

OHR YISROEL, RABBI SALANTER'S INNOVATIONS - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Aside from being a man of principle, action, dedication, and of great moral depth, R' Yisrael Salanter was also an innovator. We'll delve into ten of his greatest innovations as enunciated by his eminent disciple, R' Yitzchak Blazer.

First off, let it be said that every undertaking needs a "mission statement" -- an account of the aim we hope to achieve said outright that's made readily available, and which is to be reiterated by those in pursuit of it again and again, in order to keep things in perspective. And that's all the more so true of lofty aims like spiritual excellence. What good would our wanting to attain it be without a clear statement of what would go into it, and a constant review of that statement? And so the first of R' Salanter's innovations was to have us read and reread Mussar texts every day, since they lay out that mission so well.

Why, though, did R' Salanter feel it necessary to institute that practice in a generation that seemingly knew the Jewish goal of spiritual excellence so well? Wasn't it so manifest to them that they could nearly read it in their coffee cups, let alone in the actions and words of their friends and neighbors in synagogue and all around them? R' Salanter clearly didn't think they could do without an out and out statement of goals.

As R' Blazer put it (and quite surprisingly to us, given how we idealize the past and think we alone are off the mark), "the fear of Heaven had fallen to the depths, service to G-d had weakened, and few paid attention to (the need to acquire) a lofty character" in his day, much as it has in our own. After all, everyone was fixated on making as much as he or she could (for some very legitimate reasons, as well as for some less admirable ones). And the yetzer harah had gotten the better of them. It became clear to R' Salanter that something had to be done, and that regular Mussar study was an answer, "since it was able to infuse life into dried-out bones ... to turn hearts of stone to hearts of flesh, and to revive a troubled spirit".

So he went from congregation to congregation, community to community, lecturing about the benefits of regular, serious Mussar study. And no one was to be exempt, be he or she a scholar or a householder, young or old, rich or poor, deeply religious or not -- "all are obliged to set aside times to study works (that focus) on the fear of Heaven and on Mussar". And he underscored that point until his dying day. While many great rabbis before him agreed that Mussar works were deeply effective in turning one around to righteousness, no one before R' Salanter had had the idea to press forward with a universal plan for its study.

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