

## The Daily RYS 12/4/06 Early Life: Another Opinion

From Rabbi Israel Salanter by Immanuel Etkes, pages 74 - 75.

Among the second generation of disciples of Rabbi Israel Salanter, followed by Dov Katz, an internal tradition circulated that describes the activities undertaken by Rabbi Israel to prepare the ground for his public mission in the realm of Mussar, as follows:

Rabbi Israel knew that without the authority of a Torah giant [gaon] he would have no access to Lithuanian Jewry, and after a difficult struggle within himself he decided to reveal himself before the people. In order to begin his activity, he went about the neighboring towns preaching pilpul of Torah. Wherever he went, his audience was astonished at his genius and acuity, and his name was on everybody's lips. Before long, the news spread in the camp of the lomdim that a great gaon had arisen in Israel.... Rabbi Israel utilized this opportunity, at the same time preaching to the public about matters of admonitions and Mussar, rousing them to spiritual awakening and winning souls over to his approach. He was graced with great talent in public speaking, a strong voice breaking into flames of fire, and he aroused the fear of God in their hearts and brought them close to their Heavenly Father."

Further on, Dov Katz adds that, because of difficulties in the situation of his wife's business, Rabbi Israel sought a position that would provide him a source of livelihood, and at the same time constitute an appropriate framework within which to fulfill his public mission. Among other options, he considered the possibility of serving as a *maggid*—an itinerant preacher. He later thought that the position of *mashgiah* (model and guide in Mussar education with higher status than even the yeshiva head) in a yeshiva would be the proper solution, but finally responded to the proposal that he serve as a *resh metivta*, heading one of the yeshivot in Vilna.

Suggestive though these stories are, they appear to have no basis in fact; they all took shape in the world of legend created by the second generation of Salanter's disciples and neither confirmation of them nor an echo of them is found among the members of the previous generation, who were his contemporaries. These stories reflect a tendency typical of all hagiographical legends surrounding a historical personality—namely, the attempt to fill a lacuna in our knowledge of an earlier period by means of what is known from the later time. Since Salanter later became renowned as a Torah gaon throughout Russia, the legend asserts that he must have gone from one community to another attempting to establish his brilliance before the public. Moreover, because the office of *mashgiah* became of central importance in the Mussar yeshivot that were established at a much later period, he is said to have intended to serve in such an office already when he lived in Salant, when, in fact, this institution—as it developed in the Mussar yeshivot had not yet existed.

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