The Daily RYS 8/13/06 Importance of Customs

From page 108 of The Making of a Godol, Improved Edition, Volume I.

The *talmidim* of R' Yisrael Salanter *davent* with their master on
Shmini 'Atsereth and sent someone to bring a kittel for the khazzen
to recite the Prayer for Rain, as is customary. When the messenger tarried, one of the
group asked R' Yisrael if it was necessary to wait so long for a
kittel, and he replied, "What has remained for us other than the
kittel?!" He meant that observance of Jewish customs is crucial for
our preservation of Judaism.

 (Similar to the Salanter's approach regarding the kittel is an episode
recorded in Katz I, to wit: R' Yisrael Salanter called a
meeting in Vilna regarding a situation threatening Russian Jewry
at which "several geonim of the generation, including R' Eliyahu
Schick/I", were present. When the time for Minhah arrived, R'
Yisrael arose to daven - but R' Eliyahu objected that not only
were they exempt from davenen, but were forbidden to interrupt a
meeting of such nature for prayer. R' Yisrael rejoined that al-
though R' Eliyahu was technically right, Jewry was beset by so
many recurrent problems that, were we to follow this halakhah
nowadays, we would remain "without Torah and without Prayer",
and he prayed in private [*b'yechidus*]. Afterwards he said "with a
smile" that both he and R' Eliyahu acted correctly: "Together, we
functioned in line with the principle of *Alu v'alu divrei elokim chayim* [Both
these and those are words of a Living G-d]: R' Eliyahu was required
to convey that a life-threatening concern [*pekuach nefesh*] over-
rides everything else, and I was required to show that this is not to
be done constantly [*davor kovua*] - so that prayer in its proper time
[*b'zmana*, the three prayer services daily] not be altogether abolished."
In this case, R' Yisrael went beyond simply insisting that a custom
be maintained, as he had done in the kittel episode. He allowed
the current custom of Minhah davenen to overrule the literal din,
which in that particular situation was not to daven.)