

The RYS Daily 8/29/06 Truth and Legend III

From "Truth and Legend About Israel Salanter" by Jacob Mark

Rabbi Israel was the first of his time to heed the danger to Jewry from the oncoming haskala. Paradoxically, Judaism and the study of the Torah were then in full flower. The great yeshivas of Volozhin, Vilna, Slutsk, Minsk, Karlin, and Lublin were crowded with students. Practically every little town in Lithuania boasted a yeshiva.

Not only yeshiva students but ordinary householders filled the prayer houses, studying Torah. The singsong Gemara intonation of "the Rabbis teach" was heard from one end of the Pale of Settlement to the other. Since Jews were Jews never had Isaiah's prophecy been so well fulfilled: "And all thy children shall be taught of the Law." The Shulhan Arukh reigned supreme in the Jewish world, while the Pentateuch in Yiddish and morality books ruled the Jewish home.

Small wonder, then, that the rabbis could not understand what Rabbi Israel had in mind when he appealed to them to find ways to safeguard Judaism. Some were incensed at him and responded only with the formula that "innovations are prohibited according to the Torah." But Rabbi Israel's vision was clearer. He foresaw that for all its Judaism and Torah Lithuania would be less resistant to the haskala than Poland, White Russia, the Ukraine, and Galicia, where hasidism had become entrenched; where the authority of the rebbe and zaddik prevailed, where the tradition of the Jewish sages governed the community.

Pondering along these lines, Rabbi Israel concluded that the only way to safeguard Torah and Judaism from the onslaughts of the time was to teach ethics, morality, and the fear of Cod not only to the young but to adults married folk, and parents. He used to say educating parents was more urgent and useful than educating children. If parents were more God-fearing they would not surrender their children to alien influences.

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