

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There's simply no comparison between regular, lengthy, in-depth study and the occasional, quick, superficial kind. Of course, sometimes we don't have a choice, as reality always beckons and we often have to settle for the less-than-ideal. Nevertheless, R' Salanter emphasized that we would have to set aside a specific amount of time to delve seriously into Mussar works if we're to really benefit from it.

Many of us set aside specific times -- early in the morning, perhaps, before the day begins, in the course of the day here and there, or at the end of day -- to delve into Talmud, Halacha, Tanach, Jewish Thought, and more. R' Salanter's innovation was to suggest that we set aside regular times for serious and prolonged Mussar study, too.

That hadn't been done until his time: some who'd be inclined would pick up a Mussar work at random when they were unable to study anything else, others would delve into favorite Mussar books in the course of the month of Elul or the Days of Atonement, others would be moved to delve into them when approaching milestones in their lives (like marriage, childbirth, or the like), or just on a whim. But R' Salanter's point was that if we're ever to grow we'd need to delve into such works regularly, seriously, and at length.

There are a couple instances when we're resistant to Mussar study, R' Blazer pointed out, citing R' Salanter's teaching. Sometimes we lapse into certain sins so often and with such abandon that the sins themselves "numb the heart and turn it to stone". That's to say that our growing blasé about the sin on one level, but also knowing only too well how wrong it is in our hearts, throws us into such a state of inner conflict that we just close ourselves off to what we're doing in self-defense.

Here's what someone in that state would have to do even before approaching the Mussar works that would help, R' Salanter points out. He'd have to delve into regular Torah study beforehand and pray to G-d for help "in a spirit of humility and submission". That will "soften one's heart and enable him to be touched" by what the Mussar works he'd then delve into would teach him, R' Salanter assures us.

The other instance in which we'd be resistant to serious Mussar study would be when we're so consumed by business or professional interests that we'd imagine we simply haven't the time to study Mussar. Such a person should set aside time on Shabbos for Mussar study, R' Salanter suggests, when he'd already be away from the pressures of work. And he should take some time -- even not a lot of it -- in the course of the week to review what he'd concentrated on the previous

Shabbos. That would solidify the ideas he'd dwelt on already and implant them in his heart.

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