

BE THERE!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

After the giving of the Aseres haDibros/Ten Commandments at Har (Mount) Sinai, Hashem (G-d) asked Moshe to re-ascend the mountain. *"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Ascend to Me, to the mountain, and be there. And I shall give you the two Tablets of Stone, and the Torah and the mitzvah that I have written; to teach them (24:12).'"* The wording, "Ascend to Me, to the mountain, and be there (ve-heye sham)," seems at best superfluous, if not down-right strange. Does it not go without saying that if Moshe will ascend the mountain, he will be there? Or does it...

Mendel, a faithful chassid (disciple) of the renowned tzaddik (spiritual giant) Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir was, aside from being a devoted chassid, also an astute businessman. Once, as he was making plans for a business trip, he realized that he would be attending a trade gathering in a town not far from that of his Rebbe (teacher), Kuzmir, early the following week. "How convenient!" he thought joyously. "I've been longing to spend a Shabbos (Sabbath) together with my Rebbe for quite some time - and I just never get around to it. But now, since I need to be in the region the following week anyway - what a perfect opportunity to be with my Rebbe!"

Then a thought occurred to him. "I will have to leave Kuzmir early Sunday morning in order to reach the convention in time. But what if, as is often the case, the Rebbe will not be available, and I won't be able to take leave of the Rebbe? I might end up waiting around and miss my convention!" He began to have second thoughts.

Afterwards, though, Mendel decided that he would travel to spend Shabbos with his Rebbe as planned. As for his concerns, he resolved that in the very worst case, he would just have to leave without taking leave, if such would be the way things turned out.

And so, with great joy and anticipation, Mendel set out to the city of Kuzmir, to enjoy Shabbos in the court of his holy Rebbe, and - as well - hopefully to enjoy a successful business convention after Shabbos.

When he arrived in Kuzmir, after settling his belongings at the guest house, the first thing Mendel did was to go to the house of his Rebbe, Rabbi Yechezkel, to greet him. "Shalom aleichem, may peace be upon you, Reb Mendel," said the holy Rebbe. "It is wonderful to see you once again. And may you have a safe and peaceful trip home for Shabbos."

"But Rebbe," Reb Mendel said, "My plans were to be here, in Kuzmir, for Shabbos; to enjoy an exalted Shabbos in the presence of the Rebbe. Have I done something wrong, that the Rebbe does not

desire to have me here for Shabbos?"

"Reb Mendel," said the Rebbe, citing the aforementioned pasuk (verse) in this week's sidrah (Torah portion), "Hashem asked Moshe to join him on Har Sinai, 'Ascend to Me, to the mountain.' So why was it necessary to say afterwards, 'and be there?' Of course, if Moshe were to ascend, would he not be there?"

"However, you may know that our holy master, the Ba'al Shem Tov of blessed memory, constantly stressed the power of thought. A person, he taught, is wherever his thoughts are. If one finds himself in an unholy place, yet fills his mind with thoughts of Torah and of Hashem, then he is indeed in a very holy place, regardless of where his body may be. And, conversely, if one is in a place of extreme sanctity, yet his mind is filled with mundane thoughts, then he is not at all where he thinks he is. Hashem was telling Moshe: When you ascend the mountain, leave your earthly concerns behind. Be there - in mind and body.

"So you see Reb Mendel, sometimes, a chassid can think he's with his Rebbe, when in fact he's spending Shabbos in the marketplace. And I have no need for such chassidim. Now, if you were to forego that convention of yours, and dedicate this trip solely to coming and spending an elevating and uplifting Shabbos together - well then perhaps things would be different."

Needless to say, Reb Mendel cancelled his plans for the convention.

It is interesting to consider what "foreign thoughts" Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher) might have had. Was Hashem concerned he might, in the midst of receiving the Torah, daydream about the stock market? Highly unlikely. Moshe's "business" was the Jewish nation.

Perhaps Hashem was concerned that the shepherd's thoughts might wander to his flock, and his mind would not be fully focused on receiving the Torah. Even such thoughts, however meritorious, had no place on Har Sinai. As Shlomo haMelech (King Solomon) puts it (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 3:1), "La-kol zeman ve-eis le-chol chefetz - There is a time for everything." There is a time to worry about the nation, and a time to set aside those worries and concentrate exclusively on understanding the Torah. Hashem wanted Moshe to be there.

Shulchan Aruch (the code of Jewish law - Orach Chaim 191:3) writes: "It is forbidden to perform others tasks while making a blessing." Mishnah Berurah (a famous commentary on the Shulchan Aruch - ibid. 5) comments that this prohibition refers not only to strenuous forms of labour, but even to simple tasks, which do not require substantial concentration. One who does other things while making a blessing (or, as the Mishnah Berurah adds, while praying, bentsching [reciting grace after meals], etc.) demonstrates a lack of respect and significance for what he is doing, and for Whom he does it. It is evidently not important enough for him to give it his full concentration.

This is one small way we can take the lesson of being there and apply it to everyday life. If we just tried to do the things we do every day with all our concentration; to really pray when we pray, learn

when we learn, bentsch when we bentsch, and give others our full attention when we talk to them - how much richer and fuller our lives would be!

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