

# OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 13-14

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We'll once again be combining two of R' Salanter's letters here (13 and 14). The first one addresses a correspondent who thought it would be wrong for most of us to step into a Mussar House. We'd be taken by others as being already refined if we did that, he reasons, when most of us aren't, and we'd thus make matters worse when we'd be seen to be the sinners and faulty people most of us are.

We're better off not going and avoiding the disillusionment that would follow.

But R' Salanter says that his perspective is off the mark. A Mussar House isn't for the more-refined -- it's for the rest of us who need to better ourselves right here and now. In fact, "studying in a Mussar House isn't a virtue (in itself) nor does it indicate (that the person going there is on) a high level". At bottom "It's an out and out requirement" for each one of us "infected with iniquity and sin" to be there.

In a manner of speaking, a Mussar House is a sort of "hospital" for the spiritually ill rather than a "spa" for the righteous, his point is. So it's only right that we head there as soon as we find ourselves ailing. But the only reason we don't head straight to a Mussar House in the event of a spiritual emergency when we'd have no compunctions about going to a hospital if we were ill is that we're intensely focused on our physical well-being and only minimally focused on our spiritual well-being. It would behoove us all to run to a Mussar House and pour out our heart and soul there!

Letter 14 speaks about the days leading up to the Days of Judgment. "It's well known that in days long gone everyone was gripped by fear at the outset of the month of Elul" at the very thought of the Days of Judgment. Even the people who wouldn't ordinarily direct their hearts toward piety the rest of the year would be frightened then.

The reason that's no longer so, R' Salanter asserts, is because most of us just "go through the motions" when it comes to our service to G-d anyway and ape what others do, and also because the ways of the world tend to becloud our minds now so we've lost our sensitivity toward such things. But the primary thing is that we're simply too physically centered, so, once again, it would behoove us to concentrate on Mussar study.

He points out in fact that while "it is possible to serve G-d on a high level without Mussar study" it's nonetheless impossible "to change one's nature from wrongfulness to righteousness without it" as we'd all need to do.

Returning to the theme of the Days of Judgment he concludes with the insight that "the sages ordained that everyone set aside time to study Mussar and things relevant to the fear of Heaven (this time of the year) because the more one realizes the magnitude of Yom Kippur, the greater will be his level of teshuvah." And he advises his students to gather together a minyan so that "each person there could pour out his soul to G-d" that He might "pierce some small hole in the steel barrier" between Himself and us, and have mercy.

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