

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 6

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Written during the Ten Days of Repentance -- a time of action, the time of year most especially conducive to improving our ways, as he put it -- R Salanter offered a lot of sage advice in this first of his public letters (the first five having been addressed to his disciples). And as well find, it speaks to many things.

R Salanter first touches on this. Our true self, he says, is our inner spirit, (the part of us that) speaks, thinks, desires, and tries to fulfill our desires and not our bodies. It is what endures after death, and what will experience sublime delight by observing ... G-d's mitzvahs or suffer the dire consequences of disobeying Him. So it would do us well to guide the self toward betterment. (Consider the ramifications of his definition of our spirit! It's enlightening, but far beyond the scope of the subject at hand.)

Now, given that each self has its own quirks and distinctive qualities, each one of us will therefore be judged at life's end according to his own temperament and worldly circumstances. As such, the easier it is for someone to refrain from violating G-d's will given his makeup, the greater will be the consequences for him or her. And contrarily, the harder it would be for someone to observe a mitzvah because of his character and circumstances, the greater his reward for having done it. (So, for example, your having been wealthy in life will prove to be your undoing in the Afterlife if you weren't charitable; and your having been sickly will prove to be your saving grace if you didn't do much for others' sakes because you simply couldn't).

So we should obviously do what we can in our lifetimes to bolster our strengths and not reach beyond our capabilities. Before returning to this truism though, R Salanter focused on what we can do to better ourselves, and he started off by saying that the most important thing is to inculcate good habits in ourselves. But, how?

The best way is to use the methods that teachers use when teaching kids. A teacher first lays down the basics, has the students practice them again and again until they internalize them, and then he has them progress from there. The child then gets to the point where he or she no longer has to concentrate on each separate step, since it will have become embedded in his subconscious mind. That's the way we're to acquire good traits, R' Salanter says. In order for such a trait to become second nature we're to first make a conscious effort to inculcate it, and to reinforce it again and again. The result will be that in the process of time that earnest effort will make an impression on a subconscious level within your being, and you will have acquired that good trait.

R Salanter then makes the point that it would thus behoove each one of us to go to a Mussar House several times a week to do just that -- to reinforce what we learned beforehand, when we'd been there to concentrate on acquiring a desired trait, and to solidify it.

That's to say that we're to go there to take steps to slowly and repetitively work on acquiring good traits until it becomes a habit. If nothing else, R' Salanter adds, going regularly to a Mussar House will help us to avoid sins we could easily shun (thanks to being in such an environment on a regular basis). The other point is that since going there is a relatively easy thing to do, we'd at least not have to answer after our passing why we didn't do what we could easily have done in life to better ourselves.

Exceedingly important for our spiritual well being as well is what's termed altruistic Torah study (Torah Lishma). After all, what is Torah study but the knowledge of G-ds will, and what better way is there to come to it than altruistically?

One comes to that initially though a rigorous intellectual effort to determine the halachic requirement, but in the end it only comes your way by nullifying your will differentially. It, too, is relatively easy to come to, and should thus be striven for.

And since in point of fact, the most difficult thing to be is scrupulously honest in business (as anyone savvy enough in the ways of the world knows only too well) it's also important to concentrate on the halachot that touch on what's ethical or not in that area (as found in the Choshen Mishpat section of Shulchan Aruch). Depending on our circumstances and makeup, we'll be rewarded for our efforts in that realm, too.

While we should obviously take this all to heart when we approach Yom Kippur, as R' Salanter implies, the wise would take it to heart all the time.

Text Copyright © 2010 by [Rabbi Yaakov Feldman](#) and [Torah.org](#)