

Israel Salanter (1810 – 1883), Revolutionary Rabbi Par Excellence

Stevens Faculty Forum April 18, 2007

**Real name – Yisroel Lipkin, called Salanter because lived in Salant
Salantai is a city in Lithuania. Founder of Musar Movement – Jewish
ethics movement**

**I. Early life – born Zhagory, small northern Lithuanian town, father
tutored boys, including his son**

**A. Child prodigy – delivered pilpulistic and analytic discourses at
10.**

**B. At age 12 sent to study with Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Braude of
Salantai**

**C. Soon had mastered entire Talmud – wrote own halachic
novellae at 14**

**D. Engaged at 14 to Esther the daughter of R' Ya'akov HaLevi
Eisenstein. Had 4 sons and 2 daughters**

E. He lead in spiritual, she lead in material - two versions

F. She ran a small business so he could spend 18 years studying.

**G. Gained fame as genius who had mastered phenomenal mastery
of Torah learning**

II. Intended to live in obscurity, out of public eye

**A. Changed mind – decided that anyone who capable of
influencing others had no right to live in seclusion.**

**B. Wife's business collapsed in 1840 – just then offered position of
joint head of a yeshiva in Vilna, Lithuanian Jerusalem**

**C. Discourses created a stir – novel ideas, deep insights,
combining apparently diverse topics from the entire body of Jewish**

knowledge. Talk of entire city of Vilna – not many could follow his classes

D. Came to his attention that he was completely overshadowing the other yeshiva leader. Immediately resigned and began giving classes in a different place. Supported by a businessman. Also, wife opened a business.

III. Not content – public gatherings, inspirational addresses designed to imbue listeners with true fear of G-d – Mussar

A. Maxim – “Not everyone who can, should speak in public; but everyone who does should know how.”

B. Stressed character perfection

C. Musar house

IV. Cholera epidemic in Vilna – 1848 many died

A. Felt responsible to help sick – rented a hospital with 1500 beds, had no money, raised funds, got doctors to agree to care for the sick for free

B. Gathered 60 to 70 young men to care for sick – he himself was everywhere, especially made visits on Sabbath to show that one is allowed to desecrate Sabbath to save life.

C. Everyone must obey doctors’ orders

D. Yom Kippur – fasting could cause many to get sick

1. Ruled that those who are weak should not fast, reduced amount of prayers to be said

2. During day went to synagogues and insisted that people break their fast

E. Stir of repercussions – held no official office in Vilna, city had many competent rabbis who could have ruled on what to do. Opposition

F. Announced he would give a halachic discourse – delivered brilliant talk on a different topic

V. Rabbinical seminary

A. Maskilim viewed him as a progressive

B. Russian government wanted to wean Jews away from Judaism

C. Train secularly educated rabbis in rabbinical seminary – ploy to produce rabbis who would be puppets of the Russian government

D. Wanted RYS to head seminary – would have no part of it – left Vilna for Kovna (1849)

VI. Headed yeshiva in Kovna – Mussar – remained there for 9 years

A. 1858 went to live in Germany – Memel, close to Lithuanian border. Koenigsberg

B. Attempted to stop reform movement – college students

C. Paris also for two years

VIII. Bold projects - translate talmud into European languages, first Torah journal, attempts to influence Russian government

IX. His son Yom Tov (Lipmann) Lipkin – mathematical physicist

A. Linear into Circular motion – disproved conjecture of Chebyshev, called “Lipkin's Parallelogram.” or PEAUCELLIER-LIPKIN LINKAGE

([HTTP://KMODDL.LIBRARY.CORNELL.EDU/TUTORIALS/05/](http://kmoddl.library.cornell.edu/tutorials/05/))

This linkage starts with the question: What is straight?

When using a compass to draw a circle, we are not starting with a figure we accept as circular; instead we are using a fundamental property of circles that the points on a circle are at a fixed distance from the center. In other words **we are using the definition of a circle.**

Is there a tool (serving the role of a compass) that will produce a motion along a straight line?

- If, in this case, we want to use Euclid's definition (A straight line is a line which lies evenly with the points on itself) -- it won't be of much help.
- One can say: We can use a straightedge for constructing a straight line! Well, how do you know that your straightedge is straight? How can you check that something is straight?

B. Not happy about what his son did – son died young @ 21

X. Stories about RYS

Rav Yisroel Salanter never occupied any public office. He was neither a businessman nor an artisan. He belonged to none of the categories that the Russian government considered eligible to obtain a passport legally. In order to travel he used the passport of a merchant friend.

The Ink Maker

Rav Yisroel's pure character did not allow him to keep up this unlawfulness for long. When he visited Berlin in the early 1870's to seek a cure for his ailing health, this aging man of 63 or so decided that he would not travel home until he had learned a skill that would enable him on his return to Russia to obtain a legal passport. It seemed to him that the easiest and most promising skill to learn was ink-making, and he took lessons from a chemist. A friend gave him a whole floor in his house to use as a laboratory. For weeks, Rav Yisroel occupied a good part of his day and his nights with intensive theoretical and practical study of chemistry.

This was not as easy as it sounds. He and his chemistry teacher could at first only communicate with each other through an interpreter. But Rav Yisroel learned to read and write German, and soon progressed so far that he could read the daily paper. With some help for the more difficult words and the chemical terms, he was soon able to study chemistry books. A few weeks later, Rav Yisroel understood the composition of all types of ink, including gold and silver ink. He had accomplished his goal so rapidly and so thoroughly that his chemistry teacher declared that his elderly chemistry student had nothing more to learn from him.

The Desperate Woman

A similar instance involving a more serious episode occurred in Vilna during the period that he headed the Zarece yeshivah. He [RYS] took particular pains always to be on time for his lectures. Yet once it had become very late and he had still not made his appearance. Concerned, his students

went outside to look for him. When they reached the bridge leading to the city, they noticed him standing deep in conversation with a young woman. They understood that he was occupied with some grave matter and withdrew. When he finally entered the Yeshivah, R. Israel apologized for being so late, but explained that a matter of life and death had detained him. The students subsequently investigated and finally the details of the incident were pieced together:

On his way to the Bet Midrash, he was about to cross the bridge when he suddenly noticed an excited woman rushing towards the river. He stood in her way, stopped her and asked her why she was running. She tried to pass by him and told him to leave her alone. R. Israel grasped her by the sleeve and repeated his request that she tell him what the matter was. Forced to remain where she was, she unfolded her tale of woe. A short while ago her two children were taken ill, and had died a few days later. So overcome with grief was her husband that he had been unable to work for the past several weeks. They had been forced to hire someone else to drive their wagon, and in this way managed to subsist and cover the costs of the husband's illness. Suddenly the horse died. Their sole means of support was gone. In despair she had decided to throw herself into the river.

R. Israel talked to her at length. Tenderly and softly he explained to her that G-d could easily make good her deficiencies. She was still young. A year from now she could bear another child, and so on. Her husband would recover and resume his occupation. As for the loss of the horse, he would send her the money for another the next day. Slowly the woman became pacified and regained her composure. She thanked R. Israel for the goodness of his heart and returned home. A year later R. Israel was invited to attend the Brit Milah of her newly born son.

Need for a Secularly Educated Observant Jew

During the 19th Century there were those in Russia who came to believe that

... anyone who had received an advanced secular education as being on a higher level and therefore not expected to obey the mitzvot of the Torah as did the rank and file. R. Israel endeavored to eradicate this popular misconception and to produce secularly educated, G-d fearing Torah scholars. This would be the weapon against the specious Maskilim who considered the fear of G-d and enlightenment to be mutually exclusive, and who looked with contempt on Judaism. He conducted an experiment — extremely audacious for the climate of opinion of those days. Choosing one of his outstanding disciples, Isar Einhorn by name, R. Israel sent him off to study in a secular institution. The student was most successful and in a short time was graduated from the St. Petersburg Military Medical Institute. As a

physician he was truly outstanding. But he succumbed to temptation. Having attained high military rank, he abandoned his Judaism and converted to Christianity. He was the well-known Gen. Einhorn.

Externalities Not Important

Reb Yisroel was not concerned with mere externalities for externalities sake, but rather with one's dealings with HaShem and one's fellow man as the following story illustrates.

Another aspect of R. Israel's personality must be mentioned, even though this would appear as purely external. Yet it stemmed from deep spiritual roots, and is characteristic of R. Israel's entire approach. R. Israel, as has been said, did not wear rabbinic clothes; he dressed like any ordinary person. He did not recoil at times from wearing clothes that were unconventional for those learned in Torah in a particular environment. He used to relate that he once delivered an inspiring address in a town, and his listeners were deeply affected. Suddenly, as he descended from the Bimah, he noticed the local elders moving back from him, upon noticing that he was wearing polished high-boots, which was not the norm in those circles. (Some add that he ascended the Bimah a second time and administered a lengthy reproof that so trifling a consideration vitiate the effect of his discourse.)

He had, however, always taken particular care to ensure to be neat and clean, and saw to it that his clothes were spotless. His clothes were always well-made and pressed, his hair neatly cut and combed and orderly. His posture and gait were in the best of taste. He stood erect and walked with measured step, and all his motions were flexible and courteous. His manners were modern, elegant and polite, conforming to the standards of cultured society. His entire carriage bespoke elegance and dignity.

Honesty and Praying for the Government

Reb Yisroel felt it was important to live according to the laws of the land and to be a loyal citizen of the country in which one resides. He abhorred dishonesty, doing his best to fulfill all of his civil obligations.

He made no distinctions between the laws between man and G-d and the laws between man and man, and even gave priority to the latter over the former. He regarded honesty in business, and the preservation of the sanctity of someone else's property as occupying the highest level - and he found support for his evaluation in many rabbinic dicta.

He would carry out the injunction to "pray for the welfare of the government." Once the cantor in the Kriniki synagogue omitted the standard

prayer, “May He who gives salvation unto kings...” when R. Israel was present. R. Israel turned his head to the wall and recited the prayer himself.

No *Zemiros* or *Divrei Torah* at the Shabbos Table

Reb Yisroel’s concern for his fellow man knew no bounds. He was always careful not to let his religious observance impact negatively on others, leading him at times to what on the surface appeared to be “strange” behavior.

One of his disciples had invited him for Friday night dinner. R. Israel had stipulated that he would not dine anywhere till he had satisfied himself that the kashrut was above reproach. The disciple informed R. Israel that in his home all the *Halachos* were observed with utmost stringency. He bought his meat from a butcher known for his piety. It was truly "glatt" - free of any Halachic query or lung adhesion (*sirchah*). His cook was an honest woman, the widow of a Talmid Chacham, daughter of a good family, while his own wife would enter the kitchen periodically to supervise. His Friday night meal was conducted in the grand style. There would be Torah discussion after each course, so there was no possibility of their meal being “as if they had partaken of offerings to idols.” They would study Shulchan Aruch regularly, sing *Zemiros* and remain seated at the table till well into the night.

Having listened to this elaborate account of the procedures, R. Israel consented to accept the invitation, but stipulated that the time of the meal be curtailed by two full hours. Having no alternative, the disciple agreed. At the meal, one course followed another without interruption. In less than an hour, the *mayim acharonim* had been passed around in preparation for the Grace after Meals.

Before proceeding with the Grace, the host turned to R. Israel and asked: “Teach me, rabbi. What defect did you notice in my table?”

R. Israel did not answer the question. Instead he asked that the widow responsible for the cooking come to the room. He said to her: “Please for give me, for having inconvenienced you this evening. You were forced to serve one course after another - not as you are used to do.” “Bless you, rabbi,” the woman answered. “Would that you would be a guest here every Friday evening. My master is used to sit at the table till late at night. I am worn out from working all day. My legs can hardly hold me up, so tired do I become. Thanks to you, rabbi, they hurried this evening, and I am already free to go home and rest.” R. Israel turned to his disciple. “The poor widow’s remark is the answer to your question. Indeed your behavior is excellent, but only as long as it does not adversely affect others.”

Forgoes Saying Kaddish on His Father's Yahrzeit

The Mitzvah of davening for the *Amud* and saying *Kaddish* for a parent on his or her yahrzeit is a time honored obligation. Conflicts can result when there is more than one yahrzeit on the same day. Here is how Reb Yisroel, due to his high standards of *ehrllichkeit*, once handled such a situation.

On one of the anniversaries of his father's death, R. Israel was in Memel. He was informed that someone else in the synagogue wished to say Kaddish. Now R. Israel was very insistent that only one person at a time be allowed to recite the Kaddish at the services and apparently this congregation had complied with his ruling.

Reb Yitzchak Isaacson was observing the yahrzeit of a daughter who had died very young. Now the Halachah gives precedence to a son observing the yahrzeit of a parent on these occasions, and R. Israel was obviously entitled to the privilege. Sensing the grief he would cause the father by depriving him of the opportunity to say Kaddish for his daughter, R. Israel went up to him and said: "You sir, will say Kaddish."

The worshippers expressed their surprise. Not only had R. Israel yielded his own right, but also overlooked the duty of honoring his father, since he was, by law, obliged to say Kaddish. He explained to them that the merit of extending kindness (*gemilut chesed*) to a fellow Jew possessed far greater value than the saying of Kaddish.

Overriding Concern for Others

Rav Salanter's concern for others knew no bounds. The following story illustrates this.

He was amazed that people were oblivious of the weighty obligation devolving upon them to bring benefit to others and who treated their responsibilities so lightly. People go out of their way to confer the merit on others to perform some mitzvah, but never take the trouble to make others happy. "Many times," he would say, "I have seen a person pass by a synagogue, and those inside call out to him, 'Kedushah! Kedushah!' They invite him to participate in the performance of a mitzvah. Yet never in my life have I seen a person pass by a house where a meal is being eaten, and the family inside calling out, 'Dinner is served and invite him to join them.'"

His Passing

Even in his last hours, R' Yisroel did not stop thinking about what he could do for others.

During his terminal illness in Koenigsberg, a simple Jew was sent to attend him. On the last day of his life, R' Yisroel opened a conversation with the attendant about the fear people have of being alone with a corpse. R' Yisroel assured the man that the fear was groundless because a dead person can't harm anyone. A few hours later R' Yisroel died, with no one present except for the one attendant.

XI. Conclusion

The Almighty surveys all the generations and endows each epoch with great personalities who become the beacons shedding their light and illuminating the way for human beings to follow. These exemplary figures emerge. They size up the condition of their age, and open up new horizons for the fertilization of Jewish thought and expression, and infuse new blood and strength in the arteries of the eternal people, thus assuring its survival and revival.

One of the bright stars in the Jewish firmament of our times was R. Israel of Salant. He was a remarkable genius, a creative thinker, and a leader among men, all at the same time. He was also a revolutionary in his style of thinking and manner of action. He exposed himself and a light was shed upon Israel, the light of a revival movement in Judaism, a movement for the complete return to its sources and Halachot, a movement for reinforcing of the consciousness of the people and of molding their outlook on the principles and values of Judaism, a movement of new educational methods — all suited to the condition and spirit of the epoch.

His gigantic personality served as the symbol of human perfection. He trained a group of disciples and admirers, impressed his mark upon his contemporaries and constituted the lighthouse for generations to come.

(The Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 2, page 270)