

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 30:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

R' Salanter expands upon the idea of using our emotions to grow with this discussion of one of his greatest innovations -- the use of "*hitpa'alut*". (R' Salanter actually offered a rather lengthy digression at this point in the letter which we'll present at the end of it so as to allow for easier comprehension.)

The word *hitpa'alut* itself translates as "setting oneself in motion" or better yet *motivating* oneself, and it comes to this. R' Salanter taught that the best way to instill good traits within yourself is to read Mussar works attentively and to repeat phrases in them that especially speak to your heart or directly address issues you're working on and to do that out loud slowly, mournfully and melodically. (There are even melodies from R' Salanter himself and his students that obviously and unfortunately can't be cited here.) That's to say that you're to recite those phrases *emotionally* rather than intellectually in order to be moved by them rather than just to know what they say.

He goes on to say that while your intellect enables you to "uncover the hidden-most secrets of wisdom" and allows you to "seek and inquire, and to clarify things", your emotions serve to "open the locked-off rooms of your heart and ... to (fully) understand what you already understand intellectually which (nonetheless) hasn't entered the inner core of your heart".

That's to say that while your intellect allows you bring all the raw truths you can muster to your doorstep, your emotions allow you to bring them in and take them to heart; and while the former is certainly important, the latter is *vital* if you're ever to be the person you hope to be. And the only reliable tool for doing that, R' Salanter's point is, is *hitpa'alut*. It alone can "bring you to the point where you only wish is to do what's good in G-d's eyes".

But you'd have to concentrate so deeply on your practice of *hitpa'alut* that you come to the point where "the focus of all of your energy" is so thorough that "all of your other feelings are forgotten and undone".

R' Salanter indicates that all of us tend to do this, albeit it on an unconscious level. We all tend to imagine good or bad traits we'd like to instill within ourselves and to concentrate on them so deeply that we reinforce our desires for it profoundly. He discusses for example our tendency to bolster our overblown egos time and time again by affirming our positive traits and denying our negative ones to ourselves. After all, isn't this a form of *hitpa'alut*, too? Don't we recite phrases to ourselves emotionally and intensely that favor egotism (rather than the noble trait of humility)? We should all the more so strive to do this with good and laudable traits.

He ends this part of Letter 30 with words of encouragement, offering that none of your efforts when it comes to *hitpa'alut* will ever have been in vain, even if you don't notice any change at first. For your efforts will be like the thousands of tiny drops of water falling on a huge stone that -- in the process of time and with steady practice -- will invariably wear away the stone and make a deep impression upon it.

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