OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 7

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

People who strive for excellence of one sort or another sometimes despair or even lose hope. After all, they have their ideals of how things should be done, they strive for that, and (being the sort of people they are) they often succeed. But because they too have their limitations, they sometimes fail to a degree. When that happens more than they think it should, the light in their eyes and heart starts to dim, possibilities seem to wane, and they become dejected. That's all the more so true of those who strive for spiritual excellence who have the loftiest of expectations and the most clear-cut vision of right and wrong.

R' Salanter recognized all that and took pains to prevent it. He encouraged us all to indeed strive for spiritual excellence and to be idealistic, but he adjured us to remember that losing one's perspective could be fatal for one's basic spiritual well-being. So he offered the following,

We're to know that change and achievement happens by degrees. As such, even if we'd have failed to make a particular trait a veritable, permanent part of our being, we're to nevertheless know that something of that trait has already imprinted itself onto our soul in the process. Each concentrated effort to focus on a trait we'd like to adopt, and every attempt to focus on a detail of it and take it to heart, embeds itself into the heart and plants seeds (albeit slow growing seeds sometimes, the truth be known).

His further point is that in fact the effort is cumulative: each success builds on the ones before it, and the lot of them form a firm basis for change. And while the trait we want to assimilate may not yet have come to fruition, its opposite which we'd want to eradicate, would more likely than not have been undone (and so, for example, while I may not become the charitable person I want to be, I may very well be less and less harsh when asked for a contribution).