

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

All of G-d's creations must "hope for His generosity and await His mercy", R' Salanter avers. And they should hope that He'd "grant us merit", given how difficult it is to be the sort of people we're capable of being. What we should do is "try to emulate His ways as much as possible" -- especially His loving-kindness, which He exhibits throughout the universe and oftentimes without reason. And we should do all we can to "help the weak". This last letter that R' Salanter wrote specifically to his greatest disciples, makes the point that they (and we) should thus "help the weak" of character by spreading the word about the importance of Mussar study.

But the truth be known, none of us is straightforward, we all lack for understanding to one degree or another, and few among us truly fear Heaven. Who is it then that will help prevent the many wrongful who are always "ready to pursue each and every desire" from following through "on their schemes"? And even though "the cardinal principle of the Torah is to not be embarrassed in the face of scorers" when we reprimand them and encourage their better inclinations, we're conflicted about doing that. So what are we to do?

In order to help them we have to draw upon our own inner and perhaps inadequate Fear of Heaven, and overcome our inner shyness and hesitance. And we're to guide individuals to a Mussar House (see R' Salanter's Innovations 9) where they can bask in the light of refection and on the vision of betterment, study Mussar texts passionately and deeply, and grow.

For, without Mussar study, whatever we might do to better ourselves could very well not work. Our "character (would) continue to be corrupt", and there'd be little success in our onslaughts against the yetzer harah. Indeed, R' Salanter asserts, "If we don't turn to the all-encompassing remedy of Mussar study, there's (really) no place for Divine worship"!

The first thing to do is to know oneself -- one's makeup and tendencies. Next is to recognize in all honesty how far one is from attaining the lofty goals we were created to achieve in this world. And we're to then study Mussar assiduously enough so as to learn how to control our untoward urges as best as each one of us can -- taken our personal proclivities that we'd have come to understand. Then we "can emerge victorious" in the great inner struggle, and achieve personal perfection.

(Since this is the last of the five letters that R' Salanter wrote specifically to his best-known disciples, and his most important letters of all, we'll conglomerate and chose from his other correspondences from now on, and indicate by number which letter we'll be discussing.)

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