

“Whole Clothes and Torn Hearts”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In an age rife with religious violence, what is our essential spiritual task? Rabbi Yisroel Salanter explained it this way: too often, he said, religious people are concerned about their own bodies and other people's souls. In truth, we should be concerned about our own souls and other people's bodies.

To feed those who are hungry, to clothe those who are naked, to bring medicine and supplies to areas of the world bereft of help and hope — these are the central mitzvot of our time. In a wracked world, it is not enough to live peacefully; we must also seek peace. Communities that do not look beyond themselves are trapped in spiritual solipsism. Progress is marked by compassionate action and deepened humility.

Complacency is the enemy and kindness the aim. A man once asked Rebbe Menahem Mendle about his work in the community of Vitebsk: “When I arrived there” he responded, “I found torn clothes and whole hearts. Now it is the opposite.” If our hearts break a bit more and the world is made more whole, we will have done God's work, and earned God's blessing.