

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Though born Yisrael Lipkin (in Zagare, Lithuania on November 3, 1810), R' Yisrael Salanter came to be identified with the city of Salant where he first achieved renown, and has thus come to be known as R' Salanter (i.e., "the one from Salant"). His father was R' Ze'ev Wolf Lipkin, who served as the rabbi of that town and later as the head of the Rabbinic Courts of Goldingen and Telz, Lithuania; and his mother was Leah Lipkin.

After his marriage to Esther Feiga Eisenstein in 1823, R' Salanter continued his studies under R' Hirsch Broda and most significantly under R' Yosef Zundel of Salant, who was a disciple of R' Chaim Volozhin, the primary disciple of the Gaon of Vilna. R' Zundel had a deep and enduring influence on R' Salanter's character; and it was he who had introduced R' Salanter to Mussar. In fact, the story goes that once R' Zundel was meditating in the forest, as he often did, when the young Yisrael followed behind him unobtrusively to see just what he could learn from his teacher in secret. Lost in his reflections, R' Zundel didn't notice anything until a certain point. He quickly turned around, pointed his finger at the young R' Yisrael, and called out ominously, "Concentrate on Mussar, Yisrael" if you want to know what I'm reflecting on and if you want to grow. The remark made a deep impression on the young man who took it as a sign from Above; and he remarked later on that that was the moment that inspired him to indeed study and concentrate on Mussar texts as his life's work.

R' Salanter was appointed Rosh Yeshiva of Tomchai Torah in Vilna about 1842, and from there he moved to Zarechya where he established his own yeshiva and lectured for three years. He left Lithuania in 1857 and moved to Prussia to recover from ill health, and in 1861 he began the publication of the Hebrew journal "Tevunah" which was devoted to rabbinical law and religious ethics, but which was discontinued after three months because of lack of funds.

R' Salanter lived for periods in Memel, Königsberg, and Berlin. He selflessly devoted the last decades of his life to strengthening Torah observance in Germany and Prussia. Toward the end of his life R' Salanter was summoned to Paris to organize a community among the many Russian Jewish immigrants, and he remained there for two years.

It was Mussar that propelled him to greatness, and Mussar that was his legacy. We'll discuss his thoughts on it and so much more in the course of this study, but we'll first present four well-known incidents in R' Salanter's Vilna period that especially point out the underpinnings of his righteousness and boldness of spirit.

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