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"How Beautiful is this Tree!"

Near his town was a forest where **Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk** used to walk frequently. One day his intimates accompanied him on his walk there. After a while, they came upon a beautiful tree.

The Kotzker turned to his chasidim and said: "Surely you remember the *Mishna* (Avot 3:7): 'He who is walking on the road studying, and halts his studies to declare, 'How beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this field' – the Torah considers him to be deserving of death.' It is difficult to understand this, for the tree is one of G-d's first creations, why shouldn't we express our admiration of this glory and praise the greatness of the Creator for his creation?"

The rabbi then became silent; his chasidim were quiet as well.

The air was warm and heavy, the sun scorching hot. Thus the day was spent, until darkness began to fall. Towards evening, the heavens became heavy with clouds. One of the chasidim remarked, "We had better get back to the wagon and return home before it rains."

Soon thereafter it became very dark, such that they could not see each other. Heavy rains began to fall, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Suddenly, a man's cries were heard from a distance. Everyone became silent. The rabbi rose and told the teamster to go and see who was screaming. When he returned he told of two lightning-stricken gentiles lying on the road, crying for help. The chasidim hurried to them, loaded them into the wagon, and brought them to the city.

Meanwhile, the rain had stopped. The moon came out, illuminating the road. The Kotzker offered an insight:

"Let us go home. The first chapter of loving Israel we have carried out under a beautiful tree with two gentiles – this is the intention of Rabbi Yaakov ben Korsha in the Mishna: 'He who is walking in the road and stops his studies...is deserving of death.'

“If it rains, everybody wants to hurry home and stop his studies. But it is forbidden to do this, because you might be endangering human lives. Two gentiles might have died. But because we did not stop our studies and paid no attention to the rain, we were privileged to carry out the commandment of saving lives.”

The chasid who related the story concluded by describing how, during the walk, the rabbi had talked repeatedly about love of Israel. Through true love of Israel, we learn to love the whole world.

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*Source:* From Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk by Dr. Joseph Fox (Bosh Publ.)

*Connections (2):* 1-Weekly Reading: “Love your fellow Jew” (19:18). 2-The *Mishna* quoted and explained in the story is in the the chapter we study this Shabbat afternoon.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Kotzk** [of blessed memory: 5547 - 22 Shevat 5619 (1787 - Jan. 1859)], was not from a chasidic family, yet he became a disciple of the "Seer" of Lublin, [the "Holy Jew"] of Pshischah, and ultimately of Rebbe Simcha-Bunim of Peshischah. “The Kotzker” was known for his practice and insistence upon a zealous and unrelenting search for truth, his active opposition to self-centeredness, his emphasis on properly motivated Torah study, and for his sharp, pithy aphorisms. The last two decades of his life he spent isolated in his room. After his passing, the majority of his followers turned to his disciple R. Yitzchak Meir, first of the Gur dynasty, to be their rebbe. [Based on an appendix entry in "A Treasury of Chassidic Tales" (Artsroll).]