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THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC AND THE "RABBINICAL SEMINARY"

So far, R. Israel's activities were confined to spreading Torah learning and Musar doctrine. He had not become involved in any communal endeavor. Nor were his private actions public knowledge. "People did not come close to him, and were even afraid to talk to him." Few even knew him by sight. From time to time tales of his remarkable deeds would circulate, in which traces of his exemplary behaviour towards his fellow men and his exceptional virtue became manifest. These, however were isolated instances and did not make any inroad into the mass mind.

The exceptional event of 1848, however, brought R. Israel face to face with the populace. The greatness of his personality, his attitude towards men, and his concern for the welfare of the community became instantly evident. Here was the revelation — for all to see — of his completely consistent Musar outlook which extended over all of human life.

Cholera had broken out in Vilna, and many had died. Normally, no rabbi or Torah authority would have been regarded as responsible for organizing help and care for the sick. R. Israel thought otherwise. As far as he was concerned, saving life and benevolence were the duty of every single Jew, and first and foremost, of the Torah-educated. Just as Talmide Chachamim were expected to improve the spiritual lives of their fellow Jews, so were they required to promote bodily and material welfare of others. Consequently, he placed himself, in all his stature as Torah authority, at the head of these services. He organized a committee which took upon itself the provision of aid to the sick, and which, under his supervision, operated with exemplary efficiency. He rented a hospital containing 1500 beds. The expense entailed was enormous, and R. Israel possessed no financial resources. Nevertheless, he was not to be deterred. He initiated an extensive fund-raising effort to meet the budgetary needs. Interestingly, he was only concerned to cover the outlay of the next three days. Once a sufficient sum for this period had been deposited in the treasury, he ordered that all fund-raising endeavors cease forthwith, and that no further contributions be accepted. He believed that this was as far ahead as any human being had the right to make provisions. For the rest he had to trust in G-d. A prominent philanthropist, Aptow by name, wanted to defray the cost for meat and lighting (candles and kerosine) for as long as required. R. Israel, at first, refused to accept the contribution under any circumstances. He finally yielded to pressure and agreed to make this case an exception?

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