

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 31:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We now come upon R' Salanter's final letter in this series, and it begins by introducing the idea of straightforward and logical mitzvahs as opposed to the more "inexplicable" and mysterious ones.

The former are termed mishpatim in Hebrew and include prohibitions against things that one wouldn't need the Torah to tell us to avoid, like murder, idol worship, lewdness, robbery and the like, since they're inherently and manifestly wrongful. The latter type are termed chukim and include directives to avoid eating un-kosher food, to not wear sha'atnez, and the like that are inscrutable and seem beyond the pale (see Yoma 67b).

R' Salanter makes the point here that logic would seem to indicate that one would be more culpable if he didn't observe the more open and above-board mishpatim since they're clearly problematic (we'll return to this theme later in the letter). But he then explains how hard it is to determine just what sort of transgression is more culpable than another, and which mitzvah is more meritorious.

R' Salanter refers to Rambam as an explanation. Rambam declares that while each one of us has his or her good and bad points, those who are mostly good are deemed "righteous" while those who are mostly sinful are deemed "wrongful". But he warns that there's no easy arithmetic determination for that, as certain good deeds far outweigh certain bad ones, and vice versa. Indeed, only G-d Himself can determine the value of each (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:1-2), and hence only He knows who's truly righteous or not.

But how are we to know just which of our sins are more consequential and ominous than others so that we might at least avoid them if we can't avoid all sins?

R' Salanter offers that while there are many determinants of that in the Tradition, one we could depend on readily is the following. The more "fruits" (i.e., consequences and offshoots, either negative or positive) an action bears, the weightier it is (see Kiddushin 40a). So we'd want to avoid especially consequential sins and be sure to perform especially consequential mitzvahs.

Another principle to keep in mind is that the more difficult it would be to avoid a sin, the more meritorious we'd be shunning it, and the more difficult it would be to perform a mitzvah the greater the reward for doing it (see Pirkei Avot 5:26). So we should at least avoid committing sins that are easy enough to avoid and perform the mitzvahs that are easy enough to do.

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