

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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**As Long as the Candle is Burning...**  
**(Unwrapping a Mussar Story)**

**רכ פלאי: עזרת סופרים - לדעת חכמה ומוסר**  
**HaMelitz #88 (May 2, 1897)**



## **Background to Our Story**

### **Israel Salanter**



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Buber](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber)

Rabbi Yisrael ben Ze'ev Wolf Lipkin, also known as "Israel Salanter" or "Yisroel Salanter" (November 3, 1809, Zhagory – February 2, 1883, Königsberg), was the father of the Musar movement in Orthodox Judaism and a famed Rosh yeshiva and Talmudist. The epithet *Salanter* was added to his name since most of his schooling took place in Salant (now the Lithuanian town of Salantai), where he came under the influence of Rabbi Yosef Zundel of Salant.

Rabbi Salanter is recognized as the father of the Musar movement developed in 19th century Orthodox Eastern Europe, particularly among the Lithuanian Jews. The Hebrew term *musar* (מוסר, properly transliterated as *musar*), is from the book of Proverbs 1:2 meaning instruction, discipline, or conduct. The term was used by the Musar movement to refer to disciplined efforts to further ethical and spiritual development. The study of Musar is a part of the study of Jewish ethics.

At Rabbi Lipkin's suggestion, the Musar writings of Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Solomon ibn Gabirol, and Menachem Mendel Lefin were reprinted and popularized in Vilna. He began to be known as Rabbi Salanter.

Despite the prohibition against doing work on Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath), Rabbi Salanter set an example for the Lithuanian Jewish community during the cholera epidemic of 1848. He ensured that any necessary relief work on Shabbat for Jews was done by Jews. Although some wanted such work to be done on Shabbat by non-Jews, Rabbi Salanter held that both Jewish ethics and law mandated that the obligation to save lives took priority over other laws. During Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Rabbi Salanter ordered that Jews that year must not abide by the traditional fast, but instead must eat in order to maintain their health, again for emergency health reasons. Some claim that, to allay any doubts, he himself went up to the synagogue pulpit on that holy day, recited the Kiddush prayer, drank and ate - as a public example for others to do the same.

In 1848, the Czarist government created the Vilna Rabbinical School and Teachers' Seminary. Rabbi Lipkin was identified as a candidate to teach at or run the school. As he feared that the school would be used to produce rabbinical "puppets" of the government, he refused the position and left Vilna. Salanter moved to Kovno, where he established a Musar-focused yeshiva at the Nevyozer Kloiz.

He retained charge until 1857, when he left Lithuania and moved to Prussia to recover from depression. He remained in the house of philanthropists, the Hirsch brothers of Halberstadt, until his health improved. In 1861 he started publication of the Hebrew journal *Tevunah*, devoted to rabbinical law and religious ethics. After three months the journal had failed to garner enough subscriptions to cover its costs, so he closed it.

Rabbi Lipkin lived for periods in Memel, Königsberg and Berlin. He devoted the last decades of his life to strengthening Orthodox Jewish life in Germany and Prussia. He also played a large role in thwarting an attempt to open a rabbinic seminary in Russia. Toward the end of his life, Rabbi Lipkin was called to Paris to organize a community among the many Russian Jewish immigrants, and he remained there for two years.

Rabbi Lipkin is known as one of the first people to try to translate the Talmud into another language. However, he died before he could finish this immense project. Rabbi Lipkin died on Friday, February 2, 1883 (25 Shevat 5643), in Königsberg, then part of Germany. For many years, the exact location of his grave was unknown. Following a lengthy investigation, in 2007 the grave was located in Königsberg.

### The Text:

רכ פלאי: עזרת סופרים - לדעת חכמה ומוסר  
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ומצאתי את הרב והלמדיו יושבים ומשננים בפייהם מעשה שהיה: מעשה  
ברבינו הגאון הצדיק שבא באחר מלילות החורף לעיר אחת גדולה בשעה השנייה  
אחרי חצות הלילה. כל בני העיר כבר נמו שבתם ורק שביב אור כהה נראה  
דרך החלון של מרתף אחר מאחר הבתים, ויסר שם רבינו. כבואו אל המרתף  
מצא את בעה"ב, סנדלר עני, יושב על ספסלו וחופר נעלים והגר הולך גבכה -  
ר' יהודי, קרא רבינו - הלא כבר הגיעה השעה השנייה בלילה, ואתה עיף ויגע,  
גם הגר עוד מעט ויכבה ומרוע לא תלך לשון ולנוח? - ומה אוכל עשות  
אחרת, רבי? ענה הסנדלר - אדם לעמל יולד, וכל זמן שהגר דולק צריך  
לעמול. באותה שעה דן רבינו ק"ו בעצמו, אם לעבורת הגוף, כך לעבורת  
הבורא לא כ"ש.

It happened one night that our master, the great tzadik (Rabbi Yisrael Salanter), arrived one wintry night to a large city, two hours after midnight. All the residents of the city were asleep and only a flickering weak light was seen through the window of a cellar in one of the houses. Our master turned to that house.

When he arrived to the cellar, he found the owner of the house, a poor shoemaker, sitting on his bench, sewing shoes, and the candle almost gone.

Dear Jew -called our master- it is two hours past midnight, and you are tired and exhausted, even the candle very soon will be extinguished. Why don't you go to sleep and rest?

How can I do any different, rabbi? – answered the shoemaker. A man was born to toil, and as long as the candle is burning, it is necessary to toil.

At that moment, our master reasoned: if this is so for the toiling of the body, how much more so for the toiling of the creator!

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**Bonus** **?** Why does Rabbi Yisrael Salanter suggest to the shoemaker that he goes to sleep? Doesn't he see that the shoemaker is still working?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** What does the shoemaker mean by "*a man was born to toil*"?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus** **?** What does the candle symbolize according to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter?

**?** What do you think is man's toil according to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, following the shoemaker's reply?



### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text**

"...as long as the candle is burning, it is necessary to toil!" If your candle is still burning, if you are still here, your job is not done!

## EPILOGUE

In this apparently simple story, the shoemaker teaches Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, and all of us, a most important lesson. As long as the candle is burning there is work to be done and fixing is possible. The candle is a symbolism for the human soul – "*A candle of God is the soul of a man...*" (*Proverbs 20:27*). As long as our soul is burning within us, we can fix what we have to fix. There is never too late to leave your mark, to make a difference, to find your call, to find yourself, to be yourself, and to fix what you have to fix.

### **Appendix**

#### **Hilda Rozic's Translation**

It occurred to an eminent pious Rabbi (Rabbi Yisrael Salanter) who arrived in a big city, during winter, past midnight. All the residents were asleep already and only a feeble ray of light could be spotted coming from a sole cellar window. The Rabbi directed his steps to that place. Inside—an indigent shoemaker was cobbling shoes by a candle that was about to go out. The Rabbi said to the shoemaker: Rabbi, it's long past midnight and you're tired; your candle is going out; why don't you go to sleep and rest?

—Yet, what can I do different, Rabbi, was his answer. Man is born to toil and as long as the candle burns, one ought to toil.

At this point, the Rabbi asserted: if so for material and menial work, thus the more so — for God's worship.