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CHAPTER 29

THE ACME OF MODESTY AND VIRTUE

His concealment of his deeds and behavior led to his attainment of modesty, simplicity and humility in life. He always behaved as an ordinary Jew, not allowing himself to be served by anyone. Nor did he engage in the practice of conferring berachot upon others. His behavior was entirely inconspicuous; no one could discern any particular piety in him. Even in prayer, intense as his fervor undoubtedly was, he restrained his emotions and suppressed all outward manifestations. One scholar described R. Israel praying on Yom Kippur in these terms, as "standing immobile. Only streaks of blood appeared to pass incessantly in the veins of his temple, while streams of tears poured down from his eyes." [1] His dress was no different from that of the masses. He wore no fur coat or special headgear as was the prevailing custom in Russia. Nothing at all unusual could be noted in him, except for the luster of his face which seemed radiant with some celestial light, his enchanting, handsome features,

[1]. Told by R. Abraham Neimark in the name of R. Abraham Heller of Libau.

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The Acme of Modesty

the neatness of his clothing and his refined manners - all of which bespoke wisdom and nobility. [2]

One example should suffice as evidence of his modesty.

A grandson of the author of the Tosafot Yom Toy spent a holiday in one of the resort towns of Lithuania. One day, he received a letter from

a relative, asking that he send a description of R. Israel of Salant, who was staying in the same resort. The recipient of the letter was taken by complete surprise. Was it possible that R. Israel was there without him being aware of it? His mind began reviewing in turn all the guests he had met, and all of whom he had come to know. Which one of them could possibly be R. Israel? Indeed he had met someone by the name of Israel and had spoken to him every day for the past five weeks, since they shared a common interest. Both would take their poultry to a shochet who lived some distance away. To save effort, they had agreed between them that he would take along R. Israel's poultry when he went to the shochet, and R. Israel would do the same for him. Yet it was impossible that this individual should be the famous gaon and tzaddik. After all he dressed like a layman and behaved no differently to anyone else...

Having failed to discover any other person from out-of-town by the name of Israel, he de-

[2] See Or Yisrael, pp. 114, 120.

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cided to investigate. When they met the next time, he asked R. Israel whether he was not from Salant. R. Israel admitted that he was originally from Salant, and so the person discovered his identity.

Replying to his relative, that person wrote that it was impossible for him to describe the character and conduct of R. Israel, since he was unworthy to do so. He could state one fact, however. Although he had met R. Israel every day for five consecutive weeks, he had not had the slightest inkling, prior to receiving the letter, that the gaon and tzaddik was indeed in the vicinity. This fact - he concluded - would be sufficient for the relative to form some conception of who R. Israel was.[3]

Whenever he joined the company of Rabbis and Chasidic Rebbes, his outward appearance would evoke surprise. For the most part the others

maintained an impressive dignity. They were accompanied by a retinue of attendants and followers. They themselves were dressed in long, satin kapotes; they wore velvet, high-crowned and broad-rimmed hats or colored streimlach. An incessant noise was kept up by the circle around them. R. Israel, in contradistinction, would reach his destination, on foot. His clothes were no different from that of any layman. He would enter quietly and unobtrusively, appearing like a spectator at a bridal party.

[3]. Told by R. Abraham Yaffin.

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