

The RYS Daily 1/9/06 Seminars III

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The Vilna and Zhitomir seminaries established under Russian government auspices, and with a Russian principal, aroused even deeper and sharper antagonism. With his keen, farsighted perception, R. Israel discerned the evil lurking in them. He knew that the Government was interested in introducing reforms in the Jewish religion after the German model, with the ultimate aim of assimilating the Jews and merging them into the general population. To him this was no less than an attempt at forcible conversion, which everyone is required to resist at the cost of his life. He declared this explicitly to R. Isaac of Volozhin at the above mentioned meeting between them: "It is a time of shmad (forcible conversion), and it behooves everyone great or small, to suffer death rather than transgress, for the government wishes to commingle our new generation with them." In one of his public addresses he likened the two seminaries to the two golden calves which Jeroboam had set up... "Like those two calves, these two seminaries, would G-d forbid, heap destruction on Jewry."

R. Israel was not mistaken. Some years later, it became all too clearly evident that all the time Czar Nicholai I had been plotting to convert the Jews and absorb them into the general population. Like the modern schools and Rabbinical seminaries which the government had pretended to open out of goodness and kindness of their hearts, all decrees and regulations imposed on Russian Jewry at the time were similarly motivated.

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