

The Daily RYS 8/31/06 Truth and Legend V

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

But another story often told about Rabbi Israel is true, not a legend. As a child I heard it from my mother, who was born in Salanty and grew up with Rabbi Israel's children. This incident took place in Salanty.

People had congregated in the synagogue for Kol Nidre. They waited for Rabbi Israel but he did not appear. Since it was getting late, they recited Kol Nidre without him. Then they sent out to look for him, but no one could find him. The crowd was growing panicky; soon the service would be over. Then, abruptly he entered, took his accustomed place, drew the prayer shawl over his head and began to pray. Everyone was astonished at his appearance: his coat was rumpled; his hair and beard full of down. After he finished his prayers, he recounted what had happened to him.

On his way to the synagogue for Kol Nidre, he heard a child crying. He went in the house, saw an infant crying in its cradle, a bottle of milk just out of its reach. The mother had prepared the bottle and gone off to the synagogue, expecting her six-year-old daughter to give the baby its bottle. But the little girl had fallen fast asleep and did not hear the baby crying. Rabbi Israel fed the baby and put it to sleep. When he was ready to leave, the little girl awoke and begged him not to go for she was afraid to be alone. Reluctant to leave small children alone with low-burning candles, he stayed until the mother returned from the synagogue. He rejoiced he had been given the opportunity to do a good deed at a time as sacred as Yom Kippur. His listeners were amazed: How could one miss the Yom Kippur services because of a child's crying? Rabbi Israel scolded them: "Do you not know that, even in the case of a double doubt about saving a life in jeopardy, Jews are permitted not only to omit the prayers but even to profane the Sabbath?"

This simple story characterized Rabbi Israel. It embodied his love of all living creatures in its full radiance. For a saintly Jew like him, the sanctity of Yom Kippur, when the temporal in man ceases to exist and he becomes as an angel, is most solemn. Yet he was willing to forego prayer and confession with the congregation on that Yom Kippur because he did not want a child to cry nor to bring grief to its mother by having her called out of the synagogue.