

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We need to know where we've already done well and where we've fallen short if we're to achieve spiritual excellence. That's to say, what to leave aside and what to go on with. R. Salanter's next innovation touches on that and more.

R. Salanter pointed out that the greatest Mussar texts -- such as *The Path of the Just*, *The Duties of the Heart*, *The Gates of Repentance*, *The Ways of the Righteous*, etc. -- brought together all the verses and Talmudic statements about particular character traits in order to make it easier for us to know the Torah perspective on each one.

He advised us to take advantage of that fact so as to focus our attention on a particular trait that we find ourselves not living up to, and to concentrate on what's said about it.

What that comes down to us is honing in on a single negative factor in your being -- egocentrism, perhaps, or anger, laziness, a lack of gratitude, etc. -- seeing it for what it is from a Torah perspective and how it colors your personality, and setting out to eliminate it. The same goes, by the way, for traits you'd need to incorporate or bolster (like the opposite of the above), R. Salanter underscores.

In fact, just setting aside time to reflect upon the different sides of your personality, taking each to heart one by one, and considering what needs to stay and what should go by the waysides, is half the battle. As only someone who takes himself seriously enough to faithfully and fully consider his actions, attitudes, and motivations can ever hope to better himself.

And we're assured that we'll come to rectify that trait "by fervently repeating the statement about it as enunciated in Mussar texts, R. Blazer reports R. Salanter as saying, and by doing that until (we) will have rectified and amended our failing. His other point, understand, is that once that fault has been dealt with thoroughly, you're to move on.

Certain Mussar themes need to be dwelt on again and again, all of one's life, though, as they're so all-encompassing and fundamental to one's spiritual well-being. They include the bolstering of one's fear of heaven, always taking an account of one's actions and attitudes, reflecting on our life's mission, and the like. Those sorts of meta-themes need to be reflected upon day after day. One can never be sure he'll have reached his potential in those areas, so we're to always reflect on the Traditional statements about them, and to never consider ourselves as fully successful as far as they're concerned.

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