

## The RYS Daily 9/4/06 Truth and Legend VIII

The first five years Rabbi Israel lived in Vilna, he was an enigma to the rabbis because he wanted to safeguard Judaism from the dangers they could not yet perceive. Some rabbis even protested that Rabbi Israel's teaching of ethics and morality brought on neglect of the Torah. But came 1844, and they realized how shortsighted they had been. That was the year the Russian government opened a rabbinical seminary in Vilna; its purpose was to educate rabbis also in the general culture so they could spread general education among all Jews. (Nowadays we think an institution is ideal when it combines Torah and secular learning, but in the view of our good parents and perhaps they were right - that was the beginning of the end of Torah and Judaism.)

As soon as the rabbinical seminary opened, many students began to abandon the traditional yeshivas, and their Judaism, and flocked to the seminary. Rabbi Israel's prophecy came true sooner than even he had foretold. This sudden innovation brought such an enormous degree of laxity among the young people that even the Vilna maskilim began to fear that this long-coveted seminary would graduate skeptics instead of educated men and unbelievers instead of rabbis.

The Vilna maskilim even tried to induce Rabbi Israel to head the seminary, to lend it his high prestige so it would become more popular with traditional Jewry and simultaneously strengthen respect for Judaism among its students. But he declined, despite the concessions which were made to attract him and the offer of an immense salary for that time, said to have been about a thousand rubles a year. But the maskilim refused to take his "no" for an answer. They asked Count Uvarov, Education Minister, to order Rabbi Israel to accept the post, hoping he would not wish to transgress the precept of the Talmud that "the law of the government is the law." Just at that time, Uvarov happened to be in Vilna. Accompanied by Hayim Leib Katzenellenbogen, instructor in Bible and Talmud at the seminary, Uvarov sought out Rabbi Israel at his yeshiva and offered him the post. But Rabbi Israel declined on the ground that authoritative rabbis could not be trained in an institution where general subjects were essential and Jewish ones secondary.