

# OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 17

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

A true human being is someone "whose ways and concerns are calculated by an untainted mind", R' Salanter says in letter 17.

That's to say that at bottom -- and ideally -- we're not what we do or care for; we're meant to be the product of the thoughts that go into them when we think things through clearly and with uncorrupt intentions. For our minds were meant to lead rather than to follow our natures. Lesser beings (including much of humanity, unfortunately) don't work that way: they are the products of their instincts and of less-than-noble ideas.

Sadly, those of us who strive for spiritual excellence are often in conflict, for we're also often less than our ideal selves. Our all too real baser instincts often push us in one direction, while our holy yearnings pull us in the other. And sometimes we tend to take shortcuts in our service to G-d when goaded on by our instincts, arguing that this or that Torah- demand "goes against our grain" and "doesn't work for us" as we'd put it today.

But R' Salanter reminds us that the point of the matter is that "it's not enough to only observe what fits in with your proclivities and to disregard what you find difficult". Doing that "only enables (your) nature to follow its course" which isn't enough and even lazy. "The foundation of one's service to G-d is to observe and perform (one thing or another) even what your heart doesn't want to". We're expected to be brave, to expand our horizons, and to follow the dream of achieving spiritual excellence.

But it isn't enough to be aware of our thoughts and intentions -- we need to know that there are some very strong and unholy unconscious leanings hidden in our hearts, as we'll illustrate.

Imagine a Torah scholar who studies assiduously day and night for many years, in pursuit of true humanity and spiritual excellence. And imagine that he suddenly needed to put his studies aside and work the whole day long. He might suddenly find that he prefers working over studying, and might utterly drop even his free-time studies altogether -- and all because, unknown even to himself, he'd had a latent love of material luxuries (and not just material comfort). His whole life would be overturned, and his humanity would be affected deeply and negatively.

The only thing for anyone to do to avoid such unwanted effects as well as to continue to grow in his or her humanity, R' Salanter concludes, is to study Mussar regularly so as to know his heart, and to keep his ultimate goals aligned with his life.

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