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FRUM OR EHRlich?

Dr. Yitzchok Levine  
Posted Oct 18 2006

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The American Orthodox Jewish community of today is drastically different from the community that existed in America 75 years ago. Orthodox Judaism circa 1930 was struggling to maintain its numbers due to mass defections from religious observance. Today we see a vibrant Orthodoxy whose numbers are increasing. True, things are far from perfect, and there are far too many Jews who receive no meaningful Jewish education. Still, Orthodox communities are expanding throughout America.

In these communities one increasingly hears statements like "He is so *frum*" or "That family is very *frum*; they don't have or do [this or that]." On the other hand, far too often one hears strong criticism of *frum* people. Indeed, I have even heard some go so far as to say "*Frum* is *krum*." The source of this criticism is not limited to non-observant Jews or non-Jews. One also hears condemnation of so-called *frum* Jews from those who are committed to Torah and *mitzvot*.

Could it be that *frumkeit* is not the be all and end all of *Yiddishkeit*?

Years ago, the highest compliment one could pay a Jew was not that he or she was *frum*, but that he or she was *ehrllich*. The term *frum* is perhaps best translated as "religious." More often than not it focuses on the external aspects of observance. It describes a person whose outward appearance and public actions demonstrate an apparent commitment to religious observance performed publicly.

The categorization of someone as *ehrllich* - literally "honest" - implies that this person is not only committed to all of the externalities of religious observance, but is also concerned about the impact of his or her actions on others.

For some people, *frumkeit* seems to be primarily concerned only with *mitzvot* that are *bein adam l'Makom* (between man and God), whereas *ehrllichkeit*, while certainly concerned with all the *mitzvot* that are *bein adam l'Makom*, also focuses on those that are *bein adam l'chaveiro* (between man and man).

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Sadly, there are people who are *frum* who are not particularly *ehrllich* in some of their actions. Let me relate a personal experience. I pulled into a parking lot across from a kosher supermarket in Brooklyn. The lot is narrow, with room for only one car to enter and exit at a given time. One enters from a busy Flatbush avenue and exits into a small side street.

As I pulled into the lot I encountered a van stopped in the enter/exit lane in front of me. I waited a few minutes, but the van did not move, so I honked my horn once. There was no response from the driver. Since it was blocking my way, my only

recourse was to back out of the lot into a busy street. Not wanting to do this because of the danger involved, I honked a second time. Again there was no response.

My third honk brought a response, but not the one I'd hoped for. A woman, who from her appearance would most certainly be classified as *frum*, stuck her head out of the van and shouted at me, "I am waiting for a parking spot! I am not moving until I get one!"

I politely pointed out to her that I was trapped in the lot due to her van, and that my only recourse was to back out of the lot into a busy street. "I could easily get into an accident doing this. Please exit the lot," I politely requested. She repeated her initial belligerent response: "I am waiting for a parking spot, and I am not moving until I get one!"

In my opinion, this woman might outwardly be *frum*, but her actions were most certainly not *ehrllich*.

Model of *Ehrllichkeit*

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The question arises: "If being *frum* is indeed not the same as being *ehrllich*, what then does it mean to be *ehrllich*?"

Perhaps the best way to obtain insight into what *ehrllich* behavior entails is by studying the actions of those who excelled in such behavior. With this in mind, we'll relate some stories from the life of Rav Yisroel Salanter, *zt"l*. They are taken from Volume I, part 2 of *The Mussar Movement* (a translation of *Tanuas HaMussar*) by Rabbi Dov Katz. The book was published by Orly Press in 1970.

Rabbi Yisroel Ben Ze'ev Wolf Lipkin (1810-1883) of Salant, founder and spiritual father of the Mussar movement, developed and taught techniques for spiritual and character growth. Reb Yisroel held positions as a yeshiva *mashgiach* (spiritual mentor) and as the head of a yeshiva in Vilna. Later, he would establish his own yeshiva, where he began to spread the doctrine of Mussar, a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature. Eventually Reb Yisroel founded a Mussar yeshiva in Kovno as well as a *kollel* for young married students.

Reb Yisroel moved to Germany and then to France in order to disseminate Judaism and Torah. Some of his revolutionary ideas (many of which were far ahead of their time) included the compilation of an Aramaic-Hebrew dictionary for better understanding of the Talmud, for translating the Talmud into Hebrew, and for the teaching of Talmud in universities.

#### Externalities Not Important

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

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. (Pages 200-201.)

#### 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 of one's residence. He abhorred dishonesty, doing his best to fulfill all of his civil obligations.

"He made no distinctions," wrote Rabbi Katz, between the laws of *bein adam l'Makom* and those of *bein adam l'chaveiro*, "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."

Reb Yisroel was scrupulous in obeying the injunction to offer prayer for the welfare of the government. "Once," noted Rabbi Katz, "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 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 at times to what on the surface appeared to be "strange" behavior on his part:

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 forgive 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 sitting 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." (Pages 226-228.)

#### Forgoes Saying *Kaddish* on Father's *Yahrzeit*

The mitzvah of *davening* from 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*, 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*. (Pages 248-24.)

#### Overriding Concern for Others

Rav Salanter's concern for others obviously 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." (Page 244.)

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Rav Yisroel Salanter was a *gaon* and *tzaddik* who clearly lived his life on a very high plane. There are few people living today who can even hope to reach his high level of moral behavior, let alone attain it. This does not, however, absolve us from trying our best to emulate his meritorious deeds.

*Frumkeit should not be enough for us. We also need to permeate our lives with ehrllichkeit, so that all of our words and deeds are done in the spirit of living lives that are a Kiddush Hashem.*

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