

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

"My primary objective for you," R' Salanter wrote in this, his first letter to the many disciples he left behind in Vilna, "has been for you to take my teachings to heart and to reflect upon them deeply". For like any great teacher, he wanted his lessons to be larger than himself and to thrive in his absence.

But he seems to have believed that he'd failed in that. For instead of embracing his teachings, he accused them of having quickly forgotten what he'd said. Why would they have, he asked rhetorically? Simply because like the rest of us, they too seem to have overlooked the fear of Heaven and the sorts of things that Mussar touches on, and to have concentrated upon material needs and penchants.

(Now, we frankly doubt that R' Salanter's disciples, who were indeed fervent students of Mussar, disregarded their master's lessons; and we believe that R' Salanter was speaking rhetorically. Nonetheless, the point of the matter is that if that's at all true of them, how much more so is it true of us!)

But that's absurd, R' Salanter went on to say. After all, don't most of us think long and hard about lesser things as a rule? Don't business people consider the matter at hand from every angle before they enter into a project, and analyze the risks versus the advantages? And don't they consult with friends and consultants before setting out on a new venture?

And don't serious Torah scholars delve deeply into their areas of concentration, considering the halachic implications of the subject they're delving into from every angle, and asking greater sages for their insights? Would any of them jump to conclusions? Of course not, he implies.

Yet that's not the case when it comes to the things that Mussar touches upon -- what we're to strive for in this life and who we're to be. For "Mussar study demands that we deliberate upon and explore all of man's ways and deeds", R' Salanter points out, and thanks to it we can overcome the yetzer harah and learn to truly fear G-d. We should be just as serious about its study as we would about how to succeed in business or how to arrive at appropriate Torah conclusions. Yet we aren't.

What we all need to do when we study Mussar, he maintains, is to take it just as seriously as those other studies, and to see to it that the points made in Mussar texts enter our hearts and make deep impressions upon our beings. But the truth be known, we're lazy, R' Salanter goes on to say, and we don't take the time to do that.

What is one to do, then, given that it's so easy to lapse into spiritual mediocrity, and in face of the fact that we tend to slacken off on what we'd need to do to improve ourselves?

The best thing for his disciples to do in these dark, crude times when Mussar study and ethics in general seem to have been abandoned, and when we "stand so very far away from the principle purpose for which we were created", R' Salanter said, would be to encourage the masses to study Mussar regularly (see "R' Salanter's Innovations [10]" above). That would enable his disciples to not only accrue the merit of having done that itself, but to also engage in its study more themselves (in preparation for their lectures).

And he suggested that his students meet regularly for several Shabbos afternoons to figure out between themselves how to convince lay people to regularly delve into Mussar. (The lesson the rest of us can derive from his point, by the way, is this. R' Salanter adjured his disciples to divide these organizational duties fairly, to be polite with each other when they meet, to be serious about their goal, and to follow the majority opinion rather than to assert one's own will over others. This is the wise counsel that all who work for the benefit of the greater community should take to heart.)

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