

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 18-19

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There have always been specific traditional ways of studying the Talmud and of extracting and innovating new Jewish practices and rules accordingly, R' Salanter says in Letter 18. But "since the Talmud's final redaction, that practice has been shut off from us", says R' Salanter, and we can no longer "render halachic rulings from the Torah text itself using the (well known) 'thirteen exegetical principles' that were transmitted (to us) at Mount Sinai". And even the best of us are forced to deduce practical rulings from the Talmud alone rather than its sources.

And we only come to that after mastering the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the works of major halachic decisors, and -- most importantly -- the Talmudic commentary of Tosafos, R' Salanter adds. Only then, and only after also serving true Torah scholars, can we be said to have arrived at the requisite level of competence to extract Talmudic principles and to truly understand "true Torah".

Now, the astute reader would wonder what R' Salanter's point is here, given that this information is well known and has been presented to us by other great Talmudists who preceded him. In other words, why would we need to hear this from this great master of Mussar who, while admittedly a master Talmudist, nonetheless has other things to teach us?

Because he makes the point that not only is one's mind honed by this sort of study, but "you (also) understand your personality better thanks to it" and you can thus "overcome your subjective inclinations" and lead your mind down the correct path. That point wasn't made by his predecessors. But you can only do that, R' Salanter adds characteristically, by means of the fear of Heaven, and by being "polite and courteous" with the people you're studying Torah with.

Touching himself upon the difference between standard Torah study and Mussar study, R' Salanter points out in Letter 19 that there are two sorts of knowledge: "theoretical" or "abstract", and "practical" knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is rooted in pure ideas and hunches or insights, while the practical sort is based on experience and on an accumulation of facts and a sense of history. And while even a young person can excel at theoretical knowledge if he's especially bright and creative, only an older, more experienced person can truly excel at practical knowledge.

Now, at bottom, true Torah study is rooted in theoretical knowledge -- as well as in the "sharp, straightforward analysis" based on logical proofs and a rigorous scrutiny of one's theories and their sources in the Talmudic and post-Talmudic texts spoken of above. But Mussar study and the

knowledge of personal betterment are rooted in practical knowledge.

Yet, given that everyone is "a world unto himself" whose path toward personal betterment must be specific to his own strengths and weaknesses -- including "the powers of his soul and intellect, his temperament and emotions, and his unique life-circumstances", R' Salanter underscores, we must know that we cannot depend on practical knowledge to help any single individual. Mussar study would teach us that that depends on deep wisdom and insight, and nothing less.

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