

## The Daily RYS 4/13/07 Communal Problems

From The History of the Musar Movement 1840 - 1945 by Lester Samuel Eckman, Sheingold Publishers, 1975, pages 103 -

### THE MUSAR MOVEMENT'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNAL PROBLEMS

#### Rabbi Salanter's Participation in Vilna

In 1848, cholera spread throughout the city of Vilna, causing many deaths. Rabbi Salanter assisted in caring for the sick. Rabbi Salanter was convinced that every Jew, particularly men of the Talmud, were obligated to help the sick. He therefore assumed the leadership in Vilna in setting up relief works. He rented, at great expense, a hospital of five hundred beds. Under his influence, doctors worked without pay and a group of seventy men gathered to help in the emergency. Rabbi Salanter permitted Jews to do all necessary work on the Sabbath to care for the sick. He commanded the people to heed the advice of the doctors. He made a proclamation that eating fish which was prohibited during the epidemic was like eating pork. He advised the Jews not to fear, not to worry, not to mourn too long—because this caused physical exhaustion, which in turn led to cholera.[1]

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, during the plague, Rabbi Salanter told the Jews not to fast but to have food and water. Other rabbis would not come out in the open with the statement that food was permissible on the Day of Atonement during the cholera epidemic.

After the morning service was completed on the Day of Atonement, Rabbi Salanter "ascended the platform and recited a blessing over cookies and wine before everybody because he feared lest the people heed not his proclamation of eating on the Day of Atonement." [2] This incident created a stir among many of the rabbis, who felt that Israel Salanter, who was young and without a pulpit, had no right to make such a proclamation to the public.[3]

But Rabbi Salanter did more than this. He announced that he would deliver a lecture of rabbinic law in the Big Synagogue of Vilna. The rabbis of the city, thinking that he was going to discuss the laws of not fasting on the Day of Atonement, gathered to hear him. Then he surprised everyone by avoiding discussion of this issue. Instead, he discussed other topics "with brilliant dialectics, deep understanding and sharpness of mind." [4] He displayed his knowledge to win recognition, in order to save lives.<sup>5</sup> The rabbis of Vilna realized that he was an authority on every aspect of rabbinic law. His name and word of his noble deeds spread throughout Russia, winning him respect for his courage and determination to help others.

[1] Letter from Rabbi Salanter to a colleague stating his views on what was permitted and what was prohibited during the plague, in Isaac Blazer, *Or Israel* (Vilna, 1900), P. 67.

[2] Dov Katz, *Tenuath ha-Musar* (Tel Aviv, 1952), I, 160. See also Maggid

Steinschneider, Jr Vilna (Vilna, 1900), p. 130, and Baruch Epstein, Makor Baruch (Vilna, 1928), II, p. 1012.

[3] Told by T. Weinberg, op. cit., p. 161.

[4] *Ibid.*

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