

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 30:8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Returning to his poignant word of warning that at bottom we'll "always be human" despite our best efforts to always do what's right, R' Salanter adds that we'll always be "encumbered by emotions" and suffer from an "inability to detach our mind from them". As such, he adds, we "don't have the capacity to grasp true wisdom", sad to say.

Is there no hope? Are we left to stew in our own false perceptions? No, R' Salanter reasserts. We're to do our best with what we have, as G-d expects us to. For the Torah was given to human beings, with all of our foibles, and we're to use our (imperfect) minds to the best of our abilities. One of the ways we do that is by learning how to judge the quality of the arguments offered for or against things we're considering -- as well as the quality of those making the arguments.

Our sages argued vehemently and at great length, and about very important things. At a certain point the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued for three whole years about a particular point of law. To be sure, not a single sage there argued all of that time in order to impose his opinion on the others alone. They argued in order to defend the truth as he honestly and impartially viewed it (see Eruvin 13b).

Which side was actually right, though? They couldn't both be, could they, despite the honesty and sincerity and purity of their intentions? Yet in a certain sense, they both were, as a voice from Heaven was heard to say that "both (opinions) were the words of the living G-d" -- both were on G-d's mind, if you will, when He created the world. It's just that one of the opinions offered applied more so in that particular instance while the other one would apply in another.

The important point for our purposes is that the intentions of all concerned would have to have been pure from the first to be in that category, and the same is true of our decisions, too. When we set out to determine the truth of things in all innocence and with the best of intentions, then despite our very human tendency to be swayed one way or another by our emotions, we'll nonetheless be accredited with having arrived at the best of all truths we could have because of those pure intentions. And our words will somehow likewise be "words of the living G-d".

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