

# "He Looked Into the Torah and Fashioned Man"

## An Examination of the Life and Accomplishments of Reb Yisroel Salanter—A Century After His Passing

### The Magnificent Forest

Upon becoming engaged to Reb Yisroel Salanter's granddaughter, the prospective groom, Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, wrote a lengthy, involved *shlickel Torah* (discourse) to his future father-in-law.<sup>1</sup> Reb Yisroel responded to his own son-in-law:<sup>2</sup> "I am convinced that you have selected an outstanding Torah scholar as a *chassan* for my granddaughter. But it is written, (*Devarim*, 22:10) 'את בתי נתתי לאיש הזה' . . . My daughter I have given to this (*Ish*) man . . . 'First let us establish that he is worthy of the title '*Ish (Mensch)*'."

This incident summarizes Reb Yisroel's goal in the founding of the *Mussar* Movement. For as G-d had created Man, Man in turn must create the *Mensch* within himself. Reb Yisroel sought the *Mensch* in every man, and when a layer of sin obstructed the *Mensch*, he taught the world how to find him. Further, just as G-d used the Torah as a blueprint for creation,<sup>3</sup> so did Reb Yisroel understand that the development of the ideal *Mensch* must also come from the Torah alone. Thus, Reb Yisroel's genius equipped him to be *מסתכל באוריתא ובורא איש* to delve into the most hidden recesses of Torah literature to rediscover the once obvious, to forge the Torah-*Mensch*.

Dozens of books and articles have been written about Reb Yisroel. Storybooks tend to depict him as the kindly saint, not comprehending that his *בין אדם לחברו*, his *tzidkus* (righteousness) in dealing with others was but an aspect of his *בין אדם למקום*, his service of G-d.<sup>4</sup> . . . Others condensed a multi-faceted *Gaon Hador* (outstanding scholar of his generation) into just a pioneering *Baal Mussar* (teacher of ethics)—seeing all his colors through

a monochromatic lens, doing a disservice to his name as well as to their own cause. . . . And, of course, modern literary psychoanalysts presume too much and end up seeing too little.

Today, a century after his passing, let us look back at Reb Yisroel, whom Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk called *מעין הראשונים* "akin to a *Rishon*" (the great Early Commentators of 11-15 Centuries). Let us catch a glimpse of his unrivaled stature in Torah and *Yiras Shomayim* (Fear of Heaven), his greatness of mind; his sensitivity of spirit and his genius of heart, his keenness of insight, his creativity of thought and his daring in action. But above all, let us acquaint ourselves with the forest, instead of being overwhelmed by its own trees.

### The Early Impact

The facts have all been recorded. Reb Yisroel was born in the fall of 5570 (1809)<sup>5</sup> in Zager<sup>6</sup> a provincial town near Kovno, Lithuania, to a prestigious rabbinic family. . . . Recognized as a prodigy, he was sent, at the age of 12, to study under the celebrated *Gaon* of Salant, Reb Hirsch Braude, who came to refer to him as "*Alfasi Kattan*."<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Akiva Eiger lauded the *chiddushim* (novellae) he produced in his teens as "*Gaonus She'b'Gaonus*"—

### Notes and Sources

1. See *Sheilos U'Tshuvos Achiezer*, III, No. 53.

2. Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Grodnanski, *Rav* in Vilna, and disciple of Reb Yisroel.

3. *Midrash Rabba* to *Bereishis* I, and see R"Dal ad. loc.

4. *Ohr HaMussar* I, 77-78, quoting his great disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam.

5. As obvious from the text of his tombstone in Koenigsberg, reprinted in *Ir Vilna*, pg. 128.

6. *Tnuas HaMussar*, Vol. I, pg. 138, gloss. 4

7. A reference to Rabbi Yitzchok Alfasi, towering Talmudic scholar of 11th Century Fez, in North Africa.

Rabbi Geldwerth, a member of the faculty and administration of Yeshiva Torah Temimah in Brooklyn, wrote a biography of the Tshubiner Rav that was published in *Judaism's THE TORAH WORLD*.



Rametilles Yeshiva in Vilna, where Reb Yisroel taught.

absolutely ingenious. Reb Yisroel was married when 15 and his young wife cared for their livelihood while he developed into a rare *talmid chacham* with a widely admired approach in *pilpul*.

During the eighteen years that Salant was his home, one moment in particular changed his life and eventually revolutionized the Torah world:

*Reb Yosef Zundel (1788-1868), a disciple of Reb Chaim Volozhiner, was a man whose saintliness was hidden from the average eye. Yet young Yisroel took notice of him and developed close contact with him. Yisroel realized, however, that he could see only what Reb Zundel would permit him to see. So he tried to observe him undetected, from afar, following him out to the fields when Reb Zundel would retreat there for contemplation. Once Reb Zundel noticed him and exhorted him: "Yisroel, learn Mussar and become a Yerei Shomayim!"<sup>8</sup>*

Reb Yisroel would relate years later, that this particular moment had an everlasting impact on him. As his close disciple, Reb Itzel Blazer, later described the incident: "When he heard his master's command to learn *Mussar*, it entered his innermost heart like a fire; he then began this study of *Mussar*." "From that day on he cleaved to his mentor, until Reb Zundel moved to Jerusalem."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>. *Nesivos Ohr* p. 124

<sup>9</sup>. See *Nesivos Ohr*, 111

<sup>10</sup>. Related by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky זצ"ל in an interview granted for preparing this article.

## No One Hidden—From His Wisdom

At first, Reb Yisroel planned to emulate his master as a *nistar* (a hidden saint), to move to a community where he was not known and to assume a humble position, such as a water carrier. The first requirement he set for himself was to master the entire *Shas* (Talmud) by heart. When halfway through *Shas*, he abandoned his plan, for he realized that his generation had greater need for an active leader to exert his influence amongst the broadest of circles, than for a saintly recluse.<sup>9</sup>

Reb Naftoli Amsterdam, one of his leading disciples, later commented: "The Rebbe at first wished to be a *nistar*, and then reconsidered. In the long run, however, he succeeded and the true measure of his greatness, always remained hidden from others."<sup>10</sup>

## A Pattern of Change and Consistency

While tracing the various stages in Reb Yisroel's life, a striking feature that emerges is his willingness to make radical changes, whenever he found such necessary—by virtue of a shift in circumstances or because of his reassessment of his personal goals. For example, during his early years, Reb Yisroel decided to veer away totally from *pilpul*, in which he had gained expertise and widespread admiration. He had felt that he was sacrificing

truth for the personal gratification gained from the intellectual stimulation of the *pilpul* approach. Eventually he returned to *pilpul* because he feared a tendency toward arrogance and complacency in expecting to determine the *Gemora's* meaning by only concentrating on the page before him. . . . Other striking examples of change will follow.

At the same time, one is struck by the multiplicity of activities he undertook over the years, in so many different locales. Yet they were all unified by one underlying commitment—to help people probe beyond the surface, to bring out their inner greatness. The chronological account that follows traces the variety of activities he pursued toward this one goal.

### Taking Vilna By Storm

Reb Yisroel and his close friend Reb Shmuel Salant (Reb Zundel's son-in-law, later famous as *Rav* of Yerushalayim) had together resolved not to accept any rabbinic posts; for example, they both rejected separate bids from the prestigious community of Brisk. Yet when invited to give *shiurim* in Rameillas Yeshiva in Vilna in 1840, he accepted, replacing Rabbi Eliezer Teitz, famed disciple of Rabbi Akiva Eiger. Thus, Reb Yisroel entered the lives of the Jews of Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, to leave an unforgettable impact on it.

Reb Yisroel took the people of Vilna by storm—especially its yeshiva *bachurim*—through his brilliant lectures—reverting to *pilpul* again, as he saw fit—and his *Mussar* discourses. But Reb Yisroel feared that his success was creating envy among fellow faculty members; so he left Rameillas Yeshiva to lecture in another *beis midrash*.<sup>11</sup>

During this period, he attracted the attention of his peers and won the deference of such outstanding scholars as Reb Izek'el Charif and Rabbi Yoseif Dov Soloveitchik, author of *Beis Halevi*<sup>12</sup>. He also published a number of lesser-known *Mussar* works. Reb Yisroel then began lecturing for *baalei battim* (laymen)—shoemakers, porters and wagon-drivers flocked to his talks, as he considered each audience and addressed them on their own level.

At that time, *Maggidus* (preaching: See Chaim Shapiro's "Words From the Heart," JO April '81) no longer played the commanding role it did a century earlier; *rabbanim* left it to wandering, lesser luminaries. Reb Yisroel, coupling a magnificent gift of speech with a heartening simplicity, raised the standard of *Maggidus* to its former glory.

He organized more knowledgeable *baalei battim* into groups to study the *Mussar* classics *Mesillas Yeshorim* and *Chovos Halevavos* with greater depth, and established his first *Beis Hamussar*, a room set aside to serve as a retreat from worldly turmoil, dedicated to the study and absorption of *Yiras Shomayim* (fear of G-d). Not meant to

replace a *Beis Haknesses* or *Beis Hamidrash*, but to supplement them, this *Mussar* retreat was close enough to the *Beis Hamidrash* to avoid loss of time spent in study.

Reb Yisroel viewed the *Beis Hamussar* as both a "clinic"—following the Rambam's approach to human frailty in character or *Yiras Shomayim* as a disease-condition<sup>13</sup>—and as a haven in the swirling winds of contemporary corruption, as he wrote: "Enter this fortress, draw the bridge up behind you, and leave the world beyond the moat!"<sup>14</sup>

### Controversy in Vilna

Two unforeseen developments rocked Reb Yisroel's stay in Vilna. The first was related to Reb Yisroel's attitude toward matters of health. He accepted doctors' orders as *halacha* (Torah law), implicit in the command of "ושמרתם מאד את נפשותיכם" "And you shall guard your lives" (*Devarim* 4:15). When health concerns conflicted with other *halachos*, he usually decided with a consistent leniency as far as the latter was concerned. He seemed to share Reb Chaim Brisker's view: "I am not lenient in regard to *Shabbos* or Yom Kippur; rather I am stringent in the law of preserving a life!"<sup>15</sup>

Since Reb Yisroel never rendered any halachic decisions in Vilna, not even for his own household,<sup>16</sup> he must have experienced enormous conflict during the peak of a cholera epidemic that devastated Vilna in late summer 1848. Reb Yisroel had committed himself to the city's welfare and rented hospital quarters with 500 beds, with his own *talmidim* nursing the stricken around the clock, seven days a week, with patient care on *Shabbos* the same as on the other days of the week. As Yom Kippur approached, he feared that the fast would weaken the people and make them dangerously susceptible to the often-fatal disease. Reb Yisroel hung placards throughout Vilna urging all who felt weak to eat on the fast day, to stave off any threat. He did this without consulting others because he apparently realized that he would not gain a consensus for such a radical, yet essential move. Immediately after *Shacharis* on Yom Kippur, he himself rose to the *bima*, and according to some accounts, publicly made *Kiddush* and ate some cakes, so as to encourage all who should to follow suit. Needless to say, there were great protests, but Reb Yisroel ignored them and reportedly made his way to other *shuls* as well, to urge others to join him.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> R. Dovid Luria, see *Nesivos Ohr*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> T.H.M. I, p.150, gl. 5

<sup>13</sup> *Shemona Perakim*

<sup>14</sup> *Ohr Yisroel*, letters no. 5, 6, etc.

<sup>15</sup> *Ishim Veshitos*, Zevin, pp. 64-65

<sup>16</sup> *Sridei Aish*, IV,289. Some have attributed Reb Yisroel's reluctance to serve as a *Rav* to his having arrived at halachic conclusions different from many established local *minhagim*. T.H.M. 377.

<sup>17</sup> T.H.M. I, 160-161, no. 8 for sources.

This daring episode provoked strong and mixed reactions in different circles, and was long debated.<sup>18</sup> For all its esteem for him, the *Beis Din* of Vilna summoned Reb Yisroel for an uncomfortable exchange,<sup>19</sup> with Reb Yisroel demonstrating clearly that his command of Torah knowledge put him beyond their ability to challenge him.

### Pressure From the Haskallah

At that time, the impact of the German *Haskallah* (the Enlightenment Movement,) which was enamored with secular culture) was beginning to make its mark on Russian Jewry, especially in Vilna. The *Maskillim* prevailed on the Russian government to help them revamp the traditional *Chinuch* by demanding changes in curriculum, and they succeeded in opening several of their own elementary schools, as well as a Rabbinical Seminary in Vilna. They promoted an education that synthesized Jewish and secular knowledge for motives that went beyond a "broader education"; they were aiming at reshaping the minds and hearts of the youth, distorting the true face of Judaism.

The *Maskillim* were attracted to Reb Yisroel by his all-encompassing knowledge and were fascinated by his independence and originality, but they had totally misunderstood him and his attitudes toward *halacha*. The *Maskillim* brought considerable pressures upon him to serve as head of their Seminary. Russian Minister of Education Avaroff even interrupted one of his *shiurim* to try to influence him with magnificent offers.<sup>20</sup>

Some *Rabbonim* argued that Reb Yisroel, with his rare gifts, was the only one who could save the situation and

rechart the course of this ill-conceived Rabbinical Seminary, but Reb Yisroel adamantly refused. On the one hand, he was confident that the Seminary did not have staying power, and was not worthy of the effort required to attempt to lead it properly. Moreover, in a letter to Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz (later secretary to Kovno Rav, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector זצ"ל), he explained his philosophy of unadulterated *rabbanus*: "... knowledge of *Shulchan Aruch* and piety is not sufficient. ... For *psak* we require *Gedolei Torah*!"<sup>21</sup>—and these would not emerge from a *Haskallah*-oriented seminary.

The pressures brought to bear upon Reb Yisroel to head this institution made his continued stay in Vilna unbearable, so he left for Kovno in the winter of 1848. ... Reb Yisroel was eventually vindicated, for the government later deemed the Vilna Seminary and its counterparts in other cities ineffective, and shut them all down in 1873.<sup>22</sup>

### The Kovno Years

Upon his arrival in Kovno, Reb Yisroel was engaged by the elders of the city<sup>23</sup> to supervise "all matters relating to piety," a position he soon left<sup>24</sup> to become Kovno's "official *Maggid*"<sup>25</sup>. The *Rav*, Rabbi Leib Shapiro זצ"ל,<sup>26</sup> had insisted that Reb Yisroel only come to Kovno if he assumed some official capacity there.<sup>27</sup> Reb Yisroel obviously found this position a fitting forum from which to disseminate his *Mussar* approach. Yet, this too came to a quick end, presumably due to the anti-*Mussar* sentiments, which he had hardly experienced in Vilna.<sup>28</sup>

### A New Field of Endeavor

Despite setbacks, Reb Yisroel maintained his vision. He once wrote: "Give me ten great disciples, and I will alter the face of our time and revolutionize the Jewish world!"<sup>29</sup> and this call did not go unheeded. A well-known philanthropist, Tzvi Neveizer,<sup>30</sup> supplied the necessary means for Reb Yisroel to open a new *Beis Hamidrash*. Some 150 students flocked to this new Torah center, including a number of future Torah leaders—Rabbi Eliezer Gordon (later *Rav* and *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Telshe), Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph (*Maggid* of Vilna and Chief Rabbi of New York City), Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (*Rav* of Petersburg), Rabbi Yerucham Leib Perelman (the "*Minsker Gadol*"), Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam (*Rav* of Helsingfors, Finland), Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv ("Alter of Kelem"), Rabbi Shlomo Dovid Grodzinski (*Rav* of Ivye, father of Reb Chaim Ozer of Vilna), to mention some of the better-known disciples.

Reb Yisroel was, indeed, a unique *Rebbi*. His concern for his *talmidim* encompassed all aspects of their lives. In his yeshiva, he did away with the belittling system of

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Boruch Ber Lebowitz, many years later, said a *shiur* to analyze the *halacha* in question.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky related details to the writer, as transmitted to him by Rabbi Dovid Lebowitz זצ"ל who had heard the report from the Chofetz Chaim זצ"ל who had been in Vilna at the time.

<sup>20</sup> See T.H.M., I, 164.

<sup>21</sup> *Zichron Yaakov* III, 132. See T.H.M. I, 165-169 in detail.

<sup>22</sup> Atkes, *ibid.*, pg. 191, cites a contemporaneous letter written in Vilna from the Ginsburg Archives referring to the appointment of a dean to the Seminary "in place of the Salanter who fled to Kovna."

<sup>23</sup> See *Shvil HaZahav* of R. Mordechai Eliasberg, introductory chapters by his son Yonassan, p. XII (Warsaw: 1897)

<sup>24</sup> *Nesivos Ohr* p. 113

<sup>25</sup> Reb Naftoli Amsterdam in *Ohr HaMussar*, I, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Father of Rabbi Raphael Volozhiner—father-in-law of Reb Chaim Brisker and son-in-law of the N'tziv.

<sup>27</sup> T.H.M. I, 179-180

<sup>28</sup> See *L'Toldos HaYehudim B'Kovno* by Lipmann (Kaidon: 1931) pg. 228. *Shvil HaZahav* XVI. For full perspective of the *Mussar* conflicts of that time, see *Pulmus HaMussar*, by Rabbi Dov Katz (e.g. p. 21.)

<sup>29</sup> T.H.M., I, 171

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, I, pg. 170

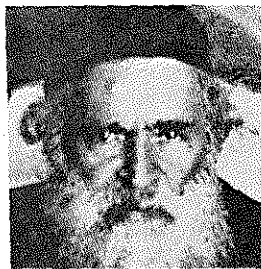
<sup>31</sup> *Zichron Yaakov*, II, pg. 8



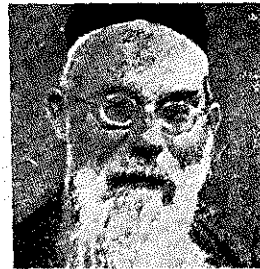
Rabbi Eliezer Gordon, Telshe



Rabbi Yitzchok Blaser  
(Peterburger),  
after he moved to Jerusalem



Rabbi Naftoli Amsterdam



Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel,  
Slobodka



Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph,  
Vilna and New York City

Among Reb Yisroel Salanter's prominent disciples:

*essen kest*,<sup>31</sup> in which the *bachurim* were dependent on the generosity of the local townsfolk, eating paltry meals in different homes daily. He insisted that *kavod haTorah* required that the hosts bring the meals to the yeshiva, without anyone knowing who was whose specific guest.<sup>32</sup> Even sons of wealthy families ate from these meals, to put an end to social differences amongst the students.

He was deeply concerned about the manners and general appearance of the *talmidim* so as to inspire proper respect in the eyes of the local *baalei battim*,<sup>33</sup> and thus enhance the young men's self-image. This effort bore results. Soon many respectable families, which earlier had shied away from a son-in-law—"a *batlan*," were vying for *chassanim* who excelled in Torah.

### His Special Energies

The main thrust of Reb Yisroel's energies, however, was to produce *Gedolei Torah*, great Torah personalities, guiding his students to *shleimus*—completeness and integrity. When he recognized potential in a young man, he dedicated himself totally to his development.<sup>34</sup>

With his remarkable insight he realized the aptitudes and talents of each student and directed him along his individual path, even though the yeshiva curriculum was uniform. He organized special *chaburos* (study groups) to transmit his ideas. Should an uninvited individual enter, Reb Yisroel would cease speaking immediately.<sup>35</sup>

This was also a time of great personal growth for Reb Yisroel. He secluded himself for days on end, hammering out his ideas, perfecting his own character, later relaying what he saw fit to his ten select *talmidim*.<sup>36</sup> Disciples of this era later recalled the profound insights they gained in these sessions.<sup>37</sup> Eventually Reb Yisroel began to withdraw from offering regular *shiurim* in *Gemora*, which he assigned to Rabbi Eliezer Gordon.<sup>38</sup>

In Kovno, as in Vilna, Reb Yisroel organized individual *Battei Mussar* for different strata of society, including one in the "woodcutters' *kloiz*," a structure that stood next to the sawmill until 1921, when it was destroyed by fire.<sup>39</sup>

### A New Focus

The great opponents of the now-blossoming *Mussar* Movement—motivated by sincere misgivings—felt obligated to react despite their reverence for Reb Yisroel as an individual. They shared many of the fears of earlier *Misnagdim* in their opposition to *Chassidus*—that *Mussar* would create a new sect, veering off the mainstream of *Yiddishkeit*. This opposition, the fact that Kovno did not match the challenges and opportunities of Vilna, along with other factors, brought about a shift in Reb Yisroel's area of activity. Even though Reb Yisroel had won fame and a following in Lithuania, he spent most of the next twenty-five years of his life criss-crossing Europe on various projects aimed at bringing estranged Jews back to *Yiddishkeit*, raising the level of commitment of observant Jews, working behind the scenes to protect Jews from all sorts of threatening decrees, only returning to Kovno during his final years.

This new phase began when Reb Yisroel visited Halberstadt, Germany, in 1857 for medical treatment. He stayed on in Germany to begin a major battle against the *Haskallah*, which Reb Yisroel saw as the single greatest threat to authentic *Yahadus* at that time. Its distortions of Judaism, its misleading humanism, and its assumption of non-Jewish values were the roots of the Reform Movement, which Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was battling in Germany<sup>40</sup> and the *Ksav Sofer* was contending with in Hungary<sup>41</sup>. Yet, unlike the Reform

<sup>32</sup>. *Zichron Yaakov*, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup>. T.H.M., I, 172

<sup>34</sup>. *Sridei Aish*, IV, 291

<sup>35</sup>. *Ohr Yisroel*, pg. 121

<sup>36</sup>. T.H.M., I, pg. 174

<sup>37</sup>. *Ohr Yisroel*, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>. T.H.M. I, 175.

<sup>39</sup>. T.H.M. I, 176, no. 20

<sup>40</sup>. See *The History of Orthodox Jewry in Germany*, by Hermann Schwab, London: 1950.

<sup>41</sup>. See *L'Toldos HaRiformatzion HaDatis B'Germania V'Ungaria*, by Y.Y. Greenwald, 1948.

## ... As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say ...

### MUSSAR

*When faced with a decision, ask yourself, 'How would I decide if it were Ne'ilah now, at the closing moments of Yom Kippur?'*

*If someone talks lashon hora in the beis hamidrash in Kovna, Jews will desecrate the Shabbos in Paris.*

*Even a person free of the obligation to study Torah must study Mussar.*

*Before I started to learn Mussar, I thought the whole world deficient except me. After I started, I found the world full of sinners, including me. Now that I've learned some more, I realize that I am indeed a sinner, but I must judge the rest of the world favorably.*

*One doesn't learn Mussar to be a tzaddik, but to become a tzaddik.*

kehillos and rabbimates, Haskallah posed a pervasive and subtle menace. In those places where Reform had not yet taken root, Haskallah was an enemy not easily recognized by the naked eye, and the battleground was not clearly defined. For sure, the Maskillim did not lack organizational skills, nor were they short of forums from which to spew forth their propaganda, but their approach was to subvert, not convert. Leaders of both Chassidim and Misnagdim recognized the threat of Haskallah, and joined forces in strengthening their positions and repelling the threat.

<sup>42</sup>. T.H.M. I, 218-221, 226

<sup>43</sup>. Eitz Pri

<sup>44</sup>. As related by Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky

<sup>45</sup>. This unique Gaon shared an unusual interest in the Gra of Vilna with those—such as Reb Yisroel—of the Gra's "Cheder," as evident from his fruitful collaboration in the fascinating work *Eliyas Eliyahu* by Rabbi Yehoshua Heshel Levin dealing with the ways and works of the Gra.

<sup>46</sup>. Originally printed together with the *Tomer Dvora*, under the title *Even Yisroel*.

<sup>47</sup>. T.H.M. I, p. 184

<sup>48</sup>. T.H.M. I, pg. 185

Reb Yisroel, ever the original activist, concluded that the best defense was a forceful, fresh counter-offensive. He saw a place for secular knowledge in the overall makeup of the individual,<sup>42</sup> but such knowledge was only acceptable for the proper reasons, for the proper people, in the proper time and in the proper place. What he abhorred was the absence of the perceptible *lehavdil*—the recognizable distinction between Torah wisdom and secular knowledge.<sup>43</sup> The two could not be uttered in the same breath, pronounced with the same gravity, articulated in the same halls. Chazal (the rabbis of the Talmud) teach that "G-d has naught in this world but only the four cubits of *halacha*." Secular studies, then, must be excluded from the rabbinical seminary by the "only" of the Chazal.

Germany was the source of the plague, and it was there that he hoped to save what he could.<sup>44</sup> He settled in Koenigsberg and was soon deeply involved with the Jewish youth enrolled in the local university. He scheduled regular *shiurim* in Navi (Prophets) for them, and was generally aided by the Rav of Koenigsberg, Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenberg, author of *Ha'Ksav V'Hakabbalah*.<sup>45</sup> While there, he published his *Iggeres HaMussar* (Letter on the Study of Ethics)<sup>46</sup>—a work that has been reprinted scores of times.

### The Memel Approach

In 1860, he was in the border city of Memel. An important port city and mercantile center, it attracted hundreds of Lithuanian Jews to its commercial opportunities, which continued non-stop, seven days a week. *Shabbos* was not even a nostalgic memory in Memel's bustling main streets.

Realizing that Berlin exerted a stronger pull on Memel than did Vilna, Reb Yisroel did not take a harsh, uncompromising stance against Sabbath desecration in that setting. Instead, he resorted to a soft, graduated approach. In his first sermon he explained the concept of *Shabbos* to the people on their level, concluding that *Chillul Shabbos* at the port was intolerable because of the writing involved—the major Sabbath desecration of running a business. He did not discuss the actual portering of goods. Many agreed that they could postpone their writing until the weekdays, while the loading and unloading continued.

Some weeks later he suggested that without too much sacrifice, it should be possible not to send shipments, even if goods did arrive. This approach too became acceptable to the merchants. After a period of time, he convinced them that even the unloading was not vital—and the Jewish merchants of the city ceased all their port activities on the *Shabbos*. A revolutionized Memel emerged.<sup>47</sup>

While there, he lectured in Talmud and *Mussar* for young men studying there, caring for all their needs. He also lectured for Jewish university students in Memel.<sup>48</sup>



### "So Much More That I Could Achieve"

As he continued to travel, Reb Yisroel's influence over the hundreds of *talmidim* and thousands of local *baalei battim* only inspired him to persevere. "There is so much more that I could achieve," was a comment that frequently fell from his lips, a theme that never ceased to haunt him, as many anecdotes testify.

Even a remote hint of the passage of time suggested to him undeveloped opportunities for growth and accomplishment. For instance, when he was sitting in a *shul* during the auctioning of *kibbudim* (synagogue rituals), for "100 groschen . . . 200 groschen," he began to weep. When asked why, he pointed to his gray beard: *Ich bin grau schon* (I am gray already) and I've accomplished so little!—a reflection prompted by the "groschen" of the bidding.<sup>49</sup>

It was during this time (1860-61) that he published the celebrated Torah journal *Tevunah* (Wisdom) to enhance the prestige of Torah, while promoting discussion on the human personality and character refinement.<sup>50</sup> It enjoyed the participation of the *Gedolei Torah*,<sup>51</sup> and though only twelve issues appeared, it was extremely popular.

### "Amongst My People" (*Melachim II-4*)

Reb Yisroel mastered the German language and adopted the German manner of dress, to advance his work in Tilsit, Berlin, Frankfurt, Halberstadt, and other cities.<sup>52</sup> As always, he was impeccable in appearance—shining shoes, sparkling buttons on his frock—dressed in the manner of a dignified layman. His impact on the lives of German Jewry appears in retrospect to have been profound. This was strengthened by his close ties with Germany's Torah leadership: Rabbi Eziel Hildesheimer, Rabbi Meir Lehmann, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. He encouraged the founding of various institutions of learning in Germany, and applauded organized *halacha shiurim* for girls.<sup>53</sup> Throughout this period, Reb Yisroel's correspondence with his *talmidim* in Russia<sup>54</sup> demonstrated that his passionate concern for them was unaffected by time and distance. He was even active in establishing two *batei Midrash* between the years 1865 and 1869 for workers and tradesmen in Russia.

<sup>49</sup>. *Me'oros Hagedolim*

<sup>50</sup>. See introduction to *Tevunah*, no. 1

<sup>51</sup>. Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveichik, Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanzohn, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, Rabbi Shlomo Kluger ז"ל, among others.

<sup>52</sup>. T.H.M. I, 186

<sup>53</sup>. *Ibid.*, 192

<sup>54</sup>. *Ohr Yisroel*, pgs. 48-68

<sup>55</sup>. T.H.M. I, 192

<sup>56</sup>. *Ibid.*, pg. 193

<sup>57</sup>. Vilna 1881

### ... As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say ...

#### SPIRITUALITY

*Like a bird, man can reach undreamed-of heights as long as he works his wings. Should he relax them for but one minute, however, he plummets downward.*

*A person lives with himself for seventy years, and after it is all over, he still does not know himself.*

*With the word "Echod" in the Sh'ma, the Jew crowns G-d as King over the entire cosmos and all four corners of the world, but sometimes he forgets to include himself.*

*Man is a drop of intellect drowning in a sea of instincts.*

*Spirituality is like a bird: if you tighten your grip on it, it chokes; slacken your grip, and it flies away.*

Eventually—between 1869 and 1871—Reb Yisroel returned to Vilna, when a devastating plague struck the area, taking his wife, whom he mourned for the rest of his days. With her passing, Reb Yisroel concentrated even more on his German activities.<sup>55</sup>

### Return to Kovno

When he was 67, Reb Yisroel planted a seed whose growth eventually sheltered all of Lithuania, nourishing us to this very day with its fruit: the Kollel Knesses Bais Yitzchok in Kovno. Its purpose—the furtherance of *Hora'ah and Mussar*—Rabbinics and Ethics, by supporting and guiding exceptional Torah scholars in their development as authorities. The project received the blessings, and eventually the name, of the Kovno *Rav* and *Poseik Hador* (the generation's outstanding authority in *halacha*), Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector. It was joined by such *Chavrei HaKollel* (fellows) as Reb Naftali Herz (later *Rav* of Jaffa), Rabbi Naftali Amsterdam, Rabbi Chaim (Telsher) Rabinowitz, and Rabbi Yitzchok Meltzan, among others.<sup>56</sup> Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son accepted the administrative responsibilities, while Rabbi Avrohom Shenker and Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel (later revered as the "Alter of Slobodka") conducted the internal affairs of this great institution. Under the latter's guidance, publication of the *Eitz Pri*<sup>57</sup> inspired the world of Torah and *Mussar*, featuring essays from both Reb Yisroel and Reb Yitzchok Elchonon—including a foreword from the then lesser-known Reb Yisroel Meir HaKohen, author of *Sefer Chofetz Chaim*.

## ... As Reb Yisroel Salanter Used to Say ...

### MAN and MITZVOS

*The greatness of the Ari Zal and the Vilna Gaon went beyond their command of vast amounts of Torah knowledge—both the open and the esoteric parts; their greatness lay in never deviating in the slightest from the directives of the Shulchan Aruch.*

*A sick person never rejects a healing procedure as "unbefitting." Why, then, do we care what other people think when dealing with spiritual matters?*

*Man is equipped with such far-reaching vision, yet the smallest coin can obstruct his view.*

*Despair is the worst of ailments. No worries are justified except: "Why am I so worried?"*

*People say: The fool gives, the wise man takes. More accurately: The fool thinks he's giving and the wise man claims that he's taking.*

*One who rushes headlong to perform a mitzva can destroy the whole world in his path.*

The true glory of the Kollel was realized under Rabbi Yitzchok Blazer (Peterburger), whose rousing *sichos* (lectures) were the Kollel's life-force. Reb Yisroel would,

<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky זצ"ל, as a disciple of Rabbi Naftali Amsterdam and the *Alter* of Slobodka, possesses a wealth of detailed information regarding Reb Yisroel's Paris stay. He offers the following:

Under Alexander II, many reforms in the Russian regime were realized, ameliorating some of the barbarous policies of Nicholas I. The appearance of Jews on the economic and cultural scene, however, provoked dormant anti-Semitic feelings, even among intellectuals (such as the novelist Dostoyevski). Early in 1881, the Czar was assassinated by revolutionaries, and the Jews served as a convenient scapegoat. Terrifying pogroms erupted in southern Russia, and continued sporadically for several years.

Reb Yisroel, weary but tireless, utilized connections in France to persuade the Parisian Rothschild to influence his cousin in London to lend his considerable prestige to pressure *The London Times* to dispatch correspondents to the scene of these atrocities and to report them to the Western world.

The Russian regime protested the bad press to the British Foreign Office, which politely explained that freedom of the press was an accepted feature of life in Britain. While Russian Jewry's problems were far from solved, Reb Yisroel's clandestine activities were effective in mitigating some of their more open manifestations.

<sup>59</sup> T.H.M. I, pp. 230-236

<sup>60</sup> T.H.M. I, 238

upon occasion, visit Kovno, and, of course, again address the Kollel.

Several "second-generation" institutions were then formed: Reb Simcha Zissel founded the Talmud Torah in Kelem. In Vilna a *Mussar* yeshiva was established by Reb Yaakov Yoseph, while Reb Nosson Zvi Finkel started the yeshiva in Telshe, and eventually raised the banner of *Mussar* in Slobodka with "Knesses Yisroel," named for the great mentor of them all, Reb Yisroel Salanter.

The impact of these individuals and their institutions on the future great citadels of learning—Telshe, Mir, Kamenitz, Grodno, Kletzk, Chevron, Lakewood, and all their branches and seedlings—is now part of the vital history of Torah in Europe and America.

Vilna, Kovno, Koenigsberg, Memel, Berlin—Reb Yisroel's map stared back at him: *There is so much more to achieve.* He reportedly considered coming to America to establish a proper Jewish community and formal *Kehilla*, but decided against attempting to build a spiritual life in a country where the atmosphere is set by a constitution that guarantees separating Church and State, religious principle and day-to-day life.

### Mission in Paris

Yet, Reb Yisroel did move on to Paris at the age of 70, despite illness and chronic severe headaches (which at times made it agonizing for him to give public addresses). *Why Paris?*<sup>58</sup> The generally accepted view is, to help organize a *Kehilla* under a qualified *Rav*. Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel Levin of Vilna did, in fact, become *Rav* there due to Reb Yisroel's influence. Other claim his purpose there was to arrange a French translation of the Talmud. (Reb Yisroel's goal was to have *Shas* translated into Russian and German as well.)

His Paris agenda also included offering spiritual direction for the Russian-Polish elements of the Jewish community—all incredible undertakings for an aged, ailing foreigner.<sup>59</sup> His living conditions, however, were horrible, and after two near-fatal mishaps, he finally left.

Returning to Koenigsberg, he filled a spiritual vacuum left by the departure of the *Malbim* from that city's rabbinate. He made one more trip to Russia to recharge his disciples with the fire of *Mussar*, visiting Kovno, Minsk, and Vilna (where he yet found time to study some of the Vilna Gaon's manuscripts). Before returning to Koenigsberg, he instructed Rabbi Yaakov Lipschitz to take up his talented pen and to give expression to Reb Yisroel's opposition to a newly-proposed Rabbinical Seminary sponsored by Baron Ginsburg.<sup>60</sup>

### The Will of the Righteous

Reb Yisroel, 73 years of age, having achieved what scores of others may only dream of accomplishing, took ill in Koenigsberg, in his attic apartment in the home of



his friend and patron, Reb Eliyahu Ber. Reb Yisroel instructed the household that come what may, no one was to desecrate the *Shabbos* on his behalf. This curious demand was in total opposition to *halacha*, which Reb Yisroel himself had so valiantly championed.

Nonetheless, he was not to be dissuaded. He explained that this was not misplaced *frumkeit* (piety) or *tzidkus*, but *halacha*: the *Gemora* rules that shepherds are not to be saved from disaster since their livelihood is by theft. (Their animals would regularly graze in neighboring fields.) "Since," Reb Yisroel continued, "people provide

me with assistance believing that I'm a *tzaddik*, I too must not be saved since I'm living by false pretenses!"

That week, Reb Eliyahu Ber's son, Binyomin, visited his sister, wife of Reb Yitzchok Elchonon's son, in Kovno. When Reb Yitzchok Elchonon inquired after Reb Yisroel's welfare, he related Reb Yisroel's strange demand. Reb Yitzchok Elchonon replied that he should relay to Reb Yisroel: "The Kovno Rav says that you must allow yourself to be saved even if *Chillus Shabbos* is involved."<sup>61</sup>

"The will of the devout shall be fulfilled"—Reb Yisroel's final illness had begun on *Motza'ei Shabbos*, 20 *Shevat*, and his passing was shortly before sundown, *Erev Shabbos*, on 25 *Shevat*, 5643/1883.

<sup>61</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, who heard it from Binyomin Ber himself. See also *Ir Vilna* pgs. transcript of מצבתה.

## Tales of Reb Yisroel

The hundreds of stories about Reb Yisroel that have been preserved portray unusual intellectual gifts, a multifaceted genius with keen sensitivity to other people's needs as well as a willingness to meet their needs, and an overwhelming sense of mission. Many are well-known: Reb Yisroel, absent from *shul* for *Kol Nidrei* because he was comforting an infant and its frightened babysitter, and this was of greater importance . . . sensing the disappointment of a youngster who (he understood) was shifted from *Maftir* to a regular *aliya* to make room for Reb Yisroel, and inviting the boy to recite the *Haftarah* for him after davening, while others were kept waiting . . . advising disciples that the greatest *hidur* (enhancement) in baking *shmura matzos* is to deal gently with the widows and other poor women working the dough . . . taking a young man to task for being so involved in *Selichos* preparation that he did not reply to someone else's greeting: "Must your *teshuvah* be at the expense of his 'Good Morning'?"

Other tales, not so widely circulated are the following, taken from *Meoras Hagedolim*:

- When disciples in Lithuania pleaded with him to return from Germany to fight *Haskallah*, he replied with a parable: A farmer was chasing a team of runaway horses down a hill. He shouted to a man sitting under a tree further down the slope to stop them. The fellow did not respond. Reaching him, the farmer asked him why he made no effort to stop the horses. "Wait here until they reach bottom and I'll bring them back for you. If I'd have grabbed them on their headlong charge, they'd have dragged me down with them. At the bottom of the hill, their energy is all spent and they can be led back."

Said Reb Yisroel: "Lithuanian Jewry is plunging headlong into *Haskallah*. I cannot grapple with them without being dragged down. The Jews of Germany have reached bottom."

- Reb Yisroel's powers of concentration were so intense that he was often oblivious of where he was.

One evening he was strolling in Koenigsberg, and did not return. Failing to respond to the questions of a gendarme, he was jailed as a suspicious alien . . . After his disciples arranged for his release, the authorities wrote on his passport: "*Immer in philosophische Gedanken versunken*. (Always immersed in philosophical thought)."

- He once failed to show up in *shul* for the first *minyan*—his regular time. After several hours passed, a search party was launched, and several children found him sitting on a large stone outside of the city, *tallis* bag in hand, lost in thought. The shouts of the children called him to where he was, and he became aware that the townspeople were concerned over his absence. Reb Yisroel was so anxious to assure them of his safety that he outran the children to return to town.

- In advance of a public Talmudic address, Reb Yisroel posted a list of a hundred references. Upon entering the auditorium to present his discourse, Reb Yisroel checked the list and found that a prankster had replaced his sheet with another list of a hundred references picked at random. He turned pale, and took his seat for the ten minutes that the introductions were made. He then stepped up to the *bima* and delivered a brilliant discourse, tying together all hundred random citations.

His disciple Reb Naftoli Amsterdam later commented, "It did not take Reb Yisroel ten minutes to draw upon his knowledge of *Shas* to weave together a new *pilpul*. He turned pale because on the one hand he was reluctant to display his phenomenal intellectual abilities by presenting an 'instant' Torah discourse. Instead, he planned to rise to the *bima*, declare his inability to give the posted lecture, and take his seat. On the other hand, this would prove to be a grave set-back to his campaign to spread *Mussar*. After much analysis and inner conflict—which was why he had turned pale—he decided to present the spontaneous speech, much against his nature."