

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 30:5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Among other things, hitpa'alut prevents you from being "out of touch with your heart's innermost thoughts" about yourself, and from "being insensitive" to others, R' Salanter adds. After all, reciting Mussar phrases to yourself emotively and deeply that way can't help but keep the secret corners of your being open to reflection and change.

That's especially important for those of us who are exposed to the world and its coarsenesses to keep in mind, he says. We always face threats to our moral lives when it comes to our interactions with others. We find ourselves becoming jealous of others, for example, resenting them, slandering them, or even deceiving them, G-d forbid. So we'd especially do well to practice hitpa'alut at every opportunity to avoid that.

The truth of the matter is that none of us can ever be sure we won't lapse at any moment. Human nature, the vicissitudes of life, and G-d's own will are simply too unpredictable. For there are "natural forces" at play at any one moment, as R' Salanter terms them (i.e., ordinary circumstances), and extraordinary situations that are clearly products of "G-d's (inscrutable) decrees". And it's often not easy to know which is which.

Our free will is also of two sorts. There are out and out moral decisions we arrive at consciously, and there are others we arrive at intuitively that are rooted in our native senses of right and wrong (which can often go askew despite our best intentions). And G-d's judgments of us are likewise. He might judge us based on our actions according to the strict letter of the law, or He might base His judgment on His ultimate will to bestow benevolent goodness upon the world despite our actions.

The only response always available to us is teshuvah, of course. What is it, though, that can always prod us to do teshuvah? "A sense of one's shortcomings", R' Salanter responds. Having that "proves that we're alive and have feelings" -- that we're self-aware and sensitive enough to know what we have to do to better ourselves. His point is that engaging in hitpa'alut helps us to foster that sensitivity.

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