

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 10

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Knowing the greatness of Mussar study and the merits it brings to those who engage in it, R' Salanter made a point of instructing his disciples to encourage as many others as possible to study it regularly.

He said at one point in a letter to those disciples (who included some of the greatest sages and most august personalities of his day) that he wanted to "stir (their) sense of righteous purpose ... to enthusiastically strengthen and encourage Mussar study" among the masses.

He argued that that would work better than rebuking people and telling them where they're off-the-mark on their own, as that's nearly always a losing proposition. Because one would have to be pure himself to point to others' faults without them turning around and pointing out the speaker's own, and who among us dares claim to be pure himself? It's also better than rebuke because few people are willing to take admonishment from anyone (pure or otherwise) anyway, given the temper of the times.

His point is that one could avoid that by simply suggesting that individuals study Mussar on their own regularly, in reasonable expectation that most people who would do that would also take a number of things there to heart, and change their ways on their own.

R' Salanter then (quite cleverly) compared suggesting to others that they study Mussar regularly to someone who'd offer a poor person a job rather than handing him or her charity each time it would be needed, as studying Mussar on one's own would "feed" his soul regularly rather than sporadically and would allow him the healthy pride he'd derive from improving himself.

Finally, R' Salanter stressed just how praiseworthy anyone who'd encourage others to delve into Mussar regularly would be. After all, wouldn't the new adherent's merits be accredited to the one who encouraged him to study Mussar? And in point of fact, isn't R' Salanter himself deserving of all the accumulated merits of those who encouraged those others, as well as of those who began to study Mussar otherwise?

Indeed, he's worthy of all that and more. And so we end this section with the prayer that R' Salanter's righteousness always be cited as a blessing, and that we ourselves merit taking his advice.

To that end, we'll now move on to discuss his famous letters to his disciples which will take on some of the points we've already made here and others.

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