

# OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 2

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Sometimes we just gnaw away and quickly swallow what we eat, and other times we chew, savor, mull over, and ingest. That's true of how we read, too -- Mussar literature included. R' Salanter recommended that we read Mussar works slowly, intently, emotionally, consciously, and what with he referred to as being "activated".

"It used to be that when someone studied a Mussar work in the past," R' Blazer (R' Salanter's disciple, if you recall) reports, "that he'd either read it" as a Torah scholar would, with "a Talmudic chant", or "he'd simply read it silently and assiduously". But R' Salanter knew that neither approach would elicit the sort of Fear of Heaven that one would need in order to take the material to heart -- which was the whole point, at bottom -- nor would it "ignite the heart by awakening the soul and humbling the spirit".

After all, it wasn't knowledge per se that was called for when reading Mussar works. Knowledge of what to do or not do alone "will never fill a person's soul with (the sort of) unrest and apprehension" one would need if he's to be moved enough to change his being from spiritual mediocrity to excellence. One would need to study the text passionately, so as to "stir the soul".

How exactly would we do that? By starting off "with a sincere heart" (i.e., by setting out to take in what's said in humility and earnestly), he says; and by reading with a "mournful voice" and "with lips aflame" (i.e., animatedly). We should dwell on what we read and imagine the implications of our failings. R' Salanter compared it to being moved by music: one can become elated by music just as much as he can be moved to tears by it; as such one was to read Mussar works with that in mind so as to achieve deep effect and truly personal reactions.

"His heart will be set aflame" in the process if the reader follows through on this advice, "his spirit would become unsettled and restless, his senses would be electrified", and as a result "the words will take root in his heart of hearts, and he'd be implanted with the (sort of) Fear of Heaven" one would need to be changed for the better.

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