

The RYS Daily 5/8/07 Last Days II

From The Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 1 pages 318 - 319.

By 1880, he had attained the age of seventy. Yet he still paid no attention to his age or fragile health, and undertook new and audacious schemes, which involved much travelling and travail. Reports reached him that Judaism had receded to a low ebb in France. In the very country where emancipation had gone forth to the world, the Jewish community had been gripped by a terrifying assimilation process. Jews had turned their backs on their origins and had become integrated into the gentile community. During those years, too, numbers of Eastern European Jews, from Russia, Poland, etc., had settled in Paris, and R. Israel feared that these immigrants would mingle with the rest of Parisian Jewry and follow their example. Accordingly, he left Germany and took up residence in Paris, to organize the Jewish life of these new settlers, to guide them, and to provide them with proper leadership? This last, his main purpose was to be achieved by securing an outstanding rabbi to head their community.

All the time he stayed there, R. Israel suffered intensely. As is known, he refused all gifts, except the support he received from R. Elijah Levinsohn, and this, too, he reduced to the very minimum. But this meager sum hardly sufficed to cover the high cost of living and of renting quarters in Paris. He lived frugally and in a small room, and suffered intensely. He was forced to abstain from meat and other foods, because of his scrupulous observance of kashrut and also the strict diet which his poor health had forced upon him. He was also required to rest. And so he had to endure. In one of his letters to his family, he complained of pains in his eyes. Nevertheless, nothing was allowed to stand in the way of his efforts to strengthen Judaism. In a letter to his son-in-law, R. Elijah Eliezer in Vilna, dated the fourth day of Selichot 5641 (Wednesday, Sept. 21, 1881), he described his life in Paris: "I have been cast here for a year-and-a-half, and am unable to free myself..., since, in my eyes, the community is comparable to a person on the eve of Pesach who possesses only an olive's size of matzah. — It is difficult for me to obtain a rabbi who would be suitable for here... For my part I have made an agreement with..."

He wrote in a similar vein to Rabbi Dr. Ehrmann, whose mentor he had become, in Shevat 5681 (January 1881) : "You have undoubtedly heard that I have recommended to the Polish and Russian Jews here that they take a rabbi. I cannot leave until the matter is finalized, please G-d... It is difficult for me to remain. After all, I don't know French..."

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