

BOOK REVIEW

TWO NEW STUDIES OF RABBI ISRAEL SALANTER AND THE MUSAR MOVEMENT

by TAMAR ROSS

עמנואל אטקס, ר' ישראל סלנטר וראשיתה של תנועת המוסר. ירושלים, הוצאת מאגנס, תשמ"ב.
Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Beginning of the 'Musar' Movement*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982, 352 p.

Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, Idea* — The Ethics and Theology of an Early Psychologist of the Unconscious, New York: Ktav, 1982, xvi, 358 p.

Historically, the nineteenth century Musar movement founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter has been understood as an answer of Mitnaggedism (the anti-Hasidic stream in Eastern European Jewry, identified with Rabbi Elijah of Vilna and his followers) to the various weaknesses in the social and religious fabric of Lithuanian Jewry. This view refers particularly to those weaknesses brought into relief and challenged by the rise of Hassidism (e.g. arid overintellectualism and the ever-widening gap between the elitist ideas of Talmudic scholars and the uneducated masses), and which Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin (the foremost disciple of the Gaon of Vilna) and his school, stressing the value of Torah study for its own sake (*Torah lishmah*), were unable to overcome. Alternatively, the movement has been described as Salanter's attempt to fortify Jewish tradition in Lithuania from within, so as to aid it in withstanding the pervasive influence of the Enlightenment

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(Haskala). While both contentions are correct and not unrelated,¹ the movement nevertheless addressed itself to issues which, from both a philosophical and practical point of view, transcended the specific circumstances which occasioned its birth. Thus, though the movement never achieved the widespread popular appeal envisioned by Salanter, it did gain a foothold in the Talmudic academies (*yeshivot*) where it flourished and branched into various streams, each of which stressed this or that aspect of their master's teachings, thereby lending them a new direction or interpretation. The vitality of the movement is such that to this day hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of Yeshiva students regard themselves as disciples of this or that variant of Musar and conduct their lives in accordance with its teachings. The very structure of contemporary Lithuanian-style *yeshivot*, even those which do not regard themselves as being strictly of the Musar variety, has been shaped by the impact of Musar teachings. This is seen in the more or less universal acceptance by these *yeshivot* of periodic Musar sessions as an integral part of the curriculum, and in the generally accepted practice of appointing a *Mashgiaḥ Ruḥani* (spiritual guide), who is regarded as an indispensable member of the educational staff. The formal position of the *Mashgiaḥ* might even be regarded as an institutionalized version of Salanter's image of himself vis-à-vis his generation, his prime function within the Yeshiva being to look after the spiritual development of each of the students, as distinct from his intellectual growth. In addition to the living influence of the Musar Movement within the confines of the Yeshivot, at least 100 books have been produced since the original writings of Salanter, relating to his teachings and building upon them. This phenomenon has created an ideological momentum of its own, infiltrating religious groups and sections of Jewish society not directly identified with the original aims and far beyond the geographic boundaries of the movement. Thus, it is not surprising that Salanter's thought has recently become the subject of several scholarly studies, most notably the two works before us, both of which were originally written as doctoral dissertations and subsequently revised into book form.²

The central question addressed by Salanter as moralist and educator, sometimes directly and more often obliquely, was: What is the cause or source of the gap between an individual's professed belief and his actions? Observing the traditional society of his day, he was disturbed by the fact that there was no necessary or direct relationship between the degree of an individual's learning and his piety — which gave the lie to the Mitnaggedic conviction (based upon Talmudic dicta) that Torah learning protects one from sin. In attempting to evolve a theory of the soul which would somehow resolve this anomaly, Salanter initially proposed a

1. See Mordechai Pachter's introduction to *Kitvey Rav Yisrael Salanter* [Israel Salanter — Selected Writings] (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 10–13.

2. While Etkes' doctorate was submitted to the Hebrew University and Goldberg's to Brandeis, both authors have been associated with the Hebrew University for a number of years.

solution resembling the Socratic contention that morality is equated with knowledge — since the good by definition is that which in the long run is the most desirable, it follows that if one *knows* the good, one must necessarily *practice* it. Of course, we are speaking in this argument of a *prudential* variety of knowledge, which envisions the long-term consequences of one's actions. Thus Salanter, in using this formula, equated the knowledge necessary for moral behavior, not with Torah scholarship (as had been done by his Mitnaggedic predecessors), but with recognition of the principle of Divine Retribution. No one escapes the consequences of his actions; these will always overtake him — if not in this world, then in the World to Come. However, already at this initial stage in the development of his thought, Salanter departed from the simplistic Socratic view that knowledge (even of the prudential type) must lead to right action, by recognizing the relative weakness of man's intellect in comparison with his appetitive desires. As opposed to conclusions of the intellect, these desires already reside in the "innermost recesses of the heart" (*penimiyut ha-lev*) and although essentially passive, are immediately aroused on the occasion of any external stimulus. They are therefore a far more powerful influence upon behavior than the theoretical conclusions of the intellect. Thus, in order to foster normative behavior, certain strategic tactics (*Tahbulot*) must be developed to strengthen the influence of the intellect and allow it to penetrate the heart, which he conceived as a battlefield in which all moral decisions are made, and thereafter be translated into action by the limbs. The tactics developed by Salanter are initially based on an appreciation of the efficacy of behavioral mechanisms, whereby the habitual repetition of certain emotional, cognitive and behavioral stimuli manage to so fortify the intellectual "fear of God" that the latter eventually achieves the level of a distinct instinct or appetitive desire, capable of combatting less worthy desires or even of uprooting them entirely. In addition, he advocated the development of a type of common-sense "worldly wisdom" through which, by means of introspection and observation of others, one may develop the capacity to foresee the occasions for moral temptation and learn how to avoid them.

Later on in his writings and discourses, however, Salanter introduces the concept of the unconscious (*koḥot kehim* or *koḥot penimiyim*), not only at the level of behavior, as an indicator of the degree of proficiency acquired in certain cognitive skills, or as the reservoir of natural biological or psychological instincts, but also in what is now thought of as the Freudian sense — i.e., as the deep seat of all thoughts and desires repressed by the conscious. The tactics developed by him earlier are now viewed not simply in terms of their mechanical efficacy in strengthening the influence of reason over irrational forces, but also in their potential to effect a total transformation of personality. The eventual outcome of Musar strategy is to inculcate character traits which are good in any context, superceding the self-centered considerations of reason and driving one to ideal behavior based, not on rational considerations at all, but upon the simple will to

serve God, regardless of the consequences. In the final analysis, it is this irrational motive which has the most far-reaching influence upon one's moral behavior, for it alone is capable of affecting and supplanting even repressed negative desires.

In brief, the focus of Salanter's earlier thought is upon the distinction between *motives* and *causes* of moral behavior, noting that a self-centered and rational motive should spur one to develop strategems which act as causes aiding in the implementation of these egotistical considerations. In his later thought, however, it emerges that the most efficient cause of moral behavior is the irrational motive — i.e., an internalization of character traits beyond reason, both in the mode of behavior which they promote (i.e., selfless service of God) and the level of personality on which they operate (the unconscious), even though the irrational motive is itself the net result of strategems originating from rational considerations.

Immanuel Etkes is essentially a historian, and his book is written with the purpose of explaining the Musar Movement from a detailed biographical and historical point of view. Considering the length of Salanter's stay in Germany, one wonders at the scantiness of material in Etkes' book covering this particular period of his life. In general, however, Etkes brings to our attention many hitherto uncited sources and reassesses the reliability of others in order to establish the connection between the theories that Salanter evolved and the concrete context which served as background and stimulus for their propagation. In addition to proving the relationship between the rise of the Musar Movement and the challenge of the Enlightenment (*Haskala*), Etkes highlights the sociological motives underlying Salanter's activities, as exemplified by his attempt to define as halachic norm behavior which exhibits sensitivity for the needs and sensibilities of the downtrodden, unlearned classes.

However, it is evident that Etkes' heart lies no less in Jewish thought than in history, and his book contains valuable discussions in this area as well. One example is his detailed comparison of Salanter's thought to that of his Mitnaggedic predecessors, tracing his thought back to his direct teacher (Rav Zundel of Salant), to his teacher's teacher (Rav Hayim of Volozhin), and to the Gaon of Vilna himself. This comparison includes a careful analysis of the relationship between Torah study and God-fearingness in the thought of each of these thinkers. Etkes also engages in a lengthy comparison of the theological value of ideal character traits in the writings of Salanter with the significance these assume in the thought of rationalist philosophers such as Saadya Gaon and Maimonides, on the one hand, and in the ethical writings of pietists influenced by Kabbalah, on the other. The essential point made by Etkes — that Salanter's interest in character-building is *functional*, regarding character merely as a means to normative behavior, rather than as an end in itself — is well established and valid.

According to Etkes, Saadya and Maimonides are both seen as equating a set combination of characteristics (the harmonious balance among various traits in Saadya; the adoption of the golden mean in Maimonides) with the “moral good”, while the Kabbalistic pietists who idealize the quality of asceticism are interested in this ideal not only *per se*, as the embodiment of morality itself, but also because of the direct relationship they postulate among traits, limbs and *mitzvot*. This latter view is seen as closer to Salanter’s functional interest in traits as instruments conducive to actions than is the rationalists’ interest in the establishment of a particular type of character as an end in itself. This similarity to the Kabbalistic picture is pertinent despite the fact that Salanter does not share their ascetic inclination and views physical passions negatively only to the extent that these lead to a practical clash with halachic observance. A third original and extremely interesting contribution made by Etkes to the discussion of Salanter’s thought is his detailed description of the influence of the psychological theories promoted by Menahem Mendel Lapin of Satanov in his book, *Sefer Heshbon Ha-Nefesh*, which in turn reflects the influence of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and the strategy employed by him for his own moral improvement, as well as that of other eighteenth century currents of thought. Etkes also describes both the external similarities and essential differences between Hassidism and the Musar Movement in an incisive manner.

Stylistically Etkes’ ideas are presented in a precise, lucid fashion, and he exhibits an enviable talent for eliciting the full implications to be gleaned from any evidence he brings. There is a certain amount of repetition occasioned by the manner in which his book is organized;³ and although Etkes recognizes and apologizes for the drawbacks entailed by a method of composition which attempts to interweave chronological treatment with a theoretical discussion of ideas, one nevertheless receives the impression that by more careful editing, this minor flaw could have been avoided.

Goldberg’s book, although it too contains biographical material, has nothing new to offer over Etkes in this area, and is written with a view more to the philosophical implications of the ideas Salanter promoted, attempting to trace the development of his thought more comprehensively and in greater chronological detail. The book relies heavily on intricate textual analysis, dwelling upon Salanter’s terminology and attempting to unravel in detail the import of difficult sections — no mean task considering the knotty and obscure nature of Salanter’s written style. However, Goldberg himself sometimes adds to the difficulty. Although in the biographical section he writes in a very readable journalese, once he gets to the intellectual analysis, he has a tendency to develop elaborate concep-

3. Compare part I, pp. 21–87 to part III, pp. 129–135.

tual frameworks in order to express simple points, which sometimes serve to complicate rather than to elucidate. An example of this is the title of the book itself: *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure and Idea*. The concepts of Text, Structure and Idea are established as a threefold format for the presentation of Rabbi Israel's thought, with the concept of structure again being subdivided into three separate categories (man as evil, man as changeable, and man as ideal). Most of these categories are then applied afresh to the study of each of the four periods into which Goldberg divides Salanter's writings. It can be argued that this forces him to artificially engage in pedantic distinctions between periods which sometimes make too much of a fuss over arbitrary, fine points of variation.⁴ Might not his propensity for expressing himself in complicated technical abstractions, when plain English would do, be another of the factors that tends to make Goldberg's treatment of Salanter's writings overweighty and clumsy at points? Finally, might there not be a certain spirit of contentiousness present in some of his discussions, in which the reader is made to feel that Goldberg is playing a game of oneupmanship, out to score points against other scholars in the field⁵ and making mountains out of molehills⁶ in a manner of which Salanter himself would probably have disapproved, from a moralist's point of view?

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the very real contributions which Goldberg makes in his study. First, there are several valuable insights which he does gain via his method of detailed textual comparisons. For example, in its early stages Salanter's theory of personality is legitimately characterized by Etkes as one of "theosophic apathy". By this he refers to the fact that, as opposed to his immediate Mitnagedic predecessors, Salanter was not interested in theoretical, metaphysical speculations relating to the nature of the soul. He preferred to describe the human psyche in totally naturalistic terms, as controlled by internal soul forces rather than by metaphysical powers from without. This is one of the features lending a modern flavor to Salanter's thought, for it involves the implication that man's fate is basically in his hands and not dictated by irrational factors beyond his control. Nevertheless, as Etkes himself points out, as a result of Salan-

4. See, for example, pp. 75–80. There are many other examples throughout the book.

5. See, for example, Goldberg's "Essay on Bibliography," pp. 309–313, in which he reviews previous works written on Salanter's thought in a rather scathing manner, making some justified criticisms but also exaggerating others and, on the other hand, not giving credit where credit is due.

6. See, for example, the Excursus on pp. 209–219, titled "Did Israel Salanter study Philosophy and Kabbalah?" in which Goldberg argues with Etkes' contention that Salanter retreated in his thought from both philosophy and Kabbalah to purely Rabbinic conceptions. Goldberg's authority here, based mainly on conjecture and circumstantial evidence, is all designed to prove that Salanter did read medieval philosophy and studied Kabbalah in secret. But even if this is true, which possibly it is, one is tempted to react with "So what?" — for our main interest is not in this biographical curio but on the bearing which these facts had on his declared thought, which — particularly in the case of Kabbalah — appears to be no more than marginal.

ter's bewilderment and disappointment over the fact that, despite their relative simplicity, there was no overwhelming response of adopting the strategems which he propogated to combat the pernicious influence of innate passions, he concluded that there must be an additional source of evil in man. This source must be an external, metaphysical "spirit of impurity", whose basic irrationality can only be combated by the equally irrational influence of the disinterested study of Torah for its own sake. Building upon this observation, Goldberg notes that, much later in the development of Salanter's thought, he again calls upon this method of Torah study as a strategem against what appears to be a new irrational disrupture to moral behavior: the repressed desires of the unconscious. On the basis of this parallel, Goldberg suggests that Salanter is now identifying the traditional metaphysical explanation for sin with the more modern psychological one — the evil "spirit of impurity" is henceforth equated with the inclination of the human personality to repress negative desires rather than to conquer them completely.

However, despite the care Goldberg applies to his close analysis of admittedly difficult texts, his interpretations are sometimes debatable — for example, his discussion of Salanter's attempt to resolve his own theory that soul transmutation (*tikkun*) is desirable in all areas of beahvior with Maimonides' preference for subjugation (and not transmutation) of the desire to sin in the area of irrational mitzvot. Goldberg's summary that Salanter "remains consonant with Maimonides by reinterpreting him," while true, is nevertheless a gross understatement of Salanter's deviation from Maimonides' position and therefore misleading. Issue must also be taken with Goldberg's discussion of "a trait and its opposite,"⁷ in which he defines Salanter's view of traits as two-way, capable of inducing modes of behavior which are "logically contrary" but "psychologically unitary." This description seems to be running together two separate levels of *tikkun* which Salanter envisages within the area of the rational mitzvot.⁸ The first level, which is indeed characterized by the skill of adopting "a trait and its opposite," is a lower one, for here psychologically contrary traits do exist, but as they are still external to one's psyche, they can function as tools to be summoned at will in disciplined response to the conflicting demands of morality in shifting situations. Thus humility and arrogance can co-exist, with humility being directed by reason towards oneself, and arrogance diverted into esteem for one's fellow man.⁹ Only on a higher level of *tikkun* does Salanter envisage opposing modes of behavior as stemming from one psychic root which has become so internalized that it is an essential element of one's unconscious. In this case, humility assumes the opposite

7. pp. 133–134.

8. pp. 135–136.

9. See Pachter. *ibid.*, pp. 131–134.

form of esteem vis-à-vis one's fellowman, not as a rational instrument in the service of virtuous *behavior*, but rather as the natural expression of virtue itself, adopted spontaneously and unthinkingly in a manner beyond the realm of reason and objective justification.¹⁰

Another valuable feature of Goldberg's work is that he deals with several topics of a philosophic nature touched upon by Salanter in passing, parenthetical to his central ethical concern of developing the ideal means for ensuring moral behavior. In this, Goldberg is quite justified in regarding his work as the most comprehensive treatment of Salanter's thought to date. The philosophical topics discussed include: the twin antinomies of Divine Knowledge versus Free Will, and Miracle versus Natural Law; theodicy and other such medieval questions; as well as more modern issues such as the relative ability (or inability) of the human intellect to grasp objective truth in general and the Torah in particular; and Salanter's interpretation of the Mishnaic concept of "Faith in the Sages" (*emunat ḥakhamim*). This feature of Goldberg's study is especially useful, for although Salanter only introduces the aforementioned topics tangentially and in raw form, these ideas were subsequently developed by his disciples to a considerable degree and serve as the basis for what has come to be known as "the Yeshiva ideology" (*Yeshivishe hashkofo*). This ideology itself was eventually adopted as a key strategem for ensuring normative behavior, often supplanting the more practical techniques which Salanter himself had developed. The result of this development was that many Musar disciples came to view the most effective means of eliminating the gap between professed beliefs and practices, neither as prudential knowledge, nor as the habitual repetition of the proper emotional, cognitive and practical stimuli designed to internalize this knowledge, but rather as identification with the proper set of ideological opinions or beliefs.

Last but not least in evaluating Goldberg's work, one must mention the index he has incorporated at the end of his book, allowing the reader to follow Goldberg's commentaries to each of Salanter's writings, paragraph by paragraph. These commentaries include several long sections of translation, which given Salanter's obscure Hebrew style often involve a good measure of interpretation. Here Goldberg reveals a fine competence and sensitivity to language. Unfortunately several errors in pagination have slipped through the proof-reader's fingers, but the index still remains a valuable tool to the reader interested in studying these texts in detail.

In conclusion, Etkes' and Goldberg's books taken together provide the reader with a nearly complete account of Salanter's thought. Considering the anecdotal

10. See Pachter. *ibid.*, pp. 136–137; pp. 149–150.

and paraphrase approach which characterized the most definitive work previously written on the subject,¹¹ this is a giant step forward in the study of the thought of a very interesting personality and will inevitably serve as the basis for any further study of the thought of his disciples. Both books can be very warmly recommended to the student; in a sense, they complement each other.

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11. Dov Katz. *Tenu'at Ha-Musar* (Tel Aviv, 1945), volume 1.