

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 28

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

As any sensitive soul knows, it's far too easy to misjudge people -- even great sages. That will be the gist of R' Salanter's letter 28, as we'll see.

One of the most beloved of our sages has been Hillel, while one of the least is his counterpart, Shammai (also see R' Salanter's letters 20). In fact, our sages themselves tell us to "be humble like Hillel rather than stern like Shammai" (Shabbos 30b), seeming to prefer Hillel's demeanor over Shammai's. But R' Salanter makes the distinct point here that we misunderstand Shammai if that's our reaction to him, as he too was a caring, holy man -- even when he exhibited his characteristic starkness.

After all, how could it be that Shammai, who like all of the Sages who did all they could to perfect their characters and rise above any inborn character faults, would allow himself to be stern and unbending? We'd be hard pressed to believe that of any of our sages, let alone one who was a friend and colleague of Hillel, would not be the best person he could be.

But it comes to this, R' Salanter asserts (and once again we must advise the reader to consult the original Hebrew text to savor the brilliant ways he makes his points). Hillel and Shammai had two different approaches to serving G-d. Hillel argued that it was always important to act humble in one's service to G-d while Shammai argued that circumstances sometimes call for stern responses. In fact, as a rule Shammai was far from stern in his personal interactions -- after all, didn't he teach us to "Greet everyone cheerfully" (Pirkei Avot 1:5)?

So Shammai certainly wasn't blameworthy when he exhibited sternness and strictness. He did that when he deemed it necessary to rather than when he "lapsed" into it.

(In fact, then, a valuable lesson for us is that Shammai could be said to be even greater than Hillel in his humility, in that while Shammai was humble and loving by nature also, he nonetheless subsumed his natural tendency to be that way to his understanding that sometimes one must forgo his personal tendencies when circumstances require it. We can also learn from him that every human trait can be applied to one's service to G-d, depending on circumstances and intentions.)

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