

CONCEPT ALEPH HOSTS AN EVENING WITH RABBI ZEV LEFF

By Simche Goitein

"Concept Aleph is an organisation that is unique in the Jewish world, and I certainly hope it will catch on in other places too". These were the opening words of renowned orator, educator and writer, Rabbi Zev Leff, as he addressed a Tuesday evening gathering at the Golders Green Beis Hamedrash. Even the summer humidity did not deter the crowd numbering over 120 men and women from attending the event, organised by Concept Aleph founder Mr Daniel Lyons together with Mr. Yossi Schwarz. In what has become a hallmark of the organisation, a generous spread was laid out for the invitees to enjoy.



HaRav Zev Leff shlit'a

Mr Lyons officially opened the evening, explaining that Concept Aleph was about encouraging everyone - not just professionals - to become involved in reaching out to our fellow Jews. Just as a sports team requires both a captain and players, effective outreach needs the work of laypeople as well as professionals. Many of us work in an environment in which we meet on a daily basis, *non-frum* Jews who have never been exposed to true *Yiddishkeit*. Although this would be the ideal opportunity to reach out, unfortunately we discover that we do not have confidence to approach secular Jews. Concept Aleph, by way of seminars and workshops, addressed this issue, showing people how to effectively utilise their knowledge and channel it into their efforts of bringing a Jew closer to Hashem.

Rabbi Aaron Hersh of the Jewish Learning Exchange (JLE) then officially introduced Rabbi Leff, who described Concept Aleph as an organisation that broke a myth. Contrary to popular belief, *Kiruv* is not only the domain of professionals - *Kiruv* is the responsibility of every Jewish man and woman.

Quoting a Rambam *beshem* a Sifri, Rabbi Leff said that *Kiruv* was included in the Mitzvah of Ahavas Hashem. Chazal tell us "*Veohavto es Hashem Elokecho*" means everyone has a responsibility to spread love of Hashem - "*sheyehei Shem Shomayim mis'aveh al yodcho*". However, as one can only love what one knows, one must first seek to awaken recognition of Hashem's existence in Jewish hearts. This is the Mitzvah of *Kiruv*. Additionally, *Kiruv* is also included in the Mitzvah of "*Veohavto lere'acho komocho*." Aside for commanding us to want our fellow Jews to enjoy our physical joys, we are hereby told that we should want them to enjoy our spiritual gifts too. Perhaps that is why Rabbi Akiva said of this Possuk "*zeh klal גדול baTorah*". It is particularly in Torah that this Mitzvah comes to the fore, by wanting our fellow Jews to enjoy the same spirituality we do.

"I learned that it's everyone's responsibility to do their bit - given the opportunity, no one may turn away."

The Chofetz Chaim added a further angle to *Kiruv* by including it in the Mitzvah of *Hashovas Aveidah*. We are not only commanded to return lost physical objects, but also a lost Neshomo, a lost heritage. Moreover, as the Possuk says, "*loh suchal lehisalem*" - a person may not turn away and claim that it's not their responsibility.

Rabbi Leff admitted that, to the layperson, the idea of *Kiruv* could appear daunting and difficult. But that is only if one viewed a secular Jew as a foreigner to *Yiddishkeit*. Chazal tell us that every single Jew, regardless of their background and upbringing, has a portion of his or her *Neshama* that remains unblemished. There is always the *pintele Yied*, the eternal spark that can be awakened in every Jew. *Kiruv* is not a matter of creating something new. It is about revealing what is already there. But that spark is muffled and subdued beneath the desires the *Yetzer Hora* creates. All that is required, as with a diamond, is to clean away the dirt and the *Neshama* will sparkle. We only need to fan the flame and the rest will happen.

If a person truly wants to influence someone and bring them closer to Yiddishkeit, Hashem will send the Siyata Dishmaya to fulfil that wish.

Yet someone who wishes to have an impact on another Jew, he continued, must also have faith in that Jew. He must believe that his fellow Jew will accept and absorb that which he is teaching him. The Torah tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu did not have that belief and said to the Ribbono Shel Olam "*Veheim lo yaaminu li*" - the Yieden won't believe that I have come to take them out of Mitzrayim. Because of that doubt, the message of redemption alone would no longer have the desired effect, and the Ribbono Shel Olam had to instruct Moshe to perform two miracles to convince the *Yieden*. In the same vein, for *Kiruv* to make an impression, the mekarev must believe in the person he is relating to. He must also have faith in the power of Torah. After all, Chazal teach us that the light inherent in the Torah returns people to the right path. Lastly, one must have faith in Hakodosh Boruch Hu. We are told that a person is led *Mishomayim* on the path he wishes to tread. If a person truly wants to influence someone and bring them closer to *Yiddishkeit*, Hashem will send the *Siyata Dishmaya* to fulfil that wish.

Rabbi Leff's address ended to rapturous applause. Following a ten minute break, a brief question and answer session was held, during which several members of the audience asked about matters pertaining to *Kiruv* and how to deal with various *Kiruv* situations at work and within the family.



Mr. Daniel Lyons together with Rabbi Kirsch of the JLE.

Mr Lyons closed the evening by thanking everyone, particularly Rabbi Leff, for coming, and invited them to take advantage of the Concept Aleph seminars. Urging everyone to involve themselves in the *chiyuv* of *Ahavas Yisroel*, he again stressed the immense importance of learning the basics. This would provide the confidence that is required to reach out and help bring someone closer to becoming a committed Jew.



Part of the crowd (Photos by Shuli Smus)

Kiruv is everyone's responsibility, as Rabbi Leff powerfully illustrated in the following account.

"Many years ago, while serving as Rov in Miami, I received a phone call from a young Jewish man - a medical student - who had found me in the Yellow Pages. He was engaged to a non-Jewish girl and wanted to know whether I would convert her. I explained that conversions were not performed for the sake of marriage and was about to hang up the phone. But then I was struck by the thought that it might be an idea to meet this young man and acquaint him with *Yiddishkeit*; perhaps something could be done. So, instead of hanging up, I invited him to my home."

"I was extremely impressed by this young man's character traits and good heart, and we got along famously. He began attending some of my *shiurim* and after just one month had become shomer Shabbos. Unbeknownst to me, though, he was still hoping I would convert his fiancée, and, a few weeks later, repeated his request. I decided that the only way forward would be to meet her myself and put her off the idea. I was convinced that she only wanted to convert because she wanted to marry a nice young (prospective) Jewish doctor."

"As was the case with him, I was very impressed by her good character. However, this was a different story and I tried to dissuade her from converting. Before she left, I gave her every book I could think of that would put her off the whole Judaism idea. Yet, sure enough, she returned a week later having read all the books and still intent on becoming Jewish. So I sent her to various families for Shabbos and to a number of Rabbonim. They all commented on her good Middos and proclaimed that this girl could become a *giyores tzeddek*. I, on the other hand, remained doubtful. As a final test, I told her that there was a *Halacha* that if she converted she would not be allowed to marry her fiancée. Of course, this *Halacha* was entirely my own fabrication. After a few moments' thought, she turned to me and said that although she wanted to marry her fiancée, she would rather be Jewish. When I called to break the news to him he told me the same. Needless to say, she converted and I created a '*hetter*' for my '*Halacha*' that allowed them to marry. Although they faced many tests, they have managed to build up a true bayis ne'eman leshem uletiferes in every sense of the word"

"Who knows", Rabbi Leff continued, "what would have happened had I not changed my mind when I had that student on the phone. Had I hung up, that young man might have found another Rabbi, perhaps reform or conservative, who would have been happy to convert his girlfriend, and an entire family would have been lost. I learned that it's *everyone's* responsibility to do their bit - given the opportunity, no one may turn away."

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