

The Daily RYS 8/30/06 Truth and Legend IV

From "Truth and Legend About Israel Salanter" by Jacob Mark

In a small town like Salanty, Rabbi Israel had little opportunity to put his ideas to practice, but his arrival in Vilna marked a new period in his life. Not yet thirty, he became renowned in and around Vilna as a great scholar and pious Jew. He organized societies to study ethical works like Bhaya Ibn Pakuda's Duties of the Heart and Moses Hayim Luzzato's The Path of the Upright, and he himself studied with them. He also preached sermons in the synagogues.

Vilna provided Rabbi Israel with numerous opportunities to do good deeds and, indeed, many stories were told of his charity and kindness in helping the needy and oppressed. I want to dwell particularly on one story which has frequently been told about him. During a cholera epidemic, to discourage people from fasting on Yom Kippur, he was supposed to have pronounced a benediction on wine in the Great Synagogue of Vilna, despite the objection of the authoritative rabbis in matters affecting Jewish law. This story entered our literature (Steinschneider's "The City of Vilna" and Frischman's "The Three Who Ate") as a true incident, but it is only a myth. I once talked with Rabbi Simeon Strashun of Vilna, who had been in the synagogue on that occasion. This is what happened. The day before Yom Kippur, with the concurrence of the authoritative rabbis, Rabbi Israel had announcements posted in the synagogues that because of the epidemic, the liturgical poems could be omitted, the prayers were to be shortened as much as possible, and the people were to stay in the fresh air as long as possible. Tiny portions of sponge cake were to be on hand in an antechamber of the synagogue, to be used if necessary. After the morning services, Rabbi Israel mounted the pulpit and announced that anyone feeling weak could partake of food in the antechamber, without asking a doctor's opinion. Then, the head of the authoritative rabbinical body followed Rabbi Israel to the pulpit, protesting the announcement. But Rabbi Israel himself did not, in fact, taste any food.

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