FROM THE RABBI

The great scholar of Jewish history Louis Ginzberg, in his book Students, Scholars and Saints (1928), tells this story about the famous Rabbi, Yisroel Salanter of Vilna, which took place in the year 1848:

*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 courage enough 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 with great joy his Creator for having found him worthy to be the instrument of saving so many lives.*

It is comforting to know that no less a personage than the great Rabbi Yisroel Salanter would approve and endorse the cautious approach that our Temple Shalom community is taking to ensure the preservation of health and life in our current Covid 19 crisis—may we all stay healthy and strong. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter is revered and loved in both the Yeshiva world and across all the Jewish denominations as the founder of the Mussar movement. The Mussar movement transformed the 19th Century Yeshiva from a sterile academic institution to one that emphasized ethics and character alongside rigorous Talmudic scholarship—an emphasis that continues to influence both the Yeshiva world and liberal/progressive Rabbinic institutions to this day. I will leave you with a beautiful Yisroel Salanter teaching:

*When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I could not change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I could not change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I’ve come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world.*

Rabbi Sruli