

The RYS Daily 12/26/06 Cholera IV

From The Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 1, page 213.

He regarded the entire responsibility as thrust upon his shoulders. Any mishap attributed to lack of promptness filled him with distress. A baby died. R. Israel feared that the rescue operations might have been at fault, and he became very much depressed. He wanted to go to the child's grave and beg for forgiveness.

The epidemic also forced R. Israel to cast aside his modesty and act over the heads of all the great rabbinic authorities of Vilna. All the time that he had lived there, he had never occupied any rabbinic office. He behaved like any ordinary householder and treated the local rabbis with all due deference. On pilgrim festivals he would go to pay his respects to them, as is customary, and he obediently bowed to their rulings in all matters, since this authority belongs to the Mara DeAtra (lit. "Master of the Locality"). Nevertheless, local rabbis constantly addressed halachic queries to R. Israel, and he would respond, clarify and argue but never render any definitive decision in practice out of respect to them. He would even refer such questions as arose in his household to them, and never rely upon his own judgments. With human life at stake, however, he saw no point in proffering honor to anyone else, and he confronted them all with the power of his genius.

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