

For I am Hashem your G-d, you are to sanctify yourselves and you shall become holy. (11:44)

Ibn Ezra adds to the *pasuk*: “You shall sanctify yourselves because I am Hashem your G-d. I gave you *mitzvos* and statutes to guard (and observe), so that you will maintain your holiness.” In other words, the *mitzvos* which we observe protect us. The greater our affiliation with and observance of *mitzvos*, the greater is our protection from failure and falling into the abyss of sin and spiritual contamination. One night, quite late, *Horav Akiva Eiger, zl, Rav* of Posen and the preeminent Torah giant of his generation, heard knocking at his door. As *Rav* of the city, the people knew that he was the 24/7 address for every Jew in need. The fact that it was late at night, when most Jews had retired for the night, did not matter. The *Rav* was surely awake. He was always learning. The *Gaon* went to his door to find two women standing there: a mother and her daughter. They stood by the door weeping bitterly.

“What is wrong?” the *Gaon* asked them. “Our father (elderly woman’s husband) leased an inn from a gentile landowner. This past winter was outrageously cold and snowy. As a result, people did not go out. Without customers, we have no income; without income, we have no rent money. The problem is: the *poritz*, landowner, accepts no excuses. He demands payment. My father was thrown into the dungeon and given an ultimatum: two days to pay – or else. One day has passed.” They then proceeded to continue their incessant weeping.

The *Gaon*’s reply was, “Wait here until I return.” He called his son, and they both left the house in search of funds to help this poor Jew. *Rav Akiva Eiger* covered half the city, trudging through the frigid snow, braving the biting cold wind, all for the sake of a Jew whom he did not even know. He “chanced” upon a bar (The word is in quotes because, as *frum* Jews, we know that nothing happens by chance. Indeed, the word should not be in our lexicon.). The establishment was packed with men imbibing to their heart’s content. Understandably, the patrons of this bar were not the average *shul*-going, *Shabbos* observant members of the Jewish community. The *Gaon* was confronted with a quandary: Should he enter the establishment and plead with them, attempting to appeal to their *Yiddishe neshamos*, souls, the *pintele Yid* that we each possess? He decided that, since a Jew’s life was in danger, he would take his chances.

Rav Akiva Eiger walked into the bar and placed himself in middle of the room. “*Rabbosai*, I need your help. One of our own is wallowing in a dungeon and, unless I raise the funds to redeem him, he will be tortured, and perhaps worse. Please help. Whoever saves one Jew it is considered as if he sustained the entire world!” Their wallets opened up and, within a few moments, these far from religiously observant Jews produced sufficient funds to save their brother.

The *Gaon* took their money and turned back and began admonishing them concerning their lack of observance. The men were shocked. Their leader spoke up, “First, the *Rav* empties our wallets, and then he has the temerity to give us words of *mussar*, admonishment?”

The *Gaon* replied, “It is my responsibility as *Rav* to see to it that every member of our community (Posen) follows along in the correct and righteous path. You have no idea how much I value and appreciate each and every one of you. I have enormous pain in my heart resulting from your spiritual infamy. You have distanced yourselves from Hashem, and this troubles me.” With these words, *Rav Akiva Eiger* burst into bitter, uncontrolled weeping. A few minutes passed, and he added, “When I entered the bar I saw you in your degradation, I was prepared then and there to admonish you for your less than acceptable behavior. Then I recalled the words of *Chazal*, ‘Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say what will be heard (and accepted), it is likewise a *mitzvah* not to say what will not be heard (*Yevamos* 65b).’ In other words, it is better not to speak/admonish when the subject will, at best, ignore you. We gain nothing by giving *mussar* to someone whom we know will not listen. Indeed, it might enrage him and distance him even further. Now that you all have merited to save a Jewish life, however, I am certain that the light of the *mitzvah* has illuminated and warmed your hearts to the point that it is incumbent upon me to arouse you to return and embrace your religious roots.” The words of the *Gaon* had an impact, and a number of those in attendance altered their spiritual trajectory and became observant Jews. This goes to show that, more than what we do for the *mitzvah*, the *mitzvah* does for us.