

From The Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 1, pages 213 -214.

The year 5609 had just commenced (Sept. 1848). It was the High Holiday season and the epidemic still raged unabated. Although it was well known that hunger, crowding, fatigue promote physical weakness and help the disease to spread, none of the Vilna rabbis had dared grant permission publicly for the population to refrain from fasting on Yom Kippur. R. Israel suddenly emerged from his hiding and gave the ruling on his own responsibility. He considered fasting forbidden, a most grievous sin. [6] He even held it to be a desecration of the Divine Name, since the Gentiles would be able to say that the religion of the Jews had brought the epidemic upon them. [7] On Erev Yom Kippur, he had notices affixed in all the synagogues of Vilna calling on the congregations "not to fast on this holy and awesome day, to reduce the number of piyyutim recited in the service, to go for walks during the warm hours of the day, and to help one another with one's physical strength money and council." Apprehensive that, on account of the dread of the day, he would not be obeyed, he ascended the Bimah of the Great Synagogue at the end of the Morning Service, took out wine and cake, recited the Kiddush and ate in the presence of the entire congregation. [8]

They were awestruck, and could not believe their eyes. One of the dignitaries of the congregation arose and called out: "Don't we have rabbis and dayanim who know the laws of saving human life? Yet they did not permit this publicly, like you." Some even related that the senior dayan of Vilna, R. Bezalel, walked to the Bimah and protested in the name of all the dayanim against this blanket dispensation, without confining permission to individual cases and under doctor's orders. R. Israel would not yield, and refused to leave until all the worshippers, one by one, came to the Bimah and ate. From there, it is told, he went from synagogue to synagogue in the city and insisted on all breaking their fast.

6. See the memoirs. A friend told R. Israel that he had acted stringently, and had fasted on Yom Kippur. R. Israel was astonished at his audacity in committing such a grave iniquity on the ve sacred day itself.

7. Ibid.

8. His son, R. Isaac, claims that he gave permission for the eating of less than the prescribed measure [for punishment] each time. According to Rabbi Farber ('Sha'are Zion') this instruction was only given to his students, whom R. Israel showed how the prohibition could be circumvented. In his *Gedolim fun unzer Zei*, p. 67, Jacob Mark writes that an eye-witness, R. Simon Straschun, reported that R. Israel himself did not eat. This, however, is impossible, as is proved by R. Israel's son's assertion in his memoirs, that his father had considered fasting on that day a grievous sin. For details of the incident, see also: R. Baruch Epstein, *Mekor Baruch*, Vol. II (Vilna, 1928), p. 1012: "R. Israel ascended the Bimah, accompanied by two prominent Vilna dayanim, and proclaimed: 'In the name of G-d and with the authority of e.- holy Torah, which has

woven one single mitzvah as a crown over all commandments: "And you shall live by them — and not die by them," we declare it permissible not to fast today.' After that, he took a cup of wine over which he recited the Kiddush. He, and the dayanim standing by him, drank, and they also tasted some sweetmeats and confectionery." R. Baruch Epstein, however ascribes the incident to 1870, which is obviously an error. True, in that year, too, a cholera epidemic broke out in Vilna. R. Israel was in Vilna at the time, and in fact his wife contracted cholera and died then. No source, however, indicates his having repeated his previous action of 1848, For the details, cf. also, Steintchneider, Ir Vilna, p. 130.

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