

Rabbi Ury is a consultant of the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles. His study on *The Musar Movement* was recently published by Yeshiva University.

SALANTER'S ETHICAL TEACHINGS

Rabbi Israel Lipkin (1810-1883), later known as Salanter, was one of Lithuania's nineteenth-century outstanding Talmudic scholars¹ who turned to the study of *Musar*.² Following the example of Rabbi Zundel, Salanter studied in seclusion, maintaining little contact with the outside world. But as he turned to self-appraisal he realized that, his great scholarly attainments notwithstanding, he lacked a higher purpose in life. Thus he began his search for an ideal and a mission.³ Concerned that man's knowledge of what is right does not always lead to good conduct,⁴ Salanter, sought an effective moral education to lead man from knowing to *doing*. Rabbi Salanter's mission was to inculcate morality through *musar*.⁵ Consequently he worked for the betterment of the community rather than merely for his own perfection.⁶

Salanter traveled to many communities inside and outside of Russia. His lectures, or *schmu'essen*, to workers and business people, for example, were refreshingly different. Unlike his contemporaries, he did not dwell too much on piety. Rather, he concentrated on honesty in trade, respect for the rights of others, and the negative effects of indiscretion and slander. Salanter was a man of "rare purity of soul, simplicity and courage,"⁷ as well as a "man of the world."

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Salanter's ethical theory is based on theological and psychological foundations. His ethics, though flexible and humanistic in approach, is a religious ethic, adding light on certain aspects of Jewish morality,⁸ and developing a new psychological dimen-

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sion to *musar*, making it attractive to modern man.⁹ Although Salanter had advanced some psychoanalytical concepts, he would not have subscribed to such Freudian teachings that sex and pleasure are the major drives motivating man.

Salanter's *musar* comes much closer to Frankl's "Logotherapy," which considers man's search for meaning and purpose as the primary force in life.¹⁰ Frankl's theory, because it conceives of the meaning of human existence as something detected by man rather than invented by him, comes much closer to spirituality and even religion.¹¹ Man's search for an ultimate purpose in life, says Frankl, drives him on to meet challenges and to find meaning even in suffering. Frankl disagrees with other psychologists who believe that what man needs most is an inner equilibrium. In his theory, there is no place for a tensionless state in man. Quite the contrary, it is the power of spiritual dynamics, which is the tension in man towards a meaningful purpose to be fulfilled, which, according to Frankl, directs man to make life more than just biological existence.¹²

Salanter's *musar*, too, finds meaning in suffering, not suffering for its own sake but as a prerequisite for the search of meaning in spiritual satisfaction, joy and serenity — the ultimate goals of *musar*. Salanter conceived self-discipline in two stages. The first, *kevishat hamidot*, (conquering one's evil tendencies) is "bitter" and the second, *tikkun hamidot* (refining one's evil inclinations), is "sweet." And there is as much meaning in the "bitterness" as there is in the "sweetness," for the latter is predicated on the former.

Besides illuminating old moral concepts, and in addition to adding psychological components to *musar*, Salanter made an important contribution to Jewish ethical theory by synthesizing reason with emotion.¹³ Thus he offered a working synthesis of two opposing forces — the struggle between mind and heart.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MAN

Salanter espoused the traditional dualistic view that man, composed of body and soul, possesses innate forces of good and evil. Salanter, steering clear of ascetism and the condemnation of the

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flesh, retained the traditional doctrine that man has a *Yetzer Tov*, a disposition towards good, and a *Yetzer Ra*, an inclination towards evil. Salanter added depth to this doctrine by evolving a psychological theory that man's inner self is much more complex, than was formerly assumed.¹⁴ According to Salanter, man's inner self consists of two parts. There is the *vivid*, or conscious part, and a pale, or *dull*, non-conscious part. The latter, harboring primary instincts and acquired characteristics, is much stronger, than the former, which possesses reason, common sense, and purity of spirit.¹⁵

Salanter maintained that these two realms of the self correspond to the traditional conception of man. The *Yetzer Tov*, consisting of reason and the human soul, operates mainly through the conscious self, and the *Yetzer Ra* combining passions and evil spiritual inclinations, functions primarily within the non-conscious self.¹⁶

Observing that reason and knowledge do not, in fact, withstand the pressures of passion, Salanter was deeply concerned with this gap between knowing and doing.¹⁷ One of the probable causes for the failure of reason to regulate conduct, he asserted, is the strong influence that the subconscious drives have on man's behavior. An additional reason given why action lags behind moral knowledge is the vagueness which characterizes moral laws and moral situations, leaving many people confused as to what constitutes proper conduct.¹⁸ The vagueness of moral laws is strikingly evident when compared to other religious laws, whether in matters pertaining to ritual or civil and criminal justice.

One is not permitted to depend on his own judgment in such matters as dietary laws, for example, and consequently he submits to the rabbi's ruling. But in matters pertaining to relations between men . . . very few turn to the rabbi for counsel, though objective knowledge and guidance are most needed in making moral decisions.¹⁹

For example, when does a father, dealing with a rebellious teenage son, show patience and when anger? Or, when should one react strongly to an insult, and when overlook it? Ethical theory is vague in such matters and people tend to rely on their

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own subjective judgment, which, in many cases, may be incorrect.

Yet Salanter did not advance arbitrary and authoritarian ethics, for he believed that people should be given independence in making moral decisions. He never demanded from his students to follow a single theory or method of musar, for he believed in a plurality of *approaches*. Accordingly, the vagueness of the moral law may have appeared to Salanter as a blessing in disguise, for it allows individual choice of expression. However, this freedom of expression is not to be exercised indiscriminately; it must be regulated by musar.

Salanter was convinced that without full knowledge of musar, one is incapable of rendering fair ethical decisions.²⁰ Man, said Salanter, will solve his moral problems when he will learn how to continually make conscious efforts to regulate his conduct according to the teachings of musar.²¹

MUSAR AS A PROCESS

Salanter's musar is not mere study; it is a *process*, involving the student's emotive and cognitive faculties. His musar provides emotional stimuli sufficiently strong to overcome man's bad inclinations.²² Whereas ordinary study of musar text reaches only the conscious realm of the self, Salanter's musar affects the subconscious realm as well as the learner's reason and common sense. While reason alone may not be able to conquer emotions and passions, especially those residing at the subconscious level, reason, reinforced by emotion and ecstasy, may regulate and subdue passion and emotion.²³ The following brief analysis of the process of education will help us understand why Salanter felt compelled to revolutionize musar.

Our process of education operates along two basic lines of human development. The first is chronological or quantitative, ranging from nursery through graduate school. As the pupil progresses from grade to grade and from school to school, he gathers more information and acquires more knowledge. The second line of development is a qualitative form of growth. It is generally assumed that, as the learner ascends the educational

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ladder, he gains not only more knowledge but also better knowledge.

"Better" knowledge means fuller comprehension, more meaningful conceptualization, relevant association and organization of facts, ideas and theories. Generally speaking, these two lines of development ultimately converge to form a harmonious union as a result of the student's physical and mental maturation and learning. This is probably the case in cognitive learning and intellectual development.

However, when it comes to moral and religious education, the qualitative development seems to lag behind its quantitative counterpart. In other words, the progressing student may acquire more religious and moral knowledge, but he does not necessarily show a concomitant deepening and keener comprehension of this knowledge. As such knowledge accumulates, it does not generally become better knowledge. It is not "better" knowledge, for it is not paralleled by growth in commitment, and improvement of conduct — the touchstone of the effectiveness of moral education.

Salanter was puzzled and baffled by this seemingly inherent weakness in moral development, and this prompted him to launch his musar programs. In the words of a noted student of Salanter's disciples:

It is a strange historical phenomenon . . . musar, one of the important areas of Jewish thought, was neglected and ineffective in the pre-Salanter days.²⁴

What, indeed, accounts for this "strange historical phenomenon?" And what is essentially the distinction between Salanter's musar and that of his illustrious predecessors?

Rabbi S. Z. Braude, exponent of Salanter's musar education, pointed out the educational implications of this "strange historical phenomenon." He suggested that, in most instances, "childish understanding of religious beliefs persists throughout life, resisting change."²⁵ Childish beliefs, asserted Braude, are only professed beliefs, and they remain superficial cognitive concepts which cannot lead men to commitment and ethical conduct.

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Such beliefs are not internalized by the individual, and they do not become actual beliefs. Only actual beliefs guide human conduct.²⁶

Such people, holding on to childish concepts, have not reflected on their beliefs in a mature and comprehensive manner, said Braude.²⁷ As a result, their moral development is inhibited. These individuals, who have matured otherwise, and have concentrated heavily on their intellectual pursuits, have really not developed morally. Musar, as interpreted by Salanter, is a comprehensive and exacting study predicated on mature understanding and concentrated efforts. No one should expect musar, nor any other sophisticated human endeavor, to develop by itself, hence the "strange historical phenomenon." From a moral point of view there are too many underdeveloped people.

Current psychological thought bears a striking resemblance to Salanter's and Braude's views. In the words of a modern writer on the subject:

The actual moral beliefs of an individual are the truest measures of his character. If they could be validly ascertained it would certainly be found that they are significantly related to conduct. The widespread opinion that belief and conduct are unrelated, springs from (a) The confusion between moral belief and moral knowledge; (b) The confusion between expressed and true beliefs.²⁸

Even intelligent persons, possessing outstanding mental abilities, do not necessarily behave as they know they should. This is because their knowledge of the good is only a cognitive knowledge, never becoming emotionally internalized, i.e., that this knowledge had no effect on their subconscious forces. Such knowledge is lacking the essential binding quality of obligatoriness. According to psychological research, there are no significant correlations between intelligence and helpfulness.²⁹ Other psychologists also report that they found no relationship between honesty or "service" behavior tests and moral training in schools.³⁰

This is why Salanter stressed that the quest for moral excellence cannot be left to childhood training, but involves development *life-long pursuit* of a vastly number of sophisticated processes.

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CONCLUSION

In this discussion of Salanter's applied musar we have stressed its relevance to contemporary life. Salanter's belief that the search for life's meaning is synonymous with the quest for moral excellence, ought to serve as an example and challenge to today's educators and rabbis. Salanter's travels and encounters, indicate the need for modern Torah tours. If the community does not come to the rabbi, then let him go to the community. Salanter lived an exemplary life of *hessed* and *balance* — balance between science and religion, reason and emotion, individualism and social service. Today, more than ever, we must take to heart Salanter's equilibrium between authority and freedom; while we do not modify principles, we may adopt and change methods, and allow for individual expressions and differences. The rabbi himself must become an example of a self-disciplined person who constantly resorts to self-analysis and introspection, and is ready to accept constructive criticism. Only then will the rabbi succeed in employing Salanterian methods of group analysis and therapy.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
4. Glenn, Menahem G., *Israel Salanter, Religious Ethical Thinker* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1953), p. 18.
5. Blazer, Isaac, *Or Yisrael* (Tel-Aviv: Israel American Offset, 1959), p. 111.
6. Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
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11. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

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12. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.
13. Kurzweil, Z. E., *Modern Trends in Jewish Education* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), pp. 74-93; Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 178; Glenn, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
14. Salanter, "Iggeret Hamusar" in *Or Yisrael*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 105.
17. Salanter, Israel, *T'vunah in Shloshah S'farim* (New York: Grossman Publishing House, 1965), pp. 14, 15, 64, 84, 94.
18. Israel Lipkin Salanter in Schneur Z. Hirshowitz *Even Yisrael* (Vilna: Funk Publisher, 1912), pp. 16, 17, 33-34, 67, 72, 92.
19. Kaplan, Abraham E., *Divray Talmud* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1958), p. 48.
20. Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 278.
21. Rosen, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
23. Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 251.
24. Weinberg, Yehiel Y., "T'nuat Ha-Musar V'shitatah," *Panim el Panim* C L I (March 16, 1962), 14.
25. Katz, *op. cit.*, II. 127.
26. See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin*, p. 106B, "Ein Torato shel Doeg ela misafah vlahutz." Doeg, the Edomite, though a great scholar, failed miserably because his Torah was not internalized. Doeg did not really identify with the Torah knowledge that he acquired intellectually.
27. Katz, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-30.
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