

## If you will not be careful to perform all the words of this Torah... to fear this honored and awesome Name: Hashem your G-d. (28:58)

The Torah is admonishing us to guard the Torah by observing its tenets, the *mitzvos* which Hashem has given us. A lack of observance is indicative of a lack of fear concerning the awesome Name of Hashem. The Torah intimates that Torah observance is intrinsically connected to a Jew's reverence and fear of Hashem. One who understands and reflects on the awe-inspiring, exalted nature of Hashem simply must respond with total observance and complete devotion to His Torah. There just cannot be any other way. To acknowledge the awesome nature of Hashem is to fear Him. To fear Hashem is to carry out His commandments. This is what it is all about. Anything else is simply a lame excuse for non-observance.

In his *Sefer Nitzotzos*, *Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita*, relates the story of *Reb Yudel*, a *chasid*, *talmid*, disciple, of the *Baal HaTanya*, which serves as an excellent analogy to explain the relationship between fearing Hashem and upholding His *mitzvos*.

*Reb Yudel* was the consummate *chasid*, attached to his *Rebbe* with a fiery passion and unfailing devotion. His *Rebbe* was the vehicle through which he derived inspiration for his ultimate serving of the Almighty. *Reb Yudel* was really a *chasid* of Hashem. The *Baal HaTanya*, as all *Rebbes*, guided and inspired him and thousands more about how to best serve the Almighty. He was counted among the true *bonei aliyah*, rising stars, in the *Chabad Chassidic* court. In fact, *Reb Yudel* was the most shining star. The area in which he best exemplified his *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, was in the area of *tefillah*, prayer. When *Reb Yudel* prayed, one could sense the angels halting their service to observe how a human being of flesh and blood could pour out his heart in profound supplication to the Almighty. To watch *Reb Yudel daven* was a sight to behold, savor and cherish. Indeed, if ever a *mashgiach*, ethical supervisor, felt that a student required special prodding concerning his *tefillah*, he would have the young man stand next to *Reb Yudel*, as the *chasid* stood in supplication before Hashem. That scene usually left a lasting impression on the student.

In *Chassidic* literature, there is a well-known maxim that status quo is actually the beginning of spiritual descent. One either rises or he falls. Standing still is tantamount to falling. One day, *Reb Yudel* felt that his passion was lacking; his fervor wanting. While this was relative to the extreme spiritual level of the *tzaddik*, righteous man, falling from a high place can cause greater injury – physical or spiritual. He presented himself before the *Baal HaTanya*. “*Rebbe*,” he said, “I feel a coldness during my *davening*. What can I do?”

“*Yudel*,” asked the *Rebbe*, “What maintained your fervor until now?”

*Reb Yudel* closed his eyes and said, “During my youth, I heard an intriguing story which has

inspired me throughout my life. Regardless of the situation, the spiritual challenges, the physical vicissitudes that have confronted me, I remind myself of the story and it keeps me going.”

Obviously, the *Rebbe* wanted *Reb* Yudel to share the story with him. John was a Cossack in Czar Nikolai’s army. Together with thousands of other soldiers, John was sent to the frigid Siberian frontier. They had one purpose: to guard the large weapons storehouses. John would stand outside in the bitter cold for long hours, guarding the building from attack. Despite the fact that no sane person would attack in the Siberian winter, these hapless soldiers were required to follow the Czar’s orders. They all knew that the punishment for failure was final and swift. As much as the men hated the cold, the alternative of a bullet in the head was non-negotiable. They would suffer the cold.

That fateful day was unusually bitter cold. The thermometer read fifty degrees below zero; the howling wind added to the savage cold. John did everything to stay warm, but to no avail – he finally collapsed. It took a short while for the other guards to notice that one of their own was missing. Finally, they discovered John’s frozen body covered with a sprinkling of snow.

John was half-dead when his compatriots carried him into the warm barracks to thaw out. It was touch and go for a while until John finally opened his eyes, and slowly began to recuperate. Two days after the incident, John was back at his post. The story, however, does not end here. One month after the incident, John received a summons to appear before the army magistrate. The charge: leaving his post. Hearing the trumped-up charge, John almost passed out. How could a soldier who almost froze to death be held in contempt? He had done no wrong! In fact, he had almost died serving the Czar! Is this the way a devoted soldier is treated?

As John stood before the judge, he could no longer contain himself. He began to lose it. “Is this how a dedicated soldier is treated? I nearly died out there. I felt I was breathing my last breath as everything went dark and I passed out from the cold. How could you do this to me?” he screamed hysterically.

The judge had been about to render a judgment of innocent, but that was prior to John’s hysterical outburst. The prosecutor saw a moment of hesitation on the judge’s face, and he immediately pounced. “Judge, let me ask your honor: Is this not a dereliction of duty? How is it possible for a soldier to freeze? The mortal fear of the Czar should be sufficient for one’s entire body to ‘warm up’ considerably, to break out in an enormous sweat. How is it possible for a soldier in the Czar’s army to freeze from cold?”

This is what *Reb* Yudel related to the *Rebbe*. The fact that one knows that he is in active service of Hashem should provide sufficient fervor to one’s prayer. How could one stand apathetically before Hashem? How can one’s *tefillah* be emotionless, indifferent, dispassionate? If one acknowledges his presence before G-d, he must feel the “heat.” If he does not, then apparently he has no understanding about before Whom he stands. He is no different than “John”!

David *Ha'melech* says in *Tehillim* 19:2-4, "The Heavens recount the glory of Hashem, and the expanse declares His handiwork. Day to day expresses speech, and night to night communicates knowledge. (Yet) There is no speech and there are no words; their voice is not heard." The question is glaring and obvious: If the Heavens recount and the expanse declares, if the days speak and the nights communicate, how is it possible for there to be people in the world who do not hear the message and do not know what is taking place? *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl*, explains that David *Ha'melech* gives us the answer: There is no speech, there are no words – for one who does not want to hear. The wicked are acutely aware of the message, the sound, the communication. However, they are not interested in listening.

This is why, explains *Rav Dessler*, there has never been a real *apikores*, heretic. Whoever denies G-d knows deep in his heart that he is hiding from the truth. The *rasha*, wicked man, is afraid to look, afraid to listen and understand, because he realizes that if only he were to look at the truth, he would be compelled to return – and this he is determined to avoid at all costs. It is not much different than our Cossack soldier, John. Denial is a deliberate pretense.

In his heart, every individual knows the truth. He is acutely aware of the beauty and value of a Torah life, but realizes that to embrace the truth means altering a lifestyle that is disingenuous as well as destructive. He likes his own version of the truth, however, and he is stuck in its mire. The only way to resolve the sham of a life that he leads, and the inner compulsion which tells him he is a fool, is to deny Hashem. This is why *Rav Dessler* posits that all heresy is rooted in falsehood. The only thing more tragic than one who cannot see is one who refuses to see.