

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 11-12

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We'll be combining two of R' Salanter's letters here (11 and 12), both of which are short but touch upon themes we'd already addressed in new ways. The first is unusual in that it was clearly addressed to some of R' Salanter's closest "friends and companions", given that he signed only his first name to the letter which he never did with his other correspondences.

He asked them to first encourage each other in their efforts to persuade the masses to study Mussar, and to then seek the support of the great rabbinic leaders with the assumption that that will clearly pave the way for success. (The truth be known, while a number of the greatest scholars of the time did encourage Mussar study, others did not for various reasons that are beyond the scope of our concerns here, and which partially explains the difficulties the Mussar Movement encountered.)

He added that they were to remember that by encouraging others to study Mussar they were "conferring merit upon the community" by giving them a chance to improve themselves that way, and that they weren't to take that lightly. After all, without the fear of Heaven, which is a major element of Mussar, one's Torah studies and mitzvahs are "mechanical and nearly without any spiritual content". So they were very fortunate to have had the "magnificent gift from the Almighty" that is the mitzvah of spreading Mussar study fall into their laps.

And the second letter was written to elaborate on the topic of bolstering a community's Beis Midrash and, in the process, of "support(ing) its 'neglected little sister'", the Mussar House. Providing Mussar Houses would enable a "sensitive soul to be moved enough to enter" one when he's inclined to grow and draw close to G-d.

Ever the teacher, R' Salanter reminds his disciples here to not pressure others to do everything at once when it comes to all of this. His disciples were to be "flexible rather than obstinate" -- "easygoing in the demands (they) make of" others. "Press too hard", he warns them, "and you will repulse (those you hope to influence) and turn them away from Mussar".

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