

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER - PART 3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The two remaining defining stories show R' Salanter as a community leader, as a bulwark against intrusions upon the Tradition, and most significantly: as a man of principle.

Seeing the need to actually implement kindness, goodness, selflessness, and charity rather than just preach it, R' Salanter took a number of bold community moves. He founded a committee of townspeople to offer relief and rescue for those in need, and rented a hospital with 1,500 beds for those purposes. To their own great credit to be sure, the doctors there worked without compensation; but it was surely R' Salanter's inspiring example of selfless service that spurred them and the others there on in their acts of charity.

R' Salanter also had some 60-70 young people help with the rescue work on one level or another, and he appointed some of them as emergency workers who'd need to be ready to help anytime and anywhere they were called upon. And he made a point of reminding them that they'd need to be available to do their rescue work on Shabbos and the Holy Days just as much as on a weekday. For while their natural inclination would be to avoid doing those kinds of things on those holy days, the Halacha clearly dictates that one should sacrifice his own spiritual needs for the needs of the sickly and moribund, and R' Salanter underscored that principle.

In a whole other context, a "rabbinical seminary" (rather than a yeshiva) was established in Vilna in 1848 by the Lithuanian government that was to train rabbis -- but in decidedly untraditional ways. Certain Jewish anti-traditionalists (maskilim) suggested to the Lithuanian government that R' Salanter be offered leadership over it, given how innovative and principled he was. But R' Salanter refused the position, despite the fact that it would have brought him great personal prestige and would have enabled him to earn four times as much as he earned as a yeshiva dean.

He did that because -- despite the fact that great innovations were called for in Jewish education, practice, and scholarship in his age, as in our own -- he knew that the sorts of innovations being proposed for the rabbinic seminary in question would undermine traditional Judaism and make a mockery of Jewish scholarship. So he selflessly stood on principle again and ignored his own needs.

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