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The Torah-Mentsch

An examination of the life and accomplishments of Reb Yisroel Salanter

by Lipa Goldwerth

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Rabbi Yisroel Salanter זצ"ל
5570/1809-5643/1883

"He Looked into the Torah and Fashioned Man"

Upon becoming engaged to Reb Yisroel Salanter's granddaughter, the prospective groom, Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, wrote a lengthy, involved shtickel Torah (discourse) to his future father-in-law - which he, in turn, sent to Reb Yisroel. ¹ Reb Yisroel responded to his own son-in-law: ² "I am convinced that you have selected an outstanding Torah scholar as a chassan for my granddaughter. But it is written, (Devarim, 22:10) '...Es Bisi Nasati L'Ish HaZeh', 'My daughter I have given to this (Ish) man...' First let us establish that he is worthy of the title 'Ish' (Mentsch). "

This incident capsulizes Reb Yisroel's goal in planting the Mussar Movement. For as G-d

had created Man, Man in turn must create the Mentsch within himself. Reb Yisroel sought this Mentsch in every man, and he taught the world how to find the Mentsch even when it was eclipsed by layers of sin. G-d used the Torah as his blueprint for creation;³ Reb Yisroel saw the Torah as the prescription for the Mentsch-ideal. His genius equipped him to be Mistakel B'Oraisa U'Borai Ish, to delve into the most hidden recesses of Torah literature to rediscover the once obvious, to forge the Torah-Mentsch.

Dozens of books and articles have been written about Reb Yisroel. Storybooks tend to depict him as the kindly saint, not comprehending that his Bein Adam L'Chaveiro, his tzidkus (righteousness) in dealing with others, was but another aspect of his Bein Adam L'Makom, service of G-d⁴ ... Others condensed a multifaceted gaon hador (outstanding scholar of his generation) into just a pioneering baal mussar (teacher of ethics) -- seeing all his colors through a monochromatic lens, doing a disservice to his name as well as to their own cause ... And, of course, modern literary psychoanalysts presume too much and end up seeing too little.

Today, a century after his passing, let us look back at Reb Yisroel, whom Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk regarded as M'ayn HaRishonim, "akin to a Rishon" (the great Early Commentators of the eleventh-fifteenth centuries).^{4a} Let us catch a glimpse of his unrivaled stature in Torah and Yiras Shomayim (Fear of Heaven), his greatness of mind, his sensitivity of spirit and his genius of heart, his keenness of insight, his creativity of thought and his daring in action. But above all, let us acquaint ourselves with the forest, instead of being overwhelmed by its own trees.

The Early Years: A Thunderbolt

The facts have all been recorded. Reb Yisroel was born in the fall of 5570 (1809)⁵ in Zager,⁶ a provincial town near Kovno, Lithuania, to a prestigious rabbinic family ... Recognized as a prodigy, he was sent, at the age of twelve, to study under the celebrated Gaon of Salant, Reb Hirsh Braude, who came to refer to him as "Alfasi Kattan."⁷ Rabbi Akiva Eiger lauded the chiddushim (novellae) he produced in his teens as "gaonus she'b'gaonus" -- absolutely ingenious. Reb Yisroel married at fifteen years of age. While his young wife cared for their livelihood he developed into a rare talmid chacham with a widely admired approach in pilpul.

During the eighteen years that Salant was his home, one moment in particular was to galvanize his life and eventually revolutionize the Torah world:

Reb Yosef Zundel (1788-1868), a disciple of Reb Chaim Volozhiner, was a man whose saintliness remained hidden from the average eye. Yet young Yisroel took notice of him and developed close contact with him. Yisroel realized, however, that he would see only what Reb Zundel would allow him to see. So he tried to observe him undetected, from afar, following him out to the fields while Reb Zundel would retreat there for contemplation. Once Reb Zundel noticed and exhorted him: Yisroel, study mussar and become a yerei Shomayim!"⁸ Reb Yisroel would relate years later that this precise moment left an everlasting impact on his life. His close disciple, Reb Itzel Peterburger (Blazer), would later describe the

incident: "When he heard his master's command to learn mussar, it entered his innermost heart like a fire; he then began this study of mussar." From that day on he cleaved to Reb Zundel, until his mentor moved to Jerusalem.

...As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say ...

When faced, with a decision, ask yourself, "How would I decide if it were Ne'ilah now, at the closing moments of Yom Kippur?"

If someone talks lashon hara in the beis hamidrash in Kovna, Jews will desecrate the Shabbos in Paris.

Even a person free of the obligation to study Torah must study mussar.

Before I started to learn mussar, I thought the whole world deficient except me. After I started, I found the world full of sinners including me. Now that I've learned some more, I realize that I am indeed a sinner, but I must judge the rest of the world favorably.

One doesn't learn mussar to be a tzaddik, but to become a tzaddik.

Nistar - After All

At first, Reb Yisroel planned to emulate his master, to be a nistar (a hidden saint), moving to a community where he was not known and to assume a humble position, such as a water carrier. The first requirement he set for himself was the mastery of the entire Shas (Talmud) by heart. When halfway through, he abandoned his plan, realizing that his generation had greater need for an active leader who could exert his influence amongst the broadest of circles than for a saintly recluse.[9](#)

Reb Naftoli Amsterdam, one of his leading disciples, would later comment. "The Rebbe at first wished to be a nistar, and then reconsidered. In the long run, however, he succeeded, and the true measure of his greatness has always remained hidden from others."[10](#)

Consistency - In Change

While tracing the various stages in Reb Yisroel's life, a striking feature emerges. He had a willingness to make radical changes, whenever he found such necessary -- by virtue of a shift in circumstances or because of a reassessment of his personal goals. For example, during his early years, Reb Yisroel decided to veer totally away from pilpul, in which he had gained expertise and widespread admiration. He had felt that he was sacrificing truth for the personal gratification gained from the intellectual stimulation of the pilpul approach. Eventually he returned to pilpul because he feared a tendency toward arrogance and complacency in expecting to determine the Gemara's meaning by concentrating only on the page before him ... Other striking examples of change will

follow.

One is also struck by the multiplicity of activities he undertook over the years and in so many different locales. Yet all were unified by one underlying commitment - to help people probe beneath the surface, to bring out their own inner greatness. The chronological account that follows traces the variety of activities he pursued toward this one goal.

The Vilna Years: Taking Vilna by Storm

Reb Yisroel and his close friend Reb Shmuel Salant (Reb Zundel's son-in-law, later famous as Rav of Yerushalayim) had together resolved not to accept any rabbinic posts during this period; for example, they both rejected separate bids from the prestigious community of Brisk. Yet when invited to give shiurim as a Rosh Hayeshivah in Rameillas Yeshivah in Vilna, Reb Yisrael accepted, replacing Rabbi Eliezer Teitz, famed disciple of Rabbi Akiva Eiger. Thus, in 1840 he entered the lives of the Jews of Vilna, to leave an unforgettable impact on the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

Reb Yisroel took the people of Vilna by storm - especially its yeshivah bachurim - through his brilliant lectures - reverting to pilpul again, as he saw fit - and with his mussar discourses. But Reb Yisroel feared that his success was creating envy among fellow faculty members; so he left Rameillas Yeshivah to lecture in another beis midrash.[11](#)

During this period, he attracted the attention of his peers and won the deference of such outstanding scholars as Reb Izek'el Charif and Rabbi Yoseif Dov Soloveitchik, author of Beis Halevi.[12](#) He also republished a number of lesser-known mussar works. Reb Yisroel then began lecturing for baalei battim (laymen) -- shoemakers, porters and wagon-drivers flocked to his talks, as he considered each audience and addressed them according to their own level.

At that time Maggidus (preaching) no longer played the commanding role it once did a century earlier; rabbonim left it to wandering, lesser luminaries. Reb Yisroel, coupling a magnificent gift of speech with a heartening simplicity, raised the standard of Maggidus to its former glory.

...As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say...

Like a bird, man can reach undreamed-of heights as long as he works his wings. Should he relax them for but one minute, however, he plummets downward.

A person lives with himself for seventy years, and after it is all over, he still does not know himself.

With the word "Echod" in the Sh'ma, the Jew crowns G-d as King over the entire cosmos and all four corners of the world, but sometimes he forgets to include himself.

Man is a drop of intellect drowning in a sea of instincts.

Spirituality is like a bird: if you tighten your grip on it, it chokes; slacken your grip, and it flies away.

He organized more knowledgeable baalei battim into groups to study the mussar classics Mesillas Yeshorim and Chovos Halevavos with greater depth, and established his first Beis Hamussar, a room set aside to serve as a retreat from worldly turmoil, dedicated to the study and absorption of yiras Shomayim (fear of G-d). Not meant to replace a Beis Haknesses or Beis Hamidrash, but to supplement them, this mussar retreat was close enough to the Beis Hamidrash to avoid loss of time spent in study.

Reb Yisroel viewed the Beis Hamussar as both a "clinic" -- following the Rambam's approach to human frailty in character or yiras Shomayim as a disease-condition¹³ -- and as a haven from the swirling winds of contemporary corruption. In his words: "Enter this fortress, draw the bridge up behind you, and leave the world beyond the moat!"¹⁴

Courage and Controversy

Two unforeseen developments rocked Reb Yisroel's stay in Vilna. The first was related to Reb Yisroel's attitude toward matters of health. He accepted doctor's orders as halachah (Torah law), implicit in the command of "V'Nishmarsem M'od L'Nafshoseihem", "And you shall guard your lives" (Devarim 4:15). When health concerns conflicted with other halachos, he usually decided with a consistent leniency as far as the latter was concerned. He seemed to share Reb Chaim Brisker's view: "I am not lenient in regard to Shabbos or Yom Kippur; rather I am stringent in the laws of preservation of life!"¹⁵

Since Reb Yisroel never rendered any halachic decisions in Vilna, not even for his own household,¹⁶ he must have experienced enormous personal conflict during the peak of a cholera epidemic that devastated Vilna in late summer 1848. Reb Yisroel had committed himself to the city's welfare - renting hospital quarters with five hundred beds, while his own talmidim nursed the stricken around the clock, seven days a week, with patient care on Shabbos no different than on the other days of the week. As Yom Kippur approached, he feared that the fast would weaken the people and make them dangerously susceptible to the often-fatal disease. Reb Yisroel hung placards throughout Vilna urging all who felt weak to eat on the fast day, to stave off any threat. He did this without consulting others because he apparently realized that he would not gain a consensus for such a radical, yet - in his view - essential move. Immediately after Shacharis on Yom Kippur, he himself rose to the bimah, and according to some accounts, publicly made Kiddush and ate some cakes to encourage all those in need to follow suit. Needless to say, there were great protests, but Reb Yisroel ignored them and reportedly made his way to other shuls as well, to urge others to join him.¹⁷

This daring episode provoked strong and mixed reactions in different circles, and was

long debated.[18](#) For all the esteem he commanded, the Beis Din of Vilna summoned Reb Yisroel for an uncomfortable exchange, [19](#) with Reb Yisroel demonstrating clearly that his command of Torah knowledge put him beyond their ability to challenge him.

Hashlamah vs. Haskallah

At that time, the impact of the German Haskallah (the Enlightenment Movement, which was enamored with secular culture) was beginning to make its mark on Russian Jewry, especially in Vilna. The Maskillim prevailed on the Russian government to help them revamp the traditional chinuch by demanding changes in curriculum, and they succeeded in opening several of their own elementary schools, as well as a Rabbinical Seminary in Vilna. They promoted an education that synthesized Jewish and secular knowledge for motives that went beyond a "broader education"; they were aiming at reshaping the minds and hearts of the youth, distorting the true face of Judaism.

. . .As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say . . .

The greatness of the Ari Zal and the Vilna Gaon went beyond their command of vast amounts of Torah knowledge - both the open and the esoteric parts; their greatness lay in never deviating in the slightest from the directives of the Shulchan Aruch.

A sick person never rejects a healing procedure as "unbefitting." Why, then, do we care what other people think when dealing with spiritual matters?

Man is equipped with such far-reaching vision, yet the smallest coin can obstruct his view.

Despair is the worst of ailments. No worries are justified except: "Why am I so worried?"

People say: "The fool gives, the wise man takes." More accurately: The fool thinks he's giving and the wise man claims that he's taking.

One who rushes headlong to perform a mitzvah can destroy the whole world in his path.

The Maskillim were attracted to Reb Yisroel by his all-encompassing knowledge and were fascinated by his independence and originality, but they had totally misunderstood him and his reactionary attitudes toward halachah. The Maskillim brought considerable pressures upon him to serve as head of their Seminary. Russian Minister of Education Avaroff even interrupted one of his shiurim hoping to influence him [20](#) with magnificent offers.

Some Rabbonim argued that Reb Yisroel, with his rare gifts, was the only one who could save the situation and redirect the course of this ill-conceived Rabbinical Seminary, but Reb Yisroel adamantly refused. On the one hand, he was confident that the Seminary did not have staying power, and was not worthy of all the efforts required in attempting to

lead it properly. Moreover, in a letter to Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz (later secretary to Kovno Rav, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector), he outlined his philosophy of unadulterated rabbanus: " . . . knowledge of Shulchan Aruch and piety is not sufficient . . . For psak we require gedolei Torah!"[21](#) - and these would not emerge from a Haskallah-oriented seminary.

The pressures brought to bear upon Reb Yisroel to head this institution made his continued stay in Vilna unbearable, so he left for Kovno in the winter of 1848 ... Reb Yisroel's approach was eventually vindicated, for the government later deemed the Vilna Seminary and its counterparts in other cities ineffective, and shut them all down in 1873.
[22](#)

The Kovno Years: The Maggid

Upon his arrival in Kovno, Reb Yisroel was engaged by the elders of the city[23](#) to supervise "all matters relating to piety," a position he soon left[24](#) to become Kovno's "official Maggid."[25](#) The Rav, Rabbi Leib Shapiro,[26](#) had insisted that Reb Yisroel only come to Kovno if he assumed some official capacity there.[27](#) Reb Yisroel obviously found this position a fitting forum from which to disseminate his mussar approach. Yet, this too came to a quick end, presumably due to the anti-mussar sentiments, which in Vilna he had hardly experienced.[28](#)

The Rebbe

Despite setbacks, Reb Yisroel maintained his vision and resolve. He once wrote: "Give me ten great disciples, and I will alter the face of our time and revolutionize the Jewish world!"[29](#) This call did not go unheeded. A well-known philanthropist, Tzvi Neveizer,[30](#) supplied the necessary means for Reb Yisroel to open a new Beis Hamidrash. Some one hundred and fifty students flocked to this new Torah center, including a number of future Torah leaders - Rabbi Eliezer Gordon (later Rav and Rosh Hayeshivah of Telshe), Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph (Maggid of Vilna and Chief Rabbi of New York City), Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (Rav of Petersburg), Rabbi Yerucham Leib Perelman (the "Minsker Gadol"), Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam (Rav of Helsingfors, Finland), Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv ("Alter of Kelem"), Rabbi Shlomo Dovid Grodzenski (Rav of Iyve, father of Reb Chaim Ozer of Vilna), to mention some of the better-known disciples.

Reb Yisroel was, indeed, a unique Rebbe. His concern for his talmidim encompassed all aspects of their lives. In his yeshivah, he did away with the belittling system of *essen kest*,[31](#) in which the bachurim were dependent on the generosity of the local townsfolk, eating paltry meals in different homes daily. He insisted that *kavod haTorah* required that the hosts bring the meals to the yeshivah, without anyone knowing who was whose specific guest.[32](#) Even sons of wealthy families ate from these meals, to put an end to social differences amongst the students.

Tales of Reb Yisroel

The hundreds of stories about Reb Yisroel that have been preserved portray unusual intellectual gifts, a multifaceted genius with keen sensitivity to other people's needs as well as a willingness to meet their needs, and an overwhelming sense of mission. Many are well known: Reb Yisroel, absent from shul for Kol Nidrei because he was comforting an infant and its frightened babysitter, and this was of greater importance . . . sensing the disappointment of a youngster who (he understood) was shifted from Maftir to a regular aliyah to make room for Reb Yisroel, and inviting the boy to recite the Haftorah for him after davening, while others were kept waiting . . . advising disciples that the greatest hidur (enhancement) in baking shmurah matzos is to deal gently with the widows and other poor women working the dough. . . taking a young man to task for being so involved in Selichos preparation that he did not reply to someone else's greeting: "Must your teshuvah be at the expense of his 'Good Morning'?"

Other tales, not so widely circulated, are the following, taken from Meoras Hagedolim:

o When disciples in Lithuania pleaded with him to return from Germany to fight Haskallah, he replied with a parable: A farmer was chasing a team of runaway horses down a hill. He shouted to a man sitting under a tree further down the slope to stop them. The fellow did not respond. Reaching him, the farmer asked him why he made no effort to stop the horses. "Wait here until they reach bottom and I'll bring them back for you. If I'd have grabbed them on their headlong charge, they'd have dragged me down with them. At the bottom of the hill, their energy is all spent and they can be led back."

Said Reb Yisroel: "Lithuanian Jewry is plunging headlong into Haskallah. I cannot grapple with them without being dragged down. The Jews of Germany have reached bottom."

He was deeply concerned about the manners and general appearance of the talmidim so as to inspire proper respect in the eyes of the local baalei battim,[33](#) and thus enhance the young man's self-image. This effort bore results. Soon many respectable families, which earlier had shied away from a son-in-law "a batlan," were vying for chassanim who excelled in Torah.

Battei Mussar

The main thrust of Reb Yisroel's energies, however, was to produce gedolei Torah, great Torah personalities, guiding his students to shleimus - completeness and integrity. When he recognized potential in a young man, he dedicated himself totally to his development.[34](#)

With his remarkable insight he realized the aptitudes and talents of each student, directing him along his individual path, though the yeshivah curriculum was always uniform. He organized special chaburos (study groups) to transmit his ideas. Should an uninvited individual enter, Reb Yisroel would cease speaking immediately.[35](#)

This was also a time of great personal growth for Reb Yisroel. He secluded himself for days on end, hammering out his ideas, perfecting his own character, later relaying what he saw fit to his ten select talmidim.³⁶ Disciples of this era later recalled the profound insights they had gained in those sessions.³⁷ Eventually Reb Yisroel began to withdraw from offering regular shiurim in Gemara, which he delegated to Rabbi Eliezer Gordon.³⁸

In Kovno, as in Vilna, Reb Yisroel organized individual battei mussar for different strata of society, including one in the "Woodcutters' Kloiz," a structure which stood in testimony next to the sawmill until 1921, when it was destroyed by fire.³⁹

The World At Large: A New Focus

The great opponents of the now-blossoming mussar Movement - motivated by sincere misgivings - felt obligated to react despite their reverence for Reb Yisroel as an individual. They shared many of the fears of earlier Misnagdim in their opposition to Chassidus - that mussar would create a new sect, veering off the mainstream of Yiddishkeit. This opposition, coupled with the fact that Kovno did not match the challenges and opportunities of Vilna (among other factors), brought about a shift in Reb Yisroel's area of activity. Even though Reb Yisroel had won fame and a following in Lithuania, he spent most of the next twenty-five years of his life crisscrossing Europe on various projects aimed at bringing estranged Jews back to Yiddishkeit, raising the level of commitment of observant Jews, working behind the scenes to protect Jews from all sorts of threatening decrees, only to return to Kovno during his final years.

Tales of Reb Yisroel

o Reb Yisroel's powers of concentration were so intense that he was often oblivious of where he was. One evening he was strolling in Koenigsberg, and did not return. Failing to respond to the questions of a gendarme, he was jailed as a suspicious alien ... After his disciples arranged for his release, the authorities wrote on his passport: "Immer in filosofish gedanken versunken. (Always immersed in philosophical thought)."

o He once failed to show up in shul for the first minyan - his regular time. After several hours passed, a search party was launched, and several children found him sitting on a large stone outside the city, tallis bag in hand, lost in thought. The shouts of the children brought him back to reality, and he became aware that the townspeople were concerned over his absence. Reb Yisroel was so anxious to assure them of his safety that he outran the children to return to town.

This new phase began when Reb Yisroel visited Halberstadt, Germany, in 1857 for medical treatment. He stayed on in Germany to begin a major battle against the Haskallah, which Reb Yisroel saw as the single greatest threat to authentic Yahadus at that time. Its distortions of Judaism, its misleading humanism, and its assumption of non-Jewish values were the roots of the Reform Movement, which Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was battling in Germany⁴⁰ and the Ksav Sofer was contending with in Hungary.⁴¹ Yet, unlike the Reform kehillos and rabbinate, the Haskallah posed a subtle

and pervasive menace. In those places where Reform had not yet taken root, the Haskallah was an enemy not easily recognized by the naked eye, and the battleground was not clearly defined. For sure, the Maskillim did not lack organizational skills, nor were they short of forums from which to spew forth their propaganda, but their approach was to subvert, not convert. Leaders of both Chassidim and Misnagdim recognized the threat of Haskallah, and joined forces in strengthening their positions and in repelling the threat.

Reb Yisroel, ever the original activist, concluded that the best defense was a forceful, fresh counteroffensive. He saw a place of secular knowledge in the overall makeup of the individual,[42](#) but such knowledge was only acceptable for the proper reasons, for the proper people, in the proper time and in the proper place. What he abhorred was the absence of the perceptible lehavdil - the recognizable distinction between Torah wisdom and secular knowledge.[43](#) The two could not be uttered in the same breath, pronounced with the same gravity, articulated in the same halls. Chazal (the rabbis of the Talmud) teach that "G-d has naught in this world but only the four cubits of halachah." Secular studies, then, must be excluded from the rabbinical seminary by the "only" of the Chazal.

Germany was the source of the plague, and it was there that he hoped to save what he could.[44](#) He settled in Koenigsberg and was soon deeply involved with the Jewish youth enrolled in the local university. He scheduled regular shiurim in Navi (Prophets) for them, and was generally aided by the Rav of Koenigsberg, Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenberg, author of Ha'Ksav V'Hakaballah.[45](#) While there, he published his Iggeres Hamussar (Letter on the Study of Ethics)[46](#) - a work that has been reprinted scores of times.

The Memel Approach

In 1860, he was in the border city of Memel. An important port city and mercantile center, it attracted hundreds of Lithuanian Jews to its commercial opportunities, which continued nonstop, seven days a week. Shabbos was not even a nostalgic memory in Memel's bustling main streets.

Realizing that Berlin exerted a stronger pull on Memel than did Vilna, Reb Yisroel did not take a harsh, uncompromising stance against Sabbath desecration in that setting. Instead, he resorted to a soft, graduated approach. In his first sermon he explained the concept of Shabbos to the people on their level, concluding that chillul Shabbos at the port was intolerable because of the writing involved - the major Sabbath desecration of running a business. He did not discuss the actual portering of goods. Many agreed that they could postpone their writing until the weekdays, while the loading and unloading continued.

Some weeks later he suggested that without too much sacrifice, it should be possible not to send shipments, even if goods did arrive. Slowly this approach too became acceptable to the merchants. After a period of time, he convinced them that even the unloading was not vital - and the Jewish merchants of the city ceased all their port activities on the Shabbos. A revolutionized Memel emerged[47](#)

While there, he lectured in Talmud and mussar for young men studying there, caring for all their needs. He also lectured for Jewish university students in Memel.[48](#)

Tales of Reb Yisroel

*In advance of a public Talmudic address, Reb Yisroel posted a list of a hundred references. Upon entering the auditorium to present his discourse, Reb Yisroel checked the list and found that a prankster had replaced his sheet with another list of a hundred references picked at random. He turned pale, and took his seat for the ten minutes that the introductions were made. He then stepped up to the bimah and delivered a brilliant discourse, tying together all hundred random citations.

His disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam later commented, "It did not take Reb Yisroel ten minutes to draw upon his knowledge of Shas to weave together a new pilpul. He turned pale because on the one hand he was reluctant to display his phenomenal intellectual abilities by presenting an 'instant' Torah discourse. Instead, he planned to rise to the bimah, declare his inability to give the posted lecture, and take his seat. On the other hand, this would prove to be a grave setback to his campaign to spread mussar. After much analysis and inner conflict - which was why he had turned pale - he decided to present the spontaneous speech, much against his nature."

"So Much More That I Could Achieve"

As he continued to travel, Reb Yisroel's influence over the hundreds of talmidim and thousands of local baalei battim kept driving him to persevere. "There is so much more that I could achieve," was a comment that frequently fell from his lips, a dream that never ceased to haunt him, as many anecdotes testify.

Even a remote hint at the passage of time suggested undeveloped opportunities for growth and accomplishment. For instance, when he was sitting in a shul during the auctioning of kibbudim (synagogue honors), for "100 groschen . . . 200 groschen," he began to weep. When asked why, he pointed to his gray beard: "Ich bin 'grau shon' (I am gray already) and I've accomplished so little!" - a reflection prompted by the "groschen" of the bidding.[49](#)

It was during this time (1860-61) that he launched the publication of the celebrated Torah journal Tevunah (Wisdom). His purpose: the enhancement of Torah prestige and the promotion of discussion on human personality and character refinement.[50](#) It enjoyed the participation of the Gedolei Torah[51](#) and though only twelve issues appeared, it was greatly respected and most popular.

"Amongst My People"

Reb Yisroel mastered the German language and adopted the German manner of dress, to advance his work in Tilsit, Berlin, Frankfurt, Halberstadt, and other cities.[52](#) As always, he was impeccable in appearance - shining shoes, sparkling buttons on his frock - dressed in the manner of a dignified layman. His impact on the lives of German Jewry appears in retrospect to have been profound. This was strengthened by his close ties with Germany's Torah leadership: Rabbi Ezriel Hildesheimer, Rabbi Meir Lehmann, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. He encouraged the founding of various institutions of learning in Germany, and applauded organized halachah shiurim for girls.[53](#) Throughout this period, Reb Yisroel's correspondence with his talmidim in Russia[54](#) demonstrated that his passionate concern for them was unaffected by time and distance. He was even active in establishing two battei midrash for workers and tradesmen in far-away Russia between 1865 and 1869.

Eventually - sometime between 1869 and 1871 - Reb Yisroel returned to Vilna, when a devastating plague struck the area, claiming his wife. Now with her passing, Reb Yisroel concentrated even more on his German activities, while mourning her for the rest of his days[55](#).

Return To Kovno

All at once back again in Kovno at age 67, Reb Yisroel planted a seed: the Kollel Knesses Bais Yitzchok in Kovno. Its purpose - the furtherance of Hora'ah and mussar, Rabbinics and Ethics - by supporting and guiding exceptional Torah scholars in their development as authorities. The project received the blessings, and eventually the name, of the Kovno Rav and poseik hador (the generation's outstanding authority in halachah), Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector. It was joined by such chavrei hakollel (fellows) as Reb Naftoli Herz (later Rav of Jaffa), Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam, Rabbi Chaim (Telsher) Rabinowitz, and Rabbi Yitzchok Meltzan, among others.[56](#) Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son accepted the administrative responsibilities, while Rabbi Avrohom Shenker and Rabbi Nossan Zvi Finkel (later revered as the "Alter of Slobodka") conducted the internal affairs of this great institution. Under the latter's guidance, publication of the Eitz Pri[57](#) inspired the world of Torah and mussar, featuring essays by both Reb Yisroel and Reb Yitzchok Elchonon - including a foreword by the then lesser-known Reb Yisroel Meir HaKohein, author of Sefer Chofetz Chaim. The fruit of Reb Yisroel's seed nourished generations of yeshivos and sustains ours today.

The true glory of the Kollel was realized under Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (Peterburger), whose rousing sichos (lectures) were the Kollel's life-force. Reb Yisroel would, upon occasion, visit Kovno, and, of course, again address the Kollel.

Several "second-generation" institutions were then formed: Reb Simcha Zissel founded the Talmud Torah in Kelem. In Vilna a mussar yeshivah was established by Reb Yaakov Yoseph, while Reb Nossan Zvi Finkel started the yeshivah in Telshe, and eventually raised the banner of mussar in Slobodka with "Knesses Yisroel," named for the great mentor of them all, Reb Yisroel Salanter.

The impact of these individuals and their institutions on the future great citadels of learning - Telshe, Mir, Kamenitz, Grodno, Kletzk, Chevron, Ponoviez, Ner Israel, R Chaim Berlin, Lakewood, and all their branches and seedlings - is now part of the vital history of Torah in Europe, Eretz Yisroel, and America.

Vilna, Kovno, Koenigsberg, Memel, Berlin - Reb Yisroel's map stared back at him. There is so much more to achieve. He reportedly considered coming to America to establish a proper Jewish community and formal kehillah, but decided against attempting to build a spiritual life in a country where the atmosphere is set by a constitution that guarantees separating Church and State, religious principle and day-today life.[57a](#)

Mission in Paris

Yet, Reb Yisroel did move on to Paris at the age of seventy, despite illness and chronic severe headaches (which at times made it agonizing for him to give public addresses). Why Paris?[58](#) The generally accepted view is, to help organize a kehillah under a qualified Rav. Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin of Vilna did, in fact, become Rav there due to Reb Yisroel's influence. Others claim his purpose there was to arrange a French translation of the Talmud. (Reb Yisroel's goal was to have Shas translated into Russian and German as well.)

His Paris agenda also included offering spiritual direction for the Russian-Polish elements of the Jewish community - all incredible undertakings for an aged, ailing foreigner.[59](#) His living conditions, however, were miserable, and after two near fatal mishaps, he finally left.

Returning to Koenigsberg, he filled a spiritual vacuum left by the departure of the Malbim from that city's rabbinate. He made one more trip to Russia to recharge his disciples with the fire of mussar, visiting Kovno, Minsk and Vilna (where he yet found time to study some of the Vilna Gaon's manuscripts). Before returning to Koenigsburg, he instructed Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz to take up his talented pen and to give expression to Reb Yisroel's opposition to a newly proposed Rabbinical Seminary sponsored by Baron Ginsburg.[60](#)

The Will of the Devout . . .

Reb Yisroel, seventy-three years of age, having achieved what scores of others may only dream of accomplishing, took ill in Koenigsberg, in his attic apartment in the home of his friend and patron, Reb Eliyahu Ber. Reb Yisroel instructed the household that come what may, no one was to desecrate the Shabbos on his behalf. This curious demand was in total opposition to halachah, which Reb Yisroel himself had so valiantly championed.

Nonetheless, he was not to be dissuaded. He explained that this was not misplaced frumkeit (piety) or tzidkus, but halachah: the Gemara rules that shepherds are not to be saved from disaster since their livelihood is by theft. (Their animals would regularly graze in neighboring fields.) "Since," Reb Yisroel continued, "people provide me with

assistance believing that I'm a tzaddik, I too must not be saved since I'm living by false pretenses!"

That week, Reb Eliyahu Ber's son, Binyomin, visited his sister, wife of Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son, in Kovno. When Reb Yitzchok Elchonon inquired after Reb Yisroel's welfare, he related Reb Yisroel's strange demand. Reb Yitzchok Elchonon replied that he should relay to Reb Yisroel: "The Kovno Rav says that you must allow yourself to be saved even if chillul Shabbos is involved."[61](#)

"The will of the devout shall be fulfilled - Reb Yisroel's final illness had begun on Motza'ei Shabbos, 20 Shevat, and his passing was shortly before sundown, Erev Shabbos, on 25 Shevat, 5643/ 1883.

Notes and Sources

1. See Sheilos U'Tshuvos Achiezer, III, No. 53. [\[return to text\]](#)
2. Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Grodnanski, Rav in Vilna, and disciple of Reb Yisroel.[\[return to text\]](#)
3. Midrash Rabba to Bereishis I, and see R"Dal ad loc.[\[return to text\]](#)
4. Ohr Hamussar I, pp. 77-78, quoting his great disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam.[\[return to text\]](#)
- 4a. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky quoting Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik of Boston in an interview granted for preparing this article.[\[return to text\]](#)
5. As evident from the text of his tombstone in Koenigsberg, reprinted in Ir Vilna, p. 128.[\[return to text\]](#)
6. Tnuas Hamussar, Vol. I p. 138, gloss. 4.[\[return to text\]](#)
7. A reference to Rabbi Yitzchok Alfasi, towering Talmudic scholar of 11th-century Fez, in North Africa.[\[return to text\]](#)
8. Nesivos Ohr, p. 124.[\[return to text\]](#)
9. See Nesivos Ohr, p. 111.[\[return to text\]](#)
10. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky.[\[return to text\]](#)
11. R. Dovid Luria, see Nesivos Ohr, p. 109.[\[return to text\]](#)
12. Tnuas Hamussar, p. 150, gl. 5.[\[return to text\]](#)

13. Shemonah Perakim.[\[return to text\]](#)
14. Ohr Yisroel, letters no. 5, 6, etc.[\[return to text\]](#)
15. Ishim Veshitos, R. S.Y. Zevin, pp. 64-65.[\[return to text\]](#)
16. Sridei Aish, R. F.F. Weinberg, IV, 289. Some have attributed Reb Yisroel's reluctance to serve as a Rav to his having arrived at halachic conclusions different from many established local minhagim, Tnuas Hamussar p. 377.[\[return to text\]](#)
17. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 160-161, no. 8 for sources.[\[return to text\]](#)
18. Rabbi Boruch Ber Lebowitz, many years later, said a shiur to analyze the halachah in question.[\[return to text\]](#)
19. R Yaakov Kamenetsky related details to the writer, as transmitted to him by Rabbi Dovid Lebowitz, who had heard a report from the Chofetz Chaim, who had been in Vilna at the time.[\[return to text\]](#)
20. See Tnuas Hamussar I, p. 164.[\[return to text\]](#)
21. Zichron Yaakov III, p. 132. See Tnuas Hamussar. pp. 165-169 in detail.[\[return to text\]](#)
22. Reb Yisroel Salanter, Emanuel Etkes, ibid., p. 191, cites a contemporaneous letter written in Vilna from the Ginsburg Archives referring to the appointment of a dean to the Seminary "in place of the Salanter who fled to Kovno."[\[return to text\]](#)
23. See Shvil HaZahav of R. Mordechai Eliasberg, introductory chapters by his son Yonassan, p. XII (Warsaw: 1897).[\[return to text\]](#)
24. Nesivos Ohr, p. 113.[\[return to text\]](#)
25. Reb Naftoli Amsterdam in Ohr Hamussar, I, p. 78.[\[return to text\]](#)
26. Father of Rabbi Raphael Volozhiner, Rosh Yeshivah of Volozhin, and author of Toras Rafoel and son-in-law of the Netziv. His daughter became R Chaim Brisker's wife.[\[return to text\]](#)
27. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 179-180.[\[return to text\]](#)
28. See L'Toldos HaYehudim B'Kovno by Lipmann (Kaidon: 1931). p. 228. Shvil HaZahav XVI. For full perspective of the mussar conflicts of that time, see Pulmus Hamussar, by Rabbi Dov Katz (e.g., p. 21).[\[return to text\]](#)

29. Tnuas Hamussar, I. p. 171.[\[return to text\]](#)
30. Ibid., I, p. 170.[\[return to text\]](#)
31. Zichron Yaakov, II, pg.8.[\[return to text\]](#)
32. Zichron Yaakov, op.cit.[\[return to text\]](#)
33. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p 172.[\[return to text\]](#)
34. Sridei Aish, IV, p. 291.[\[return to text\]](#)
35. Ohr Yisroel, p. 121.[\[return to text\]](#)
36. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 174.[\[return to text\]](#)
37. Ohr Yisroel, ibid.[\[return to text\]](#)
38. Tnuas Hamussar I, p. 175.[\[return to text\]](#)
39. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 176, no. 20.[\[return to text\]](#)
40. See The History of Orthodox Jewry in Germany, by Herman Schwab, London: 1950.[\[return to text\]](#)
41. See L'Toldos HaRiformatzion HaDatis B'Germania V'Ungaria, by Y.Y. Greenwald, 1948.[\[return to text\]](#)
42. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 218-221, 226.[\[return to text\]](#)
43. Eitz Pri.[\[return to text\]](#)
44. As related by Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky.[\[return to text\]](#)
45. This unique gaon shared an unusual interest in the Gra of Vilna with those - such as Reb Yisroel - of the Gra's "Cheder," as evident from his fruitful collaboration in the fascinating work Eliyas Eliyahu by Rabbi Yehoshua Heshel Levin dealing with the ways and works of the Gra's.[\[return to text\]](#)
46. Originally printed together with the Tomer Dvora, under the title Even Yisroel.[\[return to text\]](#)
47. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 184.[\[return to text\]](#)
48. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 185.[\[return to text\]](#)

49. Me'oros Hagedolim.[\[return to text\]](#)

50. See introduction to Tevunah, no. 1.[\[return to text\]](#)

51. Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik, Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanzohn, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, among others.[\[return to text\]](#)

52. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p.186[\[return to text\]](#)

53. Ibid., p. 192.[\[return to text\]](#)

54 .Ohr Yisroel, pp. 48-68.[\[return to text\]](#)

55. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 192.[\[return to text\]](#)

56. Ibid., p. 193.[\[return to text\]](#)

57. Vilna 1881. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 186.[\[return to text\]](#)

57a. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner quoting R Itzel Peterburg's wife.[\[return to text\]](#)

58. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, as a disciple of Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam and the Alter of Slobodka, possessed a wealth of detailed information regarding Reb Yisroel's Paris stay. He offered the following:

Under Alexander II, many reforms in the Russian regime were realized, ameliorating some of the barbarous policies of Nicholas I. The appearance of Jews on the economic and cultural scene, however, provoked dormant anti-Semitic feelings, even among intellectuals (such as the novelist Dostoyevski). Early in 1881, the Czar was assassinated by revolutionaries. and the Jews served as a convenient scapegoat. Terrifying pogroms erupted in southern Russia, and continued sporadically for several years.

Reb Yisroel, weary but tireless, utilized connections in France to persuade the Parisian Rothschild to influence his cousin in London to lend his considerable prestige to pressure The London Times into dispatching correspondents to the scene of these atrocities and to report them to the Western world.

The Russian regime protested the bad press to the British Foreign Office, which politely explained that freedom of the press was an accepted feature of life in Britain. While Russian Jewry's problems were far from solved, Reb Yisroel's clandestine activities were effective in mitigating some of their more open manifestations.[\[return to text\]](#)

59. Tnuas Hamussar, I, pp. 230-236.[\[return to text\]](#)

60. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 238.[\[return to text\]](#)

61. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, who heard it from Binyomin Ber himself. See also Ir Vilna, p. 128, transcript of Reb Yisroel's tombstone.[\[return to text\]](#)

(The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of Tzemach Dovid)

[Article Index](#) | [Home](#) | [Tzemach](#) | [The Community](#) | [Israel](#)
[Torah](#) | [Features](#) | [New](#) | [Search](#) | [E-mail Us](#)

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Rabbi Yisroel Salanter זצ"ל
5570/1809-5643/1883

"He Looked into the Torah and Fashioned Man"

Upon becoming engaged to Reb Yisroel Salanter's granddaughter, the prospective groom, Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, wrote a lengthy, involved shtickel Torah (discourse) to his future father-in-law - which he, in turn, sent to Reb Yisroel.¹ Reb Yisroel responded to his own son-in-law:² "I am convinced that you have selected an outstanding Torah scholar as a chassan for my granddaughter. But it is written, (Devarim, 22:10) '...Es Bisi Nasati L'Ish HaZeh', 'My daughter I have given to this (Ish) man...' First let us establish that he is worthy of the title 'Ish' (Mentsch). "

This incident capsulizes Reb Yisroel's goal in planting the Mussar Movement. For as G-d had created Man, Man in turn must create the Mentsch within himself. Reb Yisroel sought this Mentsch in every man, and he taught the world how to find the Mentsch even when it was eclipsed by layers of sin. G-d used the Torah as his blueprint for creation;³ Reb Yisroel saw the Torah as the prescription for the Mentsch-ideal. His genius equipped him to be Mistakel B'Oraisa U'Borai Ish, to delve into the most hidden recesses of Torah literature to rediscover the once obvious, to forge the Torah-Mentsch.

Dozens of books and articles have been written about Reb Yisroel. Storybooks tend to depict him as the kindly saint, not comprehending that his Bein Adam L'Chaveiro, his tzidkus (righteousness) in dealing with others, was but another aspect of his Bein Adam L'Makom, service of G-d⁴ ... Others condensed a multifaceted gaon hador (outstanding scholar of his generation) into just a pioneering baal mussar (teacher of ethics) -- seeing all his colors through a monochromatic lens, doing a disservice to his name as well as to their own cause ... And, of course, modern literary psychoanalysts presume too much and end up seeing too little.

Today, a century after his passing, let us look back at Reb Yisroel, whom Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk regarded as M'ayn HaRishonim, "akin to a Rishon" (the great Early Commentators of the eleventh-fifteenth centuries).^{4a} Let us catch a glimpse of his unrivaled stature in Torah and Yiras Shomayim (Fear of Heaven), his greatness of mind,

his sensitivity of spirit and his genius of heart, his keenness of insight, his creativity of thought and his daring in action. But above all, let us acquaint ourselves with the forest, instead of being overwhelmed by its own trees.

The Early Years: A Thunderbolt

The facts have all been recorded. Reb Yisroel was born in the fall of 5570 (1809)⁵ in Zager,⁶ a provincial town near Kovno, Lithuania, to a prestigious rabbinic family ... Recognized as a prodigy, he was sent, at the age of twelve, to study under the celebrated Gaon of Salant, Reb Hirsh Braude, who came to refer to him as "Alfasi Kattan."⁷ Rabbi Akiva Eiger lauded the chiddushim (novellae) he produced in his teens as "gaonus she'b'gaonus" -- absolutely ingenious. Reb Yisroel married at fifteen years of age. While his young wife cared for their livelihood he developed into a rare talmid chacham with a widely admired approach in pilpul.

During the eighteen years that Salant was his home, one moment in particular was to galvanize his life and eventually revolutionize the Torah world:

Reb Yosef Zundel (1788-1868), a disciple of Reb Chaim Volozhiner, was a man whose saintliness remained hidden from the average eye. Yet young Yisroel took notice of him and developed close contact with him. Yisroel realized, however, that he would see only what Reb Zundel would allow him to see. So he tried to observe him undetected, from afar, following him out to the fields while Reb Zundel would retreat there for contemplation. Once Reb Zundel noticed and exhorted him: Yisroel, study mussar and become a yerei Shomayim!"⁸

Reb Yisroel would relate years later that this precise moment left an everlasting impact on his life. His close disciple, Reb Itzel Peterburger (Blazer), would later describe the incident: "When he heard his master's command to learn mussar, it entered his innermost heart like a fire; he then began this study of mussar." From that day on he cleaved to Reb Zundel, until his mentor moved to Jerusalem.

...As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say ...

When faced, with a decision, ask yourself, "How would I decide if it were Ne'ilah now, at the closing moments of Yom Kippur?"

If someone talks lashon hara in the beis hamidrash in Kovna, Jews will desecrate the Shabbos in Paris.

Even a person free of the obligation to study Torah must study mussar.

Before I started to learn mussar, I thought the whole world deficient except me. After I started, I found the world full of sinners including me. Now that I've learned some more, I realize that I am indeed a sinner, but I must judge the rest of the world favorably.

One doesn't learn mussar to be a tzaddik, but to become a tzaddik.

Nistar - After All

At first, Reb Yisroel planned to emulate his master, to be a nistar (a hidden saint), moving to a community where he was not known and to assume a humble position, such as a water carrier. The first requirement he set for himself was the mastery of the entire Shas (Talmud) by heart. When halfway through, he abandoned his plan, realizing that his generation had greater need for an active leader who could exert his influence amongst the broadest of circles than for a saintly recluse.[9](#)

Reb Naftoli Amsterdam, one of his leading disciples, would later comment. "The Rebbe at first wished to be a nistar, and then reconsidered. In the long run, however, he succeeded, and the true measure of his greatness has always remained hidden from others."[10](#)

Consistency - In Change

While tracing the various stages in Reb Yisroel's life, a striking feature emerges. He had a willingness to make radical changes, whenever he found such necessary -- by virtue of a shift in circumstances or because of a reassessment of his personal goals. For example, during his early years, Reb Yisroel decided to veer totally away from pilpul, in which he had gained expertise and widespread admiration. He had felt that he was sacrificing truth for the personal gratification gained from the intellectual stimulation of the pilpul approach. Eventually he returned to pilpul because he feared a tendency toward arrogance and complacency in expecting to determine the Gemara's meaning by concentrating only on the page before him ... Other striking examples of change will follow.

One is also struck by the multiplicity of activities he undertook over the years and in so many different locales. Yet all were unified by one underlying commitment - to help people probe beneath the surface, to bring out their own inner greatness. The chronological account that follows traces the variety of activities he pursued toward this one goal.

The Vilna Years: Taking Vilna by Storm

Reb Yisroel and his close friend Reb Shmuel Salant (Reb Zundel's son-in-law, later famous as Rav of Yerushalayim) had together resolved not to accept any rabbinic posts during this period; for example, they both rejected separate bids from the prestigious community of Brisk. Yet when invited to give shiurim as a Rosh Hayeshivah in Rameillas Yeshivah in Vilna, Reb Yisrael accepted, replacing Rabbi Eliezer Teitz, famed disciple of Rabbi Akiva Eiger. Thus, in 1840 he entered the lives of the Jews of Vilna, to leave an unforgettable impact on the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

Reb Yisroel took the people of Vilna by storm - especially its yeshivah bachurim - through his brilliant lectures - reverting to pilpul again, as he saw fit - and with his

mussar discourses. But Reb Yisroel feared that his success was creating envy among fellow faculty members; so he left Rameillas Yeshivah to lecture in another beis midrash.^{[11](#)}

During this period, he attracted the attention of his peers and won the deference of such outstanding scholars as Reb Izek'el Charif and Rabbi Yoseif Dov Soloveitchik, author of Beis Halevi.^{[12](#)} He also republished a number of lesser-known mussar works. Reb Yisroel then began lecturing for baalei battim (laymen) -- shoemakers, porters and wagon-drivers flocked to his talks, as he considered each audience and addressed them according to their own level.

At that time Maggidus (preaching) no longer played the commanding role it once did a century earlier; rabbonim left it to wandering, lesser luminaries. Reb Yisroel, coupling a magnificent gift of speech with a heartening simplicity, raised the standard of Maggidus to its former glory.

...As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say...

Like a bird, man can reach undreamed-of heights as long as he works his wings. Should he relax them for but one minute, however, he plummets downward.

A person lives with himself for seventy years, and after it is all over, he still does not know himself.

With the word "Echod" in the Sh'ma, the Jew crowns G-d as King over the entire cosmos and all four corners of the world, but sometimes he forgets to include himself.

Man is a drop of intellect drowning in a sea of instincts.

Spirituality is like a bird: if you tighten your grip on it, it chokes; slacken your grip, and it flies away.

He organized more knowledgeable baalei battim into groups to study the mussar classics Mesillas Yeshorim and Chovos Halevavos with greater depth, and established his first Beis Hamussar, a room set aside to serve as a retreat from worldly turmoil, dedicated to the study and absorption of yiras Shomayim (fear of G-d). Not meant to replace a Beis Haknesses or Beis Hamidrash, but to supplement them, this mussar retreat was close enough to the Beis Hamidrash to avoid loss of time spent in study.

Reb Yisroel viewed the Beis Hamussar as both a "clinic" -- following the Rambam's approach to human frailty in character or yiras Shomayim as a disease-condition^{[13](#)} -- and as a haven from the swirling winds of contemporary corruption. In his words: "Enter this fortress, draw the bridge up behind you, and leave the world beyond the moat!"^{[14](#)}

Courage and Controversy

Two unforeseen developments rocked Reb Yisroel's stay in Vilna. The first was related to Reb Yisroel's attitude toward matters of health. He accepted doctor's orders as halachah (Torah law), implicit in the command of "V'Nishmarsem M'od L'Nafshoseihem", "And you shall guard your lives" (Devarim 4:15). When health concerns conflicted with other halachos, he usually decided with a consistent leniency as far as the latter was concerned. He seemed to share Reb Chaim Brisker's view: "I am not lenient in regard to Shabbos or Yom Kippur; rather I am stringent in the laws of preservation of life!"[15](#)

Since Reb Yisroel never rendered any halachic decisions in Vilna, not even for his own household,[16](#) he must have experienced enormous personal conflict during the peak of a cholera epidemic that devastated Vilna in late summer 1848. Reb Yisroel had committed himself to the city's welfare - renting hospital quarters with five hundred beds, while his own talmidim nursed the stricken around the clock, seven days a week, with patient care on Shabbos no different than on the other days of the week. As Yom Kippur approached, he feared that the fast would weaken the people and make them dangerously susceptible to the often-fatal disease. Reb Yisroel hung placards throughout Vilna urging all who felt weak to eat on the fast day, to stave off any threat. He did this without consulting others because he apparently realized that he would not gain a consensus for such a radical, yet - in his view - essential move. Immediately after Shacharis on Yom Kippur, he himself rose to the bimah, and according to some accounts, publicly made Kiddush and ate some cakes to encourage all those in need to follow suit. Needless to say, there were great protests, but Reb Yisroel ignored them and reportedly made his way to other shuls as well, to urge others to join him.[17](#)

This daring episode provoked strong and mixed reactions in different circles, and was long debated.[18](#) For all the esteem he commanded, the Beis Din of Vilna summoned Reb Yisroel for an uncomfortable exchange, [19](#) with Reb Yisroel demonstrating clearly that his command of Torah knowledge put him beyond their ability to challenge him.

Hashlamah vs. Haskallah

At that time, the impact of the German Haskallah (the Enlightenment Movement, which was enamored with secular culture) was beginning to make its mark on Russian Jewry, especially in Vilna. The Maskillim prevailed on the Russian government to help them revamp the traditional chinuch by demanding changes in curriculum, and they succeeded in opening several of their own elementary schools, as well as a Rabbinical Seminary in Vilna. They promoted an education that synthesized Jewish and secular knowledge for motives that went beyond a "broader education"; they were aiming at reshaping the minds and hearts of the youth, distorting the true face of Judaism.

. . .As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say . . .

The greatness of the Ari Zal and the Vilna Gaon went beyond their command of vast amounts of Torah knowledge - both the open and the esoteric parts; their greatness lay in never deviating in the slightest from the directives of the Shulchan Aruch.

A sick person never rejects a healing procedure as "unbefitting." Why, then, do we care what other people think when dealing with spiritual matters?

Man is equipped with such far-reaching vision, yet the smallest coin can obstruct his view.

Despair is the worst of ailments. No worries are justified except: "Why am I so worried?"

People say: "The fool gives, the wise man takes." More accurately: The fool thinks he's giving and the wise man claims that he's taking.

One who rushes headlong to perform a mitzvah can destroy the whole world in his path.

The Maskillim were attracted to Reb Yisroel by his all-encompassing knowledge and were fascinated by his independence and originality, but they had totally misunderstood him and his reactionary attitudes toward halachah. The Maskillim brought considerable pressures upon him to serve as head of their Seminary. Russian Minister of Education Avaroff even interrupted one of his shiurim hoping to influence him [20](#) with magnificent offers.

Some Rabbonim argued that Reb Yisroel, with his rare gifts, was the only one who could save the situation and redirect the course of this ill-conceived Rabbinical Seminary, but Reb Yisroel adamantly refused. On the one hand, he was confident that the Seminary did not have staying power, and was not worthy of all the efforts required in attempting to lead it properly. Moreover, in a letter to Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz (later secretary to Kovno Rav, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector), he outlined his philosophy of unadulterated rabbanus: " . . . knowledge of Shulchan Aruch and piety is not sufficient . . . For psak we require gedolei Torah!"[21](#) - and these would not emerge from a Haskallah-oriented seminary.

The pressures brought to bear upon Reb Yisroel to head this institution made his continued stay in Vilna unbearable, so he left for Kovno in the winter of 1848 ... Reb Yisroel's approach was eventually vindicated, for the government later deemed the Vilna Seminary and its counterparts in other cities ineffective, and shut them all down in 1873.
[22](#)

The Kovno Years: The Maggid

Upon his arrival in Kovno, Reb Yisroel was engaged by the elders of the city[23](#) to supervise "all matters relating to piety," a position he soon left[24](#) to become Kovno's "official Maggid."[25](#) The Rav, Rabbi Leib Shapiro,[26](#) had insisted that Reb Yisroel only come to Kovno if he assumed some official capacity there.[27](#) Reb Yisroel obviously found this position a fitting forum from which to disseminate his mussar approach. Yet, this too came to a quick end, presumably due to the anti-mussar sentiments, which in

Vilna he had hardly experienced.[28](#)

The Rebbe

Despite setbacks, Reb Yisroel maintained his vision and resolve. He once wrote: "Give me ten great disciples, and I will alter the face of our time and revolutionize the Jewish world!"[29](#) This call did not go unheeded. A well-known philanthropist, Tzvi Neveizer,[30](#) supplied the necessary means for Reb Yisroel to open a new Beis Hamidrash. Some one hundred and fifty students flocked to this new Torah center, including a number of future Torah leaders - Rabbi Eliezer Gordon (later Rav and Rosh Hayeshivah of Telshe), Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph (Maggid of Vilna and Chief Rabbi of New York City), Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (Rav of Petersburg), Rabbi Yerucham Leib Perelman (the "Minsker Gadol"), Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam (Rav of Helsingfors, Finland), Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv ("Alter of Kelem"), Rabbi Shlomo Dovid Grodzenski (Rav of Iyve, father of Reb Chaim Ozer of Vilna), to mention some of the better-known disciples.

Reb Yisroel was, indeed, a unique Rebbe. His concern for his talmidim encompassed all aspects of their lives. In his yeshivah, he did away with the belittling system of essen kest,[31](#) in which the bachurim were dependent on the generosity of the local townsfolk, eating paltry meals in different homes daily. He insisted that kavod haTorah required that the hosts bring the meals to the yeshivah, without anyone knowing who was whose specific guest.[32](#) Even sons of wealthy families ate from these meals, to put an end to social differences amongst the students.

Tales of Reb Yisroel

The hundreds of stories about Reb Yisroel that have been preserved portray unusual intellectual gifts, a multifaceted genius with keen sensitivity to other people's needs as well as a willingness to meet their needs, and an overwhelming sense of mission. Many are well known: Reb Yisroel, absent from shul for Kol Nidrei because he was comforting an infant and its frightened babysitter, and this was of greater importance . . . sensing the disappointment of a youngster who (he understood) was shifted from Maftir to a regular aliyah to make room for Reb Yisroel, and inviting the boy to recite the Haftorah for him after davening, while others were kept waiting . . . advising disciples that the greatest hidur (enhancement) in baking shmurah matzos is to deal gently with the widows and other poor women working the dough. . . taking a young man to task for being so involved in Selichos preparation that he did not reply to someone else's greeting: "Must your teshuvah be at the expense of his 'Good Morning'?"

Other tales, not so widely circulated, are the following, taken from Meoras Hagedolim:

o When disciples in Lithuania pleaded with him to return from Germany to fight Haskallah, he replied with a parable: A farmer was chasing a team of runaway horses down a hill. He shouted to a man sitting under a tree further down the slope to stop them. The fellow did not respond. Reaching him, the farmer asked him why he made no effort to stop the horses. "Wait here until they reach bottom and I'll bring them back for you. If

I'd have grabbed them on their headlong charge, they'd have dragged me down with them. At the bottom of the hill, their energy is all spent and they can be led back."

Said Reb Yisroel: "Lithuanian Jewry is plunging headlong into Haskallah. I cannot grapple with them without being dragged down. The Jews of Germany have reached bottom."

He was deeply concerned about the manners and general appearance of the talmidim so as to inspire proper respect in the eyes of the local baalei battim,[33](#) and thus enhance the young man's self-image. This effort bore results. Soon many respectable families, which earlier had shied away from a son-in-law "a batlan," were vying for chassanim who excelled in Torah.

Battei Mussar

The main thrust of Reb Yisroel's energies, however, was to produce gedolei Torah, great Torah personalities, guiding his students to shleimus - completeness and integrity. When he recognized potential in a young man, he dedicated himself totally to his development.[34](#)

With his remarkable insight he realized the aptitudes and talents of each student, directing him along his individual path, though the yeshivah curriculum was always uniform. He organized special chaburos (study groups) to transmit his ideas. Should an uninvited individual enter, Reb Yisroel would cease speaking immediately.[35](#)

This was also a time of great personal growth for Reb Yisroel. He secluded himself for days on end, hammering out his ideas, perfecting his own character, later relaying what he saw fit to his ten select talmidim.[36](#) Disciples of this era later recalled the profound insights they had gained in those sessions.[37](#) Eventually Reb Yisroel began to withdraw from offering regular shiurim in Gemara, which he delegated to Rabbi Eliezer Gordon.[38](#)

In Kovno, as in Vilna, Reb Yisroel organized individual battei mussar for different strata of society, including one in the "Woodcutters' Kloiz," a structure which stood in testimony next to the sawmill until 1921, when it was destroyed by fire.[39](#)

The World At Large: A New Focus

The great opponents of the now-blossoming mussar Movement - motivated by sincere misgivings - felt obligated to react despite their reverence for Reb Yisroel as an individual. They shared many of the fears of earlier Misnagdim in their opposition to Chassidus - that mussar would create a new sect, veering off the mainstream of Yiddishkeit. This opposition, coupled with the fact that Kovno did not match the challenges and opportunities of Vilna (among other factors), brought about a shift in Reb Yisroel's area of activity. Even though Reb Yisroel had won fame and a following in Lithuania, he spent most of the next twenty-five years of his life crisscrossing Europe on

various projects aimed at bringing estranged Jews back to Yiddishkeit, raising the level of commitment of observant Jews, working behind the scenes to protect Jews from all sorts of threatening decrees, only to return to Kovno during his final years.

Tales of Reb Yisroel

o Reb Yisroel's powers of concentration were so intense that he was often oblivious of where he was. One evening he was strolling in Koenigsberg, and did not return. Failing to respond to the questions of a gendarme, he was jailed as a suspicious alien ... After his disciples arranged for his release, the authorities wrote on his passport: "Immer in filosofish gedanken versunken. (Always immersed in philosophical thought)."

o He once failed to show up in shul for the first minyan - his regular time. After several hours passed, a search party was launched, and several children found him sitting on a large stone outside the city, tallis bag in hand, lost in thought. The shouts of the children brought him back to reality, and he became aware that the townspeople were concerned over his absence. Reb Yisroel was so anxious to assure them of his safety that he outran the children to return to town.

This new phase began when Reb Yisroel visited Halberstadt, Germany, in 1857 for medical treatment. He stayed on in Germany to begin a major battle against the Haskallah, which Reb Yisroel saw as the single greatest threat to authentic Yahadus at that time. Its distortions of Judaism, its misleading humanism, and its assumption of non-Jewish values were the roots of the Reform Movement, which Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was battling in Germany⁴⁰ and the Ksav Sofer was contending with in Hungary.⁴¹ Yet, unlike the Reform kehillos and rabbinate, the Haskallah posed a subtle and pervasive menace. In those places where Reform had not yet taken root, the Haskallah was an enemy not easily recognized by the naked eye, and the battleground was not clearly defined. For sure, the Maskillim did not lack organizational skills, nor were they short of forums from which to spew forth their propaganda, but their approach was to subvert, not convert. Leaders of both Chassidim and Misnagdim recognized the threat of Haskallah, and joined forces in strengthening their positions and in repelling the threat.

Reb Yisroel, ever the original activist, concluded that the best defense was a forceful, fresh counteroffensive. He saw a place of secular knowledge in the overall makeup of the individual,⁴² but such knowledge was only acceptable for the proper reasons, for the proper people, in the proper time and in the proper place. What he abhorred was the absence of the perceptible lehavdil - the recognizable distinction between Torah wisdom and secular knowledge.⁴³ The two could not be uttered in the same breath, pronounced with the same gravity, articulated in the same halls. Chazal (the rabbis of the Talmud) teach that "G-d has naught in this world but only the four cubits of halachah." Secular studies, then, must be excluded from the rabbinical seminary by the "only" of the Chazal.

Germany was the source of the plague, and it was there that he hoped to save what he could.⁴⁴ He settled in Koenigsberg and was soon deeply involved with the Jewish youth

enrolled in the local university. He scheduled regular shiurim in Navi (Prophets) for them, and was generally aided by the Rav of Koenigsberg, Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenberg, author of Ha'Ksav V'Hakaballah.⁴⁵ While there, he published his Iggeres Hamussar (Letter on the Study of Ethics)⁴⁶ - a work that has been reprinted scores of times.

The Memel Approach

In 1860, he was in the border city of Memel. An important port city and mercantile center, it attracted hundreds of Lithuanian Jews to its commercial opportunities, which continued nonstop, seven days a week. Shabbos was not even a nostalgic memory in Memel's bustling main streets.

Realizing that Berlin exerted a stronger pull on Memel than did Vilna, Reb Yisroel did not take a harsh, uncompromising stance against Sabbath desecration in that setting. Instead, he resorted to a soft, graduated approach. In his first sermon he explained the concept of Shabbos to the people on their level, concluding that chillul Shabbos at the port was intolerable because of the writing involved - the major Sabbath desecration of running a business. He did not discuss the actual portering of goods. Many agreed that they could postpone their writing until the weekdays, while the loading and unloading continued.

Some weeks later he suggested that without too much sacrifice, it should be possible not to send shipments, even if goods did arrive. Slowly this approach too became acceptable to the merchants. After a period of time, he convinced them that even the unloading was not vital - and the Jewish merchants of the city ceased all their port activities on the Shabbos. A revolutionized Memel emerged⁴⁷

While there, he lectured in Talmud and mussar for young men studying there, caring for all their needs. He also lectured for Jewish university students in Memel.⁴⁸

Tales of Reb Yisroel

*In advance of a public Talmudic address, Reb Yisroel posted a list of a hundred references. Upon entering the auditorium to present his discourse, Reb Yisroel checked the list and found that a prankster had replaced his sheet with another list of a hundred references picked at random. He turned pale, and took his seat for the ten minutes that the introductions were made. He then stepped up to the bimah and delivered a brilliant discourse, tying together all hundred random citations.

His disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam later commented, "It did not take Reb Yisroel ten minutes to draw upon his knowledge of Shas to weave together a new pilpul. He turned pale because on the one hand he was reluctant to display his phenomenal intellectual abilities by presenting an 'instant' Torah discourse. Instead, he planned to rise to the bimah, declare his inability to give the posted lecture, and take his seat. On the other hand, this would prove to be a grave setback to his campaign to spread mussar. After

much analysis and inner conflict - which was why he had turned pale - he decided to present the spontaneous speech, much against his nature."

"So Much More That I Could Achieve"

As he continued to travel, Reb Yisroel's influence over the hundreds of talmidim and thousands of local baalei battim kept driving him to persevere. "There is so much more that I could achieve," was a comment that frequently fell from his lips, a dream that never ceased to haunt him, as many anecdotes testify.

Even a remote hint at the passage of time suggested undeveloped opportunities for growth and accomplishment. For instance, when he was sitting in a shul during the auctioning of kabbudim (synagogue honors), for "100 groschen . . . 200 groschen," he began to weep. When asked why, he pointed to his gray beard: "Ich bin 'grau shon' (I am gray already) and I've accomplished so little!" - a reflection prompted by the "groschen" of the bidding.[49](#)

It was during this time (1860-61) that he launched the publication of the celebrated Torah journal Tevunah (Wisdom). His purpose: the enhancement of Torah prestige and the promotion of discussion on human personality and character refinement.[50](#) It enjoyed the participation of the Gedolei Torah[51](#) and though only twelve issues appeared, it was greatly respected and most popular.

"Amongst My People"

Reb Yisroel mastered the German language and adopted the German manner of dress, to advance his work in Tilsit, Berlin, Frankfurt, Halberstadt, and other cities.[52](#) As always, he was impeccable in appearance - shining shoes, sparkling buttons on his frock - dressed in the manner of a dignified layman. His impact on the lives of German Jewry appears in retrospect to have been profound. This was strengthened by his close ties with Germany's Torah leadership: Rabbi Ezriel Hildesheimer, Rabbi Meir Lehmann, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. He encouraged the founding of various institutions of learning in Germany, and applauded organized halachah shiurim for girls.[53](#) Throughout this period, Reb Yisroel's correspondence with his talmidim in Russia[54](#) demonstrated that his passionate concern for them was unaffected by time and distance. He was even active in establishing two battei midrash for workers and tradesmen in far-away Russia between 1865 and 1869.

Eventually - sometime between 1869 and 1871 - Reb Yisroel returned to Vilna, when a devastating plague struck the area, claiming his wife. Now with her passing, Reb Yisroel concentrated even more on his German activities, while mourning her for the rest of his days[55](#).

Return To Kovno

All at once back again in Kovno at age 67, Reb Yisroel planted a seed: the Kollel Knesses Bais Yitzchok in Kovno. Its purpose - the furtherance of Hora'ah and mussar, Rabbinics and Ethics - by supporting and guiding exceptional Torah scholars in their development as authorities. The project received the blessings, and eventually the name, of the Kovno Rav and poseik hador (the generation's outstanding authority in halachah), Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector. It was joined by such chavrei hakollel (fellows) as Reb Naftoli Herz (later Rav of Jaffa), Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam, Rabbi Chaim (Telsher) Rabinowitz, and Rabbi Yitzchok Meltzan, among others.⁵⁶ Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son accepted the administrative responsibilities, while Rabbi Avrohom Shenker and Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel (later revered as the "Alter of Slobodka") conducted the internal affairs of this great institution. Under the latter's guidance, publication of the Eitz Pri⁵⁷ inspired the world of Torah and mussar, featuring essays by both Reb Yisroel and Reb Yitzchok Elchonon - including a foreword by the then lesser-known Reb Yisroel Meir HaKohein, author of Sefer Chofetz Chaim. The fruit of Reb Yisroel's seed nourished generations of yeshivos and sustains ours today.

The true glory of the Kollel was realized under Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (Peterburger), whose rousing sichos (lectures) were the Kollel's life-force. Reb Yisroel would, upon occasion, visit Kovno, and, of course, again address the Kollel.

Several "second-generation" institutions were then formed: Reb Simcha Zissel founded the Talmud Torah in Kelem. In Vilna a mussar yeshivah was established by Reb Yaakov Yoseph, while Reb Nosson Zvi Finkel started the yeshivah in Telshe, and eventually raised the banner of mussar in Slobodka with "Knesses Yisroel," named for the great mentor of them all, Reb Yisroel Salanter.

The impact of these individuals and their institutions on the future great citadels of learning - Telshe, Mir, Kamenitz, Grodno, Kletzk, Chevron, Ponoviez, Ner Israel, R Chaim Berlin, Lakewood, and all their branches and seedlings - is now part of the vital history of Torah in Europe, Eretz Yisroel, and America.

Vilna, Kovno, Koenigsberg, Memel, Berlin - Reb Yisroel's map stared back at him. There is so much more to achieve. He reportedly considered coming to America to establish a proper Jewish community and formal kehillah, but decided against attempting to build a spiritual life in a country where the atmosphere is set by a constitution that guarantees separating Church and State, religious principle and day-today life.^{57a}

Mission in Paris

Yet, Reb Yisroel did move on to Paris at the age of seventy, despite illness and chronic severe headaches (which at times made it agonizing for him to give public addresses). Why Paris?⁵⁸ The generally accepted view is, to help organize a kehillah under a qualified Rav. Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin of Vilna did, in fact, become Rav there due to Reb Yisroel's influence. Others claim his purpose there was to arrange a French translation of the Talmud. (Reb Yisroel's goal was to have Shas translated into Russian and German as well.)

His Paris agenda also included offering spiritual direction for the Russian-Polish elements of the Jewish community - all incredible undertakings for an aged, ailing foreigner.⁵⁹ His living conditions, however, were miserable, and after two near fatal mishaps, he finally left.

Returning to Koenigsberg, he filled a spiritual vacuum left by the departure of the Malbim from that city's rabbinate. He made one more trip to Russia to recharge his disciples with the fire of mussar, visiting Kovno, Minsk and Vilna (where he yet found time to study some of the Vilna Gaon's manuscripts). Before returning to Koenigsburg, he instructed Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz to take up his talented pen and to give expression to Reb Yisroel's opposition to a newly proposed Rabbinical Seminary sponsored by Baron Ginsburg.⁶⁰

The Will of the Devout . . .

Reb Yisroel, seventy-three years of age, having achieved what scores of others may only dream of accomplishing, took ill in Koenigsberg, in his attic apartment in the home of his friend and patron, Reb Eliyahu Ber. Reb Yisroel instructed the household that come what may, no one was to desecrate the Shabbos on his behalf. This curious demand was in total opposition to halachah, which Reb Yisroel himself had so valiantly championed.

Nonetheless, he was not to be dissuaded. He explained that this was not misplaced frumkeit (piety) or tzidkus, but halachah: the Gemara rules that shepherds are not to be saved from disaster since their livelihood is by theft. (Their animals would regularly graze in neighboring fields.) "Since," Reb Yisroel continued, "people provide me with assistance believing that I'm a tzaddik, I too must not be saved since I'm living by false pretenses!"

That week, Reb Eliyahu Ber's son, Binyomin, visited his sister, wife of Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son, in Kovno. When Reb Yitzchok Elchonon inquired after Reb Yisroel's welfare, he related Reb Yisroel's strange demand. Reb Yitzchok Elchonon replied that he should relay to Reb Yisroel: "The Kovno Rav says that you must allow yourself to be saved even if chillul Shabbos is involved."⁶¹

"The will of the devout shall be fulfilled - Reb Yisroel's final illness had begun on Motza'ei Shabbos, 20 Shevat, and his passing was shortly before sundown, Erev Shabbos, on 25 Shevat, 5643/ 1883.

Notes and Sources

1. See Sheilos U'Tshuvos Achiezer, III, No. 53. [[return to text](#)]
2. Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Grodnanski, Rav in Vilna, and disciple of Reb Yisroel. [[return to text](#)]

3. Midrash Rabba to Bereishis I, and see R"Dal ad loc.[\[return to text\]](#)
4. Ohr Hamussar I, pp. 77-78, quoting his great disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam.[\[return to text\]](#)
- 4a. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky quoting Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik of Boston in an interview granted for preparing this article.[\[return to text\]](#)
5. As evident from the text of his tombstone in Koenigsberg, reprinted in Ir Vilna, p. 128.[\[return to text\]](#)
6. Tnuas Hamussar, Vol. I p. 138, gloss. 4.[\[return to text\]](#)
7. A reference to Rabbi Yitzchok Alfasi, towering Talmudic scholar of 11th-century Fez, in North Africa.[\[return to text\]](#)
8. Nesivos Ohr, p. 124.[\[return to text\]](#)
9. See Nesivos Ohr, p. 111.[\[return to text\]](#)
10. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky.[\[return to text\]](#)
11. R. Dovid Luria, see Nesivos Ohr, p. 109.[\[return to text\]](#)
12. Tnuas Hamussar, p. 150, gl. 5.[\[return to text\]](#)
13. Shemonah Perakim.[\[return to text\]](#)
14. Ohr Yisroel, letters no. 5, 6, etc.[\[return to text\]](#)
15. Ishim Veshitos, R. S.Y. Zevin, pp. 64-65.[\[return to text\]](#)
16. Sridei Aish, R. F.F. Weinberg, IV, 289. Some have attributed Reb Yisroel's reluctance to serve as a Rav to his having arrived at halachic conclusions different from many established local minhagim, Tnuas Hamussar p. 377.[\[return to text\]](#)
17. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 160-161, no. 8 for sources.[\[return to text\]](#)
18. Rabbi Boruch Ber Lebowitz, many years later, said a shiur to analyze the halachah in question.[\[return to text\]](#)
19. R Yaakov Kamenetsky related details to the writer, as transmitted to him by Rabbi Dovid Lebowitz, who had heard a report from the Chofetz Chaim, who had been in Vilna at the time.[\[return to text\]](#)

20. See Tnuas Hamussar I, p. 164.[\[return to text\]](#)
21. Zichron Yaakov III, p. 132. See Tnuas Hamussar. pp. 165-169 in detail.[\[return to text\]](#)
22. Reb Yisroel Salanter, Emanuel Etkes, *ibid.*, p. 191, cites a contemporaneous letter written in Vilna from the Ginsburg Archives referring to the appointment of a dean to the Seminary "in place of the Salanter who fled to Kovno."[\[return to text\]](#)
23. See Shvil HaZahav of R. Mordechai Eliasberg, introductory chapters by his son Yonassan, p. XII (Warsaw: 1897).[\[return to text\]](#)
24. Nesivos Ohr, p. 113.[\[return to text\]](#)
25. Reb Naftoli Amsterdam in Ohr Hamussar, I, p. 78.[\[return to text\]](#)
26. Father of Rabbi Raphael Volozhiner, Rosh Yeshivah of Volozhin, and author of Toras Rafoel and son-in-law of the Netziv. His daughter became R Chaim Brisker's wife.[\[return to text\]](#)
27. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 179-180.[\[return to text\]](#)
28. See L'Toldos HaYehudim B'Kovno by Lipmann (Kaidon: 1931). p. 228. Shvil HaZahav XVI. For full perspective of the mussar conflicts of that time, see Pulmus Hamussar, by Rabbi Dov Katz (e.g., p. 21).[\[return to text\]](#)
29. Tnuas Hamussar, I. p. 171.[\[return to text\]](#)
30. *Ibid.*, I, p. 170.[\[return to text\]](#)
31. Zichron Yaakov, II, pg.8.[\[return to text\]](#)
32. Zichron Yaakov, *op.cit.*[\[return to text\]](#)
33. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p 172.[\[return to text\]](#)
34. Sridei Aish, IV, p. 291.[\[return to text\]](#)
35. Ohr Yisroel, p. 121.[\[return to text\]](#)
36. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 174.[\[return to text\]](#)
37. Ohr Yisroel, *ibid.*[\[return to text\]](#)
38. Tnuas Hamussar I, p. 175.[\[return to text\]](#)

39. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 176, no. 20.[\[return to text\]](#)
40. See The History of Orthodox Jewry in Germany, by Herman Schwab, London: 1950.[\[return to text\]](#)
41. See L'Toldos HaRiformatzion HaDatis B'Germania V'Ungaria, by Y.Y. Greenwald, 1948.[\[return to text\]](#)
42. Tnuas Hamussar I, pp. 218-221, 226.[\[return to text\]](#)
43. Eitz Pri.[\[return to text\]](#)
44. As related by Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky.[\[return to text\]](#)
45. This unique gaon shared an unusual interest in the Gra of Vilna with those - such as Reb Yisroel - of the Gra's "Cheder," as evident from his fruitful collaboration in the fascinating work Eliyas Eliyahu by Rabbi Yehoshua Heshel Levin dealing with the ways and works of the Gra's.[\[return to text\]](#)
46. Originally printed together with the Tomer Dvora, under the title Even Yisroel.[\[return to text\]](#)
47. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 184.[\[return to text\]](#)
48. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 185.[\[return to text\]](#)
49. Me'oros Hagedolim.[\[return to text\]](#)
50. See introduction to Tevunah, no. 1.[\[return to text\]](#)
51. Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik, Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanzohn, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, among others.[\[return to text\]](#)
52. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p.186[\[return to text\]](#)
53. Ibid., p. 192.[\[return to text\]](#)
54. .Ohr Yisroel, pp. 48-68.[\[return to text\]](#)
55. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 192.[\[return to text\]](#)
56. Ibid., p. 193.[\[return to text\]](#)
57. Vilna 1881. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 186.[\[return to text\]](#)
- 57a. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner quoting R Itzel Peterburg's wife.[\[return to text\]](#)

58. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, as a disciple of Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam and the Alter of Slobodka, possessed a wealth of detailed information regarding Reb Yisroel's Paris stay. He offered the following:

Under Alexander II, many reforms in the Russian regime were realized, ameliorating some of the barbarous policies of Nicholas I. The appearance of Jews on the economic and cultural scene, however, provoked dormant anti-Semitic feelings, even among intellectuals (such as the novelist Dostoyevski). Early in 1881, the Czar was assassinated by revolutionaries, and the Jews served as a convenient scapegoat. Terrifying pogroms erupted in southern Russia, and continued sporadically for several years.

Reb Yisroel, weary but tireless, utilized connections in France to persuade the Parisian Rothschild to influence his cousin in London to lend his considerable prestige to pressure The London Times into dispatching correspondents to the scene of these atrocities and to report them to the Western world.

The Russian regime protested the bad press to the British Foreign Office, which politely explained that freedom of the press was an accepted feature of life in Britain. While Russian Jewry's problems were far from solved, Reb Yisroel's clandestine activities were effective in mitigating some of their more open manifestations.[\[return to text\]](#)

59. Tnuas Hamussar, I, pp. 230-236.[\[return to text\]](#)

60. Tnuas Hamussar, I, p. 238.[\[return to text\]](#)

61. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, who heard it from Binyomin Ber himself. See also Ir Vilna, p. 128, transcript of Reb Yisroel's tombstone.[\[return to text\]](#)

(The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of Tzemach Dovid)