsha, the Torah says "Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them: You shall be holy; for holy I am the LORD your G-D." In the next verse we find, "You shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths: I am the LORD your G-D." Finally in verse 4, the Torah says "Turn you not unto the idols, nor make to yourselves molten gods: I am the LORD your G-D." In these three consecutive verses, the same concluding phrase is used "I am the Lord your G-D." The rebbe questioned his audience; why would the Torah repeat the same exact words three times?

After his visitors failed to provide a satisfactory answer to his query, he proposed the following answer. These three verses are in fact referring to three different individuals. The first verse which contains the injunction to be holy is of course referring to the deeply committed Jew who sees as a goal and lifelong priority achieving holiness. The second verse which contains the commandment of honoring parents and keeping Shabbat is referring to the average Jew, one who steadily performs the basic tents of our faith without thoughts of lifelong holiness but also with no thought of turning his back on our faith. The third verse which warns against turning to idolatry is obviously referring to one who is seriously contemplating such a drastic and irreversible move.

The Rebbe explained that it does not make a difference how observant one is or how far removed one is from his faith, the Torah reminds us all that at the core of our faith, the fundamental tenet of Judaism, and that which separates a Jew from the sometimes immoral world around us, is our unquestionable faith in G-D. The fervent pious Jew needs to be reminded each day about G-D as much as those that have professed a leave of faith and have contemplated abandoning their Judaism completely.

As those troubled Jews left the presence of the holy Gerrer Rebbe one wonders if his words had the intended, desired affect; were they in fact moved to reconsider their religious life, did they give careful thought to the fact that belief in G-D is central to their religious souls or were they apathetic to his subtle reproach. However, even if they ignored his powerful words, we are not free to do so, we must recognize that irrespective of our particular level of observance, belief in G-D is an inviolate and unalterable truth of our religious existence.

Shabbat Shalom,

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