

From **Rabbi Israel Salanter, Religious-Ethical Thinker**, by Menachem G. Glenn, Yashar Books, 2005, pages 27 - 28.

When a situation arose where the will of God as explained by the codifiers came in direct conflict with the good of the people he held that the welfare of the people deserved priority. This was however the case only in times of danger and only as a temporary measure. He held that Judaism must not be perverted to conform to the times or be permanently reformed: we must adhere strictly to the law and to Rabbinic interpretation, even to the minutest detail, but when human life is involved in strict adherence to the law, then such adherence itself becomes a sin. In this light can we understand the controversy about Rabbi Israel's permission in public to dispense with fasting on the Day of Atonement during the year when a frightful cholera epidemic raged in the city of Vilna." Some rabbis did not have the moral stamina to come to his support. Though he had previously turned to them for decisions on all matters of ritual, he now decided to act for himself when he saw that none of them would speak up in this particular case of the epidemic.

It was to him a matter of "when we have to act for the sake of God; then the law must be dispensed with. "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." Then he ordered announcements to be posted in all synagogues urging a dispensation of the fast. The people, however, were hesitant about complying, as indeed he felt they would be. At the very solemn moment after morning services (Shaharith) before taking out the Torah from the ark, the beadle ascended the platform, demanded that there be silence and made the following announcement: "By the Knowledge of the Omnipresent One, and by the authority of the Torah we grant permission — because of the epidemic — to eat and drink today." No one, however, stirred, no one dared to leave his place, holy terror had stricken them all. Then, to the utter amazement of all, Rabbi Israel, the meek unobtrusive Rabbi Israel, followed the beadle on the Reader's platform and in a solemn, muffled voice exhorted the congregants to abide by the decision just proclaimed.

As no one seemed willing to accept it, he wept aloud and sought to convince the people by the argumentation: "The Rabbis, of blessed memory, said, "'If a man sees that trouble comes upon him, let him investigate his conduct.' This does not refer only to the conduct in relation between man and his God, nor between man and his fellow-man. This was meant, that a man sometimes is to examine his conduct when it concerns his `own self, his own body.' " He further declared: "Man owes a debt to his own body to keep it clean, to keep it a worthy dwelling-place for the soul, the celestial gift, God's portion from on high." He further declared that dirt, unsanitary conditions, hunger — these are the messengers of the plague. God has enjoined upon us the commandment, "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourself," as well as that which is the order of this day: "And ye shall afflict yourselves (souls)." Our Rabbis have explained the words "You shall live by them - and not die by them." But seeing that his exhortations were of no avail, he motioned to the beadle, who produced some wine and cake (this does not require the obligation of ritually washing the hands) and he pronounced aloud the proper benediction

and he ate and drank, setting the example for his reluctant audience.

Where did this man, who was so strict in his observance of the minutest precepts, find the strength, the moral stamina for this heroic action? — It lay in the thought that what he had done was for the benefit of others; the general good of the Klal demanded it. He never regretted what he had done for he knew he had saved many lives. He disregarded the criticism levelled at him, even of those who charged that he went beyond his jurisdiction.

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