

# OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S LETTERS - PART 9

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

This short yet pithy letter addresses a fundamental issue in our inner lives: whether we fear G-d or not. For while any of us have accepted the idea loving G-d and appreciating His presence in our lives, most have avoided the fear of Him (or have concentrated on the more readily acceptable idea of being in awe of Him, which the Hebrew term for fear, *yirah*, also implies).

But honest to the bone as he always was, R' Salanter makes the point here that we're meant to literally fear G-d. He'll define the term for us here and tell us how to acquire it.

Why are we asked to "fear" Him, in fact? Wouldn't loving, appreciating, honoring, and accepting G-d's presence do? R' Salanter offers that fearing G-d holds a special power: it "constrains the forces of (illicit) desires". That is, it's very successful at holding back thoughts we have to do one wrongful thing or another, and at placing things in perspective. So, while loving G-d and the like is holy and precious, it often doesn't have that ability. In any event, since we're taught that G-d assesses everything we do and has us suffer the consequences of our misdeeds, we'd obviously do well to foster the fear of Him if we're to avoid sinning.

According to R' Salanter, fearing G-d then comes down to fearing His ability to have us suffer those consequences. But simply knowing about those consequences won't do the trick, R' Salanter counseled us. Only by "disturbing the soul", as he put it -- awakening and troubling it -- can one instigate it to take the reality of retribution to heart. "Only expanding upon" one's conscious knowledge of retribution "through vivid imaginings and fervent expression" of its reality works (see R' Salanter's *Innovations* 4).

For that along with gaining more and more knowledge about the dynamics involved, and reflecting upon one's own situation will "clear the stony field of (our) hearts", as he put it, and allow us to better ourselves.

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