

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 30:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

R' Salanter then sets out a major principle in interpersonal relations from a Mussar perspective. What especially matters when it comes to your own spiritual needs as opposed to your concern for others' is this, he says. While you're to be as stringent with yourself as you can be in order to be the sort of person you want to be, you're paradoxically to be as easygoing with others as possible to achieve that same end.

So, for example, while you yourself should strive for the highest degree of humility and self-discipline, for example, you're to nonetheless show others all the honor due them and to be generous and hospitable with them. (So while for example you might admirably think that the manifest holiness of Shabbos should make one reluctant to eat -- after all, would one dare eat in the presence of The King while in His Court and not be a cur? -- at the same time, it would be utterly base of you to deny your guests good food in honor of that same Shabbos.)

Wouldn't it be hard to contradict yourself and wouldn't you be a hypocrite to act that way, R' Salanter asks hypothetically? But he points out that we contradict ourselves many times over and in many situations in all innocence without compromising our morals. Consider how often we purposefully and commendably remember and forget things according to circumstances (as when we remember how kind someone has been to us when we greet them so as to be sociable and friendly, yet we purposefully forget just then how disrespectful of us they'd been on a couple of occasions for that same reason).

Then addressing the all-important question of how we're to act when we're young as opposed to when we're older when it comes to one's personal growth, R' Salanter maintains the following. We're to train ourselves to set out to actively rectify our faults from the first when we're young (when it's easier to be idealistic and to set long-range goals for yourself), yet we're to strive to at least subdue our untoward inclinations when we're older (which we'll find easy enough to do by then, as anyone who's old enough knows that he or she must do in order to succeed in the public realm).

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