

The RYS Daily 9/10/06 Truth and Legend XIII

Rabbi Israel used to say that both the hasid and mitnagid ought to be reproved: the hasid for saying "Why do I need a book for religious study, when I have a rebbe?" The mitnagid for saying, "If I have a book for religious study, why do I need a rebbe?"

Rabbi Israel first met the Lubavicher rebbe at a German spa, where they used to take the waters. A story is told about their encounter. The Lubavicher rebbe used to ride in a handsome coach accompanied by servants and disciples. Rabbi Israel used to walk. It was said Rabbi Israel did not approve of the Lubavicher's riding in a carriage - it was not clear why, but hasidim thought it was because Rabbi Israel suspected sha'atnez, that the upholstery was made of a mixture of wool and linen, impermissible according to Jewish law. The Lubavicher was not impressed with this argument, because Rabbi Jacob Reischer's Shevut Ya'akov was lenient on this subject. One day, the Lubavicher in his carriage passed Rabbi Israel on foot. The Lubavicher invited Rabbi Israel to join him, "Rather than walk, it is better to lean on Shevut Ya'akov." The hasidic version of the story tells that Rabbi Israel then stepped into the carriage and both rode together every day thereafter. The mitnagdim tell it differently. Rabbi Israel is said to have replied, "As for the charge of sha'atnez, I would surely lean on Shevut Ya'akov, but what about the charge of pride?"

To this, the hasidim retort with a remark the Lubavicher is said to have made: "On the contrary. This is the only way to achieve humility - to ride in a handsome carriage, surrounded by servants, be honored, and yet remain humble."

But this was not Rabbi Israel's concept of humility. He did not think he was better than anyone else; he did not want to be honored by others. Nor could he understand how one could simultaneously practice both pride and humility. His humility was natural, without deviousness. He refused to accept money beyond his immediate needs. He dressed simply, avoided ostentation. He attributed his great learning to a heavenly gift, not to his merit. For he held that even more important than respect for the Torah was respect for each living man.