

OU ISRAEL CENTRE. JERUSALEM.
 “GREAT JEWISH THINKERS”
 RABBI DR. ALAN AVRAHAM KIMCHE

RABBI YISRAEL (LIPKIN) SALANTER (1810-1883)
 SALANT - VILNA - KOVNO - BERLIN - KONIGSBERG

THE 19th CENTURY MUSSAR MOVEMENT INSPIRED LEADERSHIP

A 19th Cent LEGEND in VILNA

The Hebrew and Yiddish writer David Frischmann (1859-1922) wrote a famous short story in Hebrew with the title: שלשה שאכלו - *Three People Who Ate*. It describes an event that took place in Vilna during one of the terrible cholera epidemics that broke out in the city. Here is an excerpt.

מעשה בשלשה שאכלו.....לא באחד הימים הפשוטים מימי שבתות ה'אכלו את אשר אכלו, כי-אם ביום הכפורים, ביום הכפורים שחל להיות בשבת; לא במקום סתר באין רואה ובאין יודע, כי-אם לעיני כל ישראל, אשר בבית-הכנסת הגדול; ולא אנשים ריקים ופוחזים, לא קלי-דעת היו שלשת האנשים ההם, כי-אם מנשיאי העדה ואציליה הכי-נכבדים, הלא הם רב העיר ושני הדינים אשר עמו. –ובכל זה עיני כל ישראל היו תלויות אליהם ביראה ובכבוד, ויהיו קדושים בעיני כל העם ועל פני כל העדה נכבדו ויקדשו

Three people who ate....they did not eat on any regular day of the week, but on Yom Kippur. And not just on any Yom Kippur, but on Yom Kippur that fell on Shabbat. They didn't eat in secret, but in front of everyone gathered in the Great Synagogue. They weren't simple people or boors. These three were not frivolous. Rather they were the princes of the community and their most important leaders, none other than the rabbi of the city and the two Dayanim [rabbinic judges] who stood with him...

It was the afternoon of Yom Kippur. The rabbi stood bent over on the Bima...Even now my eyes can picture that incredible sight, as I stood there in the congregation of the synagogue. The rabbi stood on the Bima, his dark eyes shining out from his pale face and white beard. The Mussaf service was almost over and the congregation stood silently waiting to hear something from this man of God...

Suddenly my ears heard a sound but I could not understand exactly what it was. I heard the sounds but my heart could not comprehend.

“With the permission of God and with the permission of the community, we hereby permit people to eat and to drink today.”

The beadle came forward and the Rabbi whispered a few things into his ear. Then he spoke with the two Dayanim who were next to him.

They nodded as if to approve of what he had said. As this was happening the beadle brought a cup of wine and some cake from the rabbi’s home.

If I am lucky to live for many more years I will never forget that incredible day and that awesome sight. If I close my eyes for a moment I can still see them: the three who ate! The three shepherds of Israel standing on the Bima in the synagogue, eating in front of everyone, on Yom Kippur.

Frischmann does not give a date for the episode, nor the name of the rabbi with dark eyes and a pale face who made Kiddush and ate on that Yom Kippur. Those details are provided by **the Russian historian Hillel Noah Steinshneider in his book *Ir Vilna (The City of Vilna)***. He wrote that it happened in 1848 which was the Jewish year 5609. (In fact that year Yom Kippur fell on Saturday October 7th, so this correlates historically.) Steinshneider also identified the Rabbi of

Frischmann's story as none other than the great Yisrael ben Ze'ev Wolf Lipkin, better known as Rabbi Yisroel Salanter.

Another account of this episode comes from the great scholar of Jewish history **Louis Ginzberg, in his book *Students, Scholars and Saints* (p.184-185).**

In the year of the frightful cholera epidemic Salanter, after having taken counsel with a number of physicians, became convinced that in the interest of the health of the community it would be necessary to dispense with fasting on the Day of Atonement. Many a Rabbi in this large community was inclined to agree with his view, but none of them could gather enough courage to announce the dispensation publicly....When he saw, however, that none of them would act in this case, he thought self-assertion to be his highest duty. He affixed announcements in all Synagogues, advising the people not to fast on the day of atonement.

Knowing, however, how reluctant they would be to follow his written advice he, on the morning of the Day of Atonement at one of the most solemn moments of the service, ascended the reader's desk. After addressing a few sentences to the Congregation in which he commanded them to follow his example, he produced some cake and wine, pronounced the blessing over them, ate and drank.

One can hardly imagine what moral courage and religious enthusiasm this action of his required from a man like Salanter to whom obedience to the Torah was the highest duty. Many years later he used to dwell on this episode and thank God with great joy for having found him worthy to be the instrument of saving so many lives.