

Frum or Ehrlich?

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Introduction

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, B”H, a vibrant Orthodoxy whose numbers are increasing. Yeshivas and Bais Yaakovs produce many young people with good Jewish educations who are committed to living Torah observant lives. True, things are far from perfect, and there are far too many Jews who receive no meaningful Jewish education. Still, we do see vibrant Orthodox communities expanding throughout America.

In these communities one increasingly hears such statements as, “He is so *frum*.” “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. The source of this criticism is not limited to non-observant Jews or to non-Jews. One also hears condemnation of the so-called *frum* from Jews who are committed to Torah and Mitzvos. “He is supposedly so *frum*, and yet he does such and such.” Could it be that *frumkeit* is not the end all and be all of Yiddishkeit?

The Difference Between *Frum* and *Ehrlich*

Years ago the highest compliment that one could give to a Jew was not that he or she is *frum*, but that he or she is *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 apparently demonstrate a commitment to religious observance. The categorization of someone as being *ehrllich*, literally “honest,” implies that this person is not only committed to the externalities of religious observance, but also is concerned about how his or her religious observance impacts upon others. *Frumkeit* is often primarily concerned only with the mitzvos *bein odom laShem* (between man and G-d), whereas *ehrllichkeit*, while certainly concerned with *bein odom laShem*, also focuses on *bein odom l’odom* (those mitzvos that govern inter-personal relationships.)

The Parking Lot

Sadly, there are people who are *frum* who are not particularly *ehrllich*. Let me relate a personal experience that I had about a year ago. I pulled into a parking lot across from a

kosher supermarket. The lot is narrow – 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 large van stopped in the enter/exit lane several feet 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 of the van. Since it was blocking my way, my only recourse was to back out of the lot into the busy street perpendicular to it. Not wanting to do this due to the danger, I honked again. Again, there was no response from the driver of the van.

The third time that I honked brought a response, but not the one I had hoped for. A woman, whom, 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 calmly and 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 said. Her reply was “I am waiting for a parking spot, and I am not moving until I get one!!!” In my opinion this woman was *frum* but her actions were most certainly not *ehrlich*.

A Model of *Ehrlichkeit*, Reb Yisroel Salanter, ZT”L

The question arises, “If being *frum* is not the same as being *ehrlich*, then what does it mean to be *ehrlich*?” Perhaps the best way to get insight into what *ehrlich* behavior entails is by studying the actions of those who excelled in such behavior. With this in mind, this article will relate some stories about Rav Yisroel Salanter’s life taken from Volume I, part 2 of “The Mussar Movement” by Rabbi Dov Katz. This book, published in 1970 by Orly Press, Tel Aviv, is a translation by Leonard Oschry of volume 1 of the original sefer *Tanuas HaMussar*.

Rabbi Yisroel Ben Ze’ev Wolf Lipkin (1810 – 1883) of Salant was the founder and spiritual father of the Mussar movement. The movement developed and taught techniques for spiritual and character growth. Reb Yisroel held positions as the “mashgiach” (spiritual mentor) in a yeshiva, and as the head of a Yeshiva in Vilna. Later, he went on to establish his own Yeshiva. There he began to spread the doctrine of Mussar, a moral movement based on the study of traditional ethical literature. Eventually Reb Yisroel founded a Musar Yeshiva in Kovno as well as a Kollel for young married students.

Reb Yisroel Salanter moved to Germany and then to France in order to disseminate Judaism and Torah. Some of his revolutionary ideas included the compilation of an Aramaic-Hebrew Dictionary - for better understanding of the Talmud, translating the Talmud into Hebrew, and the teaching of Talmud in universities. Reb Yisroel’s most well known work is his “**Iggeres ha-Musar**” (the Ethical Letter).

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. The following story illustrates this.

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. Even in his old age he did not change, and his handsome and elegant appearance had lost nothing. (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 in which one resides. He abhorred dishonesty and did 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. (Page 205)

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. (Page 196)

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

Reb Yisroel's concern for his fellow man knew no bounds. In particular, he was always careful not to let his religious observance impact negatively on others. At times this led him 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." (Pages 226 – 228)

Does Not Say 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. At times both people observing a yahrzeit on the same day

could result in an acrimonious conflict regarding who has precedence regarding davening for the *Amud* and saying Kaddish. However, Reb Yisroel, due to his high standards of *ehrllichkeit*, saw things in a different light.

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 – 249)

Overriding Concern for Others

Rav Salanter's concern for others knew no bounds. The following stories illustrate 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)

To him the essence of piety lay in doing good to human beings. He established this as his criterion by which to judge the quality of piety. When he was told of the saintliness of R. Leibele Chasid of Kelm - whom he had not met in person - one of his first questions was whether this R. Leibele had ever gone into a store and suggested that the shopkeeper go and study Torah while he, R. Leib, would take care of the store for him. (page 245)

Conclusion

Rav Yisroel Salanter was a Gaon and Tzaddik who clearly lived his life on a very high plane. There are few, if any, people living today who can even hope to reach his high level of moral behavior. However, this does not 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 *ehrlichkeit*, so that all of our words and deeds are done in the spirit of living lives that are a Kiddush HaShem.