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Having established the requisite authority, R. Israel began his activities. He convened large public gatherings in the local Bate Midrash: in the famous Great Synagogue and the others as well. He delivered inspirational addresses directed at imbuing his listeners with the true fear of G-d. All manner of stories became current, lauding his rare oratorical powers. He never prepared his speeches in advance, but no sooner had he ascended the Bimah than the words of wisdom began pouring forth like a mighty river. His strong voice and fiery eloquence pierced deeply into the hearts of his listeners and elicited enthusiastic response. He became an extremely popular speaker and crowds would flock to hear him.

Sometimes the hall was so tightly packed that he had to be lifted bodily over the heads of the crowd and passed from person to person till he reached the Bimah. Lifting R. Israel was considered a meritorious act, and all would try to press forward to share in this mitzvah. Others would even kiss his clothing. The masses in particular were taken with his words — the artisans, wagon-drivers, peddlers and the like. To them, he spoke in their own language and about matters affecting their own hearts and souls. Out of respect for him and his message, the learned and communal leaders would also come to hear.

This was a complete novelty, for folk preaching was not highly esteemed in those times. Torah scholars had never occupied themselves with public speaking and were quite unfit for it. Even the official rabbis never cultivated the art and would only deliver discourses on Shabbat Hagadol and Shabbat Shuvah, and then only because custom had so ordained. Speaking to the masses was left to the Maggid, the itinerant preacher, who travelled from town to town to deliver his addresses. Most of these individuals were no scholars, not even knowledgeable, and the derashah of old lost its luster as it was downgraded to the level of the masses. Only they would come and hear the Maggid deliver his addresses, replete with illustrations and fables, while the learned looked down with disdain and held themselves aloof.

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