

“He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisrael.” (23:21)

The Baal Shem Tov Hakadosh once spent Shabbos in a city that was home to a large chassidic following. It happened that on that Shabbos a darshan, an ethical lecturer, who would travel from city to city speaking from the podium admonishing its inhabitants regarding their religious observance, also spent Shabbos in that community. The Baal Shem Tov was a person who empathized with all Jews. In his desire to provide the speaker with a large captive audience, he personally attended the drasha, lecture. The chassidim understandably followed suit.

The darshan went up to the lectern and spoke penetrating words of inspiration. He laced his speech, however, with harsh criticism of the crowd for their lack of total religious observance, citing their lack of Torah study, flimsy minyan attendance, and diminished yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. When the Baal Shem Tov heard the onslaught of invectives leveled at the community, he stood and proceeded to leave the room. Understandably, when the chassidim noticed the Baal Shem leaving, they, one by one, began to follow suit, until there was no one left to listen to the darshan's critique.

After Shabbos, the darshan came to the home where the Baal Shem was staying, complaining that because of the Baal Shem, everyone left his lecture, leaving him to speak to the four walls. He could not complete his intended drasha and who knows if now he would even get paid? Hearing this, the Baal Shem Tov arose from his chair. With tears streaming down his face, he turned to the darshan and said, “You permitted yourself to criticize Jews in public. I would like you to know that when a Jew toils throughout the day – going around the market in search of a livelihood for him and his family – and in the evening – after a full day of back-breaking labor, which has ultimately proven unsuccessful in yielding a decent financial return – just barely makes it to shul to pray with a minyan – his prayer causes an incredible uproar in Heaven. The entire Heavenly Tribunal gather together around the Heavenly Throne and say, “Who is like Your nation Yisrael!” And now, you – a creation of flesh and blood – have the audacity to censure such fine people!”

A similar incident occurred with Rav Meir, z.l., the rav of Tiktin, Poland. A maggid once came to his community and asked permission to lecture in the main shul. Rav Meir not only gave permission, he even attended the discourse. The maggid began castigating the crowd, rebuking them with powerful words. He criticized their lack of business ethics, their petty infighting and lack of religious observance. In short, he was far from complimentary. Rav Meir listened intently to the maggid's words, and suddenly he began to sob loudly.

After the drasha, the maggid came over to the rav's home to hear his opinion of the speech. Rav Meir said, “Your words were penetrating and indeed true, because – without a doubt – I am filled with sin. I must ask you, however, why you felt it important to reprove me in public? Was it necessary to humiliate me in front of the entire religious community? You could have rebuked me

in private and still achieved the same effect.”

The maggid, hearing these words, became visibly shaken. “Rebbe, I did not mean you. I would never suspect the rav of any impropriety, let alone transgressions such as the ones I mentioned. No, I was speaking to the assembled members of the community.”

“The people are pure of any blemish. They are pious and holy,” answered Rav Meir innocently. “If you found reason to censure anyone, it must have been me to whom you were speaking. Hence, I ask you again: why did you embarrass me in public?”

This story sends home a number of messages. One of these messages identifies the chasm that lies between our generation and those that preceded us. It might be a good idea to reflect on this point.