

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 22

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Someone who'd suffered the loss of family members in an outbreak of cholera wrote to R' Salanter asking about the Torah's attitude toward deep sadness and despondence in the face of such things, and R' Salanter responded in Letter 22.

The truth be known, several of the suggestions made here counter the modern view of the role of emotions in our inner lives. We tend to believe that emotions should be allowed to hold sway when they must and that they are not to be denied. But R' Salanter holds otherwise for the most part, and we'd do well to heed his sage insights.

He pointed out that the Torah asks us to consciously control our emotions (see Proverbs 16:32) at all times. As such, we're to be sad when someone dies, to be sure, but not for personal and maudlin reasons but rather for the fact that that individual can no longer serve G-d by fulfilling His mitzvahs in this world, for example.

It follows then that if the person who died was indeed righteous, R' Salanter adds, that we should rejoice over that and take solace in the fact that he'll now be receiving his reward in the Afterlife. Indeed given that, pure cold logic would seem to indicate that we shouldn't ever mourn when a righteous person dies yet, ironically, the Torah commands us to mourn when anyone dies -- righteous or otherwise. And we follow that dictate too because doing so is also another instance of controlling your heart's desires and subjugating your feelings to the Torah's prescriptions.

Later on in the letter R' Salanter offers another ironic insight along those lines. One would think that we should be despondent during the Days of Awe, since we're facing the future and we can never be sure of G-d's decisions for us. But he points out that instead "we're to serve G-d with boundless delight" then, too, as we always should, as joy is the bedrock of our Divine service (see Nechemiah 8:10). In fact there's a time for each and every emotion (see Ecclesiastes 3:1) to be sure, but we still and all must subject each to the Torah's expectations of us.

That's not to say that we should simply "resign ourselves to dying and do nothing to protect ourselves" against danger so as to avoid fear and tension. In the case of something like an epidemic (which prompted the original correspondence, recall) we should be proactive in fact. We're to follow doctors' orders since experience has proven that they know what we should do to avoid such things, and acquiescing to their dictates is yet another instance of controlling our emotions.

In any event, we're indeed to mourn the loss of our loved ones, but we're at least to take succor

from the fact that they're no longer in pain or suffering and are close to G-d's presence indeed.

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