

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Apparently R' Salanter's disciples weren't encouraging others to study Mussar as much as he'd hoped they would, so he addresses the issue again here.

R' Salanter starts off by terming Mussar "a body of (Torah) wisdom unlike any other", since it's the only one that each and every Jew must delve into. For whereas women are largely exempt from many other areas of Torah study, since "the challenges of daily life and its distractions" (i.e., raising a family and maintaining a household) excuse them from it; and whereas many men who are distracted by their professions are exempt from Torah study (for the most part, though they'd need to set aside time for it every day), that's not true of Mussar. Everyone is charged with its study every single day.

For, isn't it true, he offers as explanation, that "in an instant a person can lapse into very many sins, with nothing to stop him" if he isn't aware of the dangers of his ways? How then can one "gird himself with the strength and fortitude needed to prevail?" he asks. By studying Mussar assiduously and seriously, he answers.

For doing that helps to "purify your thoughts," (since you'd be dwelling on lofty thoughts then) and will provide you the sort of "guiding light" you'd need to achieve spiritual excellence. And not only will it help prevent you from lapsing into sin -- it would also prompt you to do more good. He also underscores the fact that we today need to be encouraged in that all the more so, since we're so tempted and sin is so much more readily available to us.

In fact, R' Salanter maintains that we're driven today especially by two delusions that detract from our giving thought to the Afterlife: that we're immortal, and that this world is all we have. As such, we should ask G-d for guidance in seeing the truth of things; that we be granted the wherewithal to serve Him in this world, which was created just for His service; and that we prevail over those delusions.

He wonders if we can really expect to continue living, given our measly ethical stature and the fact that we aren't achieving our life's goal. And he points out that indeed, our continued existence is a sort of miracle in light of that (much the way we wouldn't expect anything not living up to its own specific objectives to go on).

It's thus incumbent upon actual students of Mussar -- R' Salanter's reminds his disciples -- "to encourage those weaker than themselves" to study Mussar. For the solution lies in that alone, as

Mussar study is indispensable in the struggle with the yetzer harah. After all, if you became ill, you'd go to a doctor or a hospital for help as soon as possible, wouldn't you? he makes the point. It only makes sense then to delve into Mussar for your spiritual ills. And since anyone who loves someone who suffers from such an ailment would be the first to encourage his care, his disciples (and we) should encourage everyone to apply the salve of Mussar study to each wound, R' Salanter argues.

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