

אור ישראל  
*Ohr Yisrael*  
and Other Writings  
by Rabbi Israel Salanter





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# OHR YISRAEL

and Other Writings

By Rabbi Israel Salanter

WITH A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

and

Rabbi Justin Pines

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*and Other Writings by Rabbi Israel Salanter*

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*Dedicated in memory of*

*Getzel M. Cohen, z"l*

אליקים גצל בן חיים הכהן

*By his loving wife, children,  
grandchildren, and great-grandchildren*

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.



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## Foreword

We deem it a privilege to present to the public the major writings of R. Israel Salanter with our new English translation and commentary. The bulk of this book (which supplies its title) consists of the writings of R. Salanter found in *Ohr Yisrael*, as edited and published by R. Salanter's disciple, R. Isaac Blazer, in 1900.<sup>1</sup> These include twenty-two letters written by R. Salanter to his disciples and various others;<sup>2</sup> “*Iggeret HaMussar*,” R. Salanter's explanation of the need and his call for a movement to practice Mussar; and four *derashot* (homilies or sermons) delivered by R. Salanter and later committed to writing by R. Blazer.<sup>3</sup> There are also three essays written by R. Salanter and published in a rabbinic journal, *Tevunah*, that R. Salanter edited.<sup>4</sup> One essay served as

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1. Published by Judah Leib ben Eliezer Lipman Mats, Vilna.
  2. The letters are arranged and numbered by Blazer.
  3. These are referred to by Blazer as Letters 23, 26, 27, and 28.
  4. As discussed in the Introduction to *Ohr Yisrael* in this volume, R. Salanter felt that rabbis must develop their thinking and communicate with the public in order to compete for the Jews' understanding and commitment, and he created *Tevunah* toward those ends. It failed after only a few issues, and reading it shows that even though R. Salanter enlisted leading rabbis to write – including such luminaries as Rabbis Isaac Elhanan Spektor, Solomon Kluger, Samuel Salant, and Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer – they submitted mostly standard responsa or talmudic commentary, which

the introduction to the publication, and two were published in various issues of *Tevunah*.

R. Blazer also included in *Ohr Yisrael* (as Letters 24 and 25) two letters written by R. Joseph Zundel of Salant. R. Salanter credits R. Zundel as the man who excited his interest in the importance of learning Mussar, thus shaping his lifetime thinking. We have included those letters, believing that they shed light on R. Zundel's thinking and, therefore, contribute to our understanding of R. Salanter's thought.

We have not included in this volume the extensive personal writings of R. Isaac Blazer on Mussar, its practices, and its values, which he included in *Ohr Yisrael*. We mean no disrespect to R. Blazer by omitting them. However, his writings about Mussar and his articulation of the Mussar movement and its practices are derivative. We want to focus readers' attention on R. Salanter's ideas. His fresh religious thinking led him to initiate the Mussar movement. We refer readers who would like to read R. Blazer's writings in *Ohr Yisrael* to the translation, annotation, and publication of R. Blazer's *Ohr Yisrael* by R. Zvi Miller, published by Targum Press/Feldheim in 2004. R. Miller's book is titled *Ohr Yisrael: The Classic Writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter and His Disciple Rav Yitzchak Blazer*. R. Miller translates all of R. Blazer's as well as R. Salanter's writing, supplying titles and headings to all units as well as occasional paraphrases and annotations to make the ideas clearer. While we hope that our readers will find that our translation of and commentary on R. Salanter's writings are illuminating and offer new insights, we stress our appreciation and continuing regard for R. Miller's volume. One of us (Yitz Greenberg) was so pleased that, after a century of neglect, a first-time English translation was finally being offered, that he helped raise the funds to enable the publication. A close friend, R. David Scheinfeld, z"l, gave a dedication gift. That book is dedicated to his wife Ellen Scheinfeld, z"l, and in part to the memory of Jonathan Joseph Greenberg, z"l, son of R. Yitz and Blu Greenberg. R. Scheinfeld also wrote a foreword

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had little resonance with the public. All was not lost, however; R. Salanter himself wrote three essays ("*Derushim*" in his words) that make an important contribution to Jewish religious thought in the face of modernity.

on the significance of R. Israel Salanter, which will be expanded upon in the introduction to this book.

In addition to R. Salanter's *Ohr Yisrael* writings, we have translated and include his "Essay on Strengthening Those Who Learn Our Holy Torah." This essay was published in 1880 in a booklet called *Etz Peri*.<sup>5</sup> The book was meant to present the case and raise funds for the Kollel Perushim, an institute for advanced study of Talmud and halakha in which advanced students devoted themselves exclusively to the study of Torah and were supported by the institution of the *kollel* itself. The *kollel* was located in Kovno and was a joint project of R. Isaac Elhanan Spektor (by then the most recognized rabbinic leader of Lithuanian Jewry) and R. Salanter. R. Salanter's response to the encroachment of modernity and the spread of *Haskala* included building institutions, especially yeshivot. Instead of yeshivot growing haphazardly around a great rabbi in a particular locality, the new model was to establish yeshivot formally; a head of yeshiva would be appointed, as well as instructors for *shiurim*, and a schedule of classes would be offered as well as room and board for the students. This institutional change made the yeshiva more modern – well kept, better organized and supervised, and better able to monitor and sustain the students. The kollel was the next step in the provision of a setting in which advanced Torah scholars would develop and be taken care of financially (along with their families) so they could concentrate on furthering their learning.

The "Essay on Strengthening Those Who Learn Our Holy Torah" is one of R. Salanter's longest and most ambitious. Its tone is somewhat different from the other essays. However, in a note to the book, it is explained that R. Israel gave a sermon on the importance of Torah and the great mitzva of providing an adequate economic foundation for potential great scholars. The talk was transcribed and published under R. Israel's supervision. It has heretofore not been translated into English.

We have another motive in bringing R. Israel Salanter's ideas to the public's attention. We both feel that his emphasis on the purpose of Torah being to develop an individual of good character (a *mentsch*) and

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5. By R. Salanter and R. Isaac Elhanan Spektor, published by Judah Leib ben Eliezer Lipman Mats, Vilna, 1880.

the importance of consciously working on improving one's character traits is more important than ever. R. Salanter and his disciples identified various desirable qualities of spirit to embrace and internalize. They developed practices to recognize one's flawed traits and systematically work on improving them. The authors have participated in such Mussar exercises and found them religiously inspiring and valuable for self-development. The role and practice of Mussar has diminished in the past generation, even in yeshivot where the Mussar movement once held sway. We want to invite the public to reconnect to this stream of Judaism, in order to raise personal ethical standards and develop a kinder and gentler personality and society. In R. Justin Pines's afterword to this book, the reader will find references to ongoing projects to apply Mussar in contemporary life. He also describes his experiences in developing Mussar as a course and project within a day school curriculum as well as enabling parents and laypeople in secular sectors to apply Mussar to their lives and work. In a separate personal note, R. Yitz Greenberg describes his life-changing experience of spending his college years learning in Beis Yosef Novardok, a yeshiva that simultaneously offered a classic "lomdish" curriculum and intensive Mussar development.

As the historical introduction will show, R. Salanter understood early on that modern culture was sweeping Europe and that traditional Jewish culture would have to transform its religious system in order to survive in the new atmosphere. His response was to create educational institutions that would guide students in internalizing the ethical and emotional dimensions of the religion, and thereby compete for loyalty and identity in the age of modernity. His educational creativity and institutional upgrading of Torah learning were ahead of their time. They are available today as models that can be applied to develop a richer religious life and higher ethical standard.

For those new to Mussar, we hope that this book will give you access to another great stream of Jewish tradition and wisdom. For those already practicing, learning, and/or teaching Mussar, we hope this book can deepen your connection with the movement and its founder. In both cases, you will meet a visionary educator, a groundbreaking thinker, and a role model for a *mentsch* inspired and shaped by Torah.

*Foreword*

One final note on the style of this volume: The original Hebrew was written in the late nineteenth century and uses masculine pronouns as a default. We follow that convention as well, as we feel it would be anachronistic to do otherwise.

Yitz Greenberg

Justin Pines

Ellul 5784 – August 2023





## Preface

# My Personal Encounter with Mussar

Yitz Greenberg

I was raised in a Modern Orthodox home in Borough Park (“Boro Park”), Brooklyn. In those ancient times, Boro Park was the neighborhood to which religious immigrant families moved up socially from the Lower East Side. Despite the high level of observance, the message of making it and becoming fully American was strong. Many of my peers and counterparts in other families internalized this message and shed their traditional observances in order to become more integrated in America.

My father was a *talmid hakham* of awesome proportions who taught a *hevra Shas* (Talmud study society) every day for the last fifty years of his life, at the downstairs minyan of Temple Beth El, the fanciest Orthodox shul in Boro Park. He was a *Misnaged* (an opponent of Hasidism) by temperament, and his favorite leisure-time activity was learning Gemara with his children – so I learned a lot of Gemara with him. He was able to explain and defend Jewish observances, and my mother was a person of simple but powerfully devout faith, so they held their sons religiously better than most families could.

I attended Yeshivas Etz Chayim, the Modern Orthodox yeshiva in Boro Park. The upper grades' Talmud teacher was excellent, and he offered a voluntary summer session to study some smaller tractates in their entirety. I enjoyed this, and my learning benefited. From there I went to the newly founded Brooklyn Talmudical Academy, Yeshiva University's high school for boys. I was a successful student, but the Jewish studies and religious spirit of the school were less inspiring. In fact, we were rambunctious students, often pulling mischievous pranks and inciting students to disrupt classes – especially those of the weaker, less effective teachers. We felt that the administration was heavy-handed and did not treat the students with genuine respect. In 1949, my senior year, my plan was to attend Yeshiva College, the standard next level of education for Modern Orthodox students. I occasionally toyed with the idea of going to Brooklyn College, which offered free tuition (and would allow me to save my Regents scholarship money for graduate school). Both of my older sisters had gone to Brooklyn College and received an excellent education. They bought a lot of college-level books and created a home library which I eagerly read through. The younger of my two older sisters majored in history and raved about the department – and I was very interested in history – but I took no action in this direction.

My father walked daily from our house on 49th Street near 13th Avenue to Beth El at 48th Street and 15th Avenue. Sometimes, along the way, he would stop at Yeshivas Beis Yosef on 49th Street, between 14th and 15th Avenue, to use their library or to talk with and share in learning with its *rebbe'im*. Beis Yosef was a chief remnant of the Beis Yosef–Novardok Mussar yeshiva, which functioned in early-twentieth-century Poland and Russia. The Novardoker approach was developed by R. Yosef Yoizel Hurwitz, known as the Alter of Novardok, a primary disciple of R. Salanter.

Novardok was considered the more radical wing of the Mussar movement. At Novardok, more time was devoted to Mussar study and practice than to Talmud study. The students demonstratively wore traditional clothes and grew beards. They made no concessions to modernity in personal hygiene or social conventions. There was a strong ascetic streak in its atmosphere, and the school placed great stress on defying public opinion (even of religious Jews) as well as on breaking

one's ego to become truly ethical and devout. It indoctrinated its students to "uplift the masses" by going out and creating yeshivot which offered a mix of Torah study and moral character development through Mussar exercises and study. By 1939, the movement had created more than seventy mostly elementary school-age yeshivot in Poland and the Soviet Union, in the face of Communist persecution (in Russia) and government-backed antisemitic hostility (in Poland). These schools were destroyed in the Holocaust.

After World War II, surviving remnants of the Novardok yeshiva (called Beis Yosef in honor of its founder) made their way to Eretz Yisrael, France, and England (where they founded the famed Gateshead Yeshiva). But the head of the movement, R. Avraham Jofen, the son-in-law of the Alter and the director of the Novardok network during the interwar period, came to America and settled in Boro Park, where he reestablished the yeshiva along with his son Yaakov, his son-in-law R. Yehudah Leib Nekritz, and about forty refugee students. R. Nekritz and about half of the students had survived exile to Siberia, where they were held together by R. Nekritz's leadership. The other half were survivors of various Nazi concentration camps.

Because of their radical commitment to Mussar, the Novardok yeshiva managed to keep Mussar study and activity central to its program. By contrast, many of the Mussar yeshivot in Israel and elsewhere gradually demoted Mussar to a minor part of a typical yeshiva curriculum. I knew none of this background, although I later came to see that, paradoxically, the impact of Siberia and concentration camps had somewhat "mellowed" their spirit; their exercises in ego-busting and defying conventional public opinion became less extreme.

One day, R. Jofen spoke with my father and said that they were considering taking in American boys as students – out of the belief that they must begin to sink roots in this new country. Did my father know of any boys who might be interested? Beis Yosef's leadership was deeply ambivalent about this step. They hesitated to admit outsiders who might cool off their students' fervor or dilute their passion for Mussar. They worried about bringing callow American boys into a group that was so tightly forged in the fires of Communist Siberian work camps and Nazi concentration camps.

In truth, they never quite solved their inner conflicts over this matter. They started and stopped the experiment with American boys several times. By comparison, when R. Aharon Kotler, a Holocaust survivor, came to America, he went to Lakewood, New Jersey, and threw himself into creating a New World yeshiva completely devoted to Torah study, with no secular studies. He established uncompromising standards – as high as, or higher than, the destroyed European yeshivot – and demanded unqualified commitments to these norms on the part of the American boys. He succeeded on an immense scale. Beis Yosef never made this transition. They kept vacillating on how much to expect from American-born students. In the end, they failed to establish a robust American institution.

My father came home and asked me if I would be interested in attending Beis Yosef. I said I had no idea if this was a good school. My father was a product of Lithuanian yeshivot, where he studied from childhood on. He was an orphan whose mother was so poor that she could not support him at home. My father hardly understood, and cared very little about, the Mussar angle. He said to me: “Look, I don’t know. When I studied in Brisk [under R. Chaim Soloveitchik, as an older teenager – YG], they looked down on Mussar. But I have spoken with Rav Avraham [Jofen] and other *rebbe'im* in learning many times. He is a true *talmid hakham*, and I believe that he will give a good *shiur*, so your learning will certainly grow. Why don’t you try it out?”

We decided to “look over” the yeshiva by going there for a week-day night *seder*. (There were three *sedarim*, or study sessions, each day: morning, afternoon, and night.) This was an exercise of poor judgment; there were no formal *shiurim* at night, so I could not gauge whether any of the *rebbe'im* would inspire me. Nor were there any formal Mussar *shmuessen* (discourses) in which a *mashgiach* (spiritual supervisor) might teach or explore some aspect of behavioral ethics or character development. The one distinguishing feature of night *seder* – which I discovered after the fact – was that for fifteen to twenty minutes before Maariv, they learned Mussar “*behispailus*” (*behitpaalut*; with excitement and emotion). They engaged in emotional immersion in a Mussar text. For more than an hour, my father and I sat and studied Gemara together, amidst the hum of many other students learning by

themselves or with a *havruta* (study partner). This, of course, gave me no clue as to what learning at Beis Yosef might be like. A quarter hour before Maariv, someone gave a “*klap*” on a *shtender* (pounded on a lectern), and the room fell silent. I suddenly realized that my voice and my father’s were the only sounds in the *beit midrash*. As the silence grew more intense, I fell silent.

After a few minutes, suddenly, a student sitting at a table opposite mine leaped up out of his chair and at the top of his voice began to chant: “*Hakina, hataiva, vehakavod motzi’in es haadam min haolam*” (“Jealousy, lust, and [seeking] honor drive a person from the world”; Avot 4:21). This was his text for the evening. For the next twenty minutes, he shouted, he sang, he danced, he cried, and he repeated this statement like a mantra, with all his might.

He was not alone. At a different table, another student sang out his text, rocking and weaving, never getting up but never stopping. Then another and then another student leaped up or marched back and forth, screamed and whispered, bowed his head, or cried to the heavens. There was no one text but a stunning cacophony of verses and adages that swept the *beit midrash* and swirled around my head. I felt like I was in a storm, being buffeted and overwhelmed without relief. I could barely breathe until the frenzy ended.

Never had I experienced such a flood of raw religious emotion. Never had I seen fellow yeshiva students exhibit such passion and act out with unchecked spirit and inspiration. Never had I thought of these texts as addressing one personally and demanding a response. In the silence before the *hazan* arose to recite “*Barkhu*” and begin Maariv, I turned to my father and said: I am going to this yeshiva.

I started Beis Yosef that fall. In doing so, I gained two immediate advantages: First, the yeshiva accepted that I would attend Brooklyn College, which offered a better and richer secular education. Due to the timing of the *shiurim*, which were generally offered in the late morning, I was able to attend Brooklyn College during the early morning hours – as long as I was fully prepared for the *shiurim*. This allowed me to take some of the best courses with the best college faculty. Secondly, the Beis Yosef students spoke Yiddish, not English. My parents spoke Yiddish to us at home, so I understood every word they spoke. But at

home, I used to answer in English. To communicate with the students here, I had to learn to speak Yiddish, which I did.

Beis Yosef had recruited only a handful of Americans, so initially they set up a special *shiur* for us, though they later distributed us among the lower *shiurim*. I fell in love with the Mussar aspect of the yeshiva and with R. Yehudah Leib Nekritz, the main *mashgiach*, in particular. These were the gentlest, calmest, most embracing people that I had ever met. Rav Yehudah Leib had a perpetual kind smile. He saw everything and listened to everything with total attention and unlimited patience. His second son, Daniel, was a difficult child – restless and impulsive. He was constantly coming into the *beit midrash*, often interrupting his father’s *shiur*. His father listened kindly and spoke gently. I never saw a trace of anger or annoyance. Plain and simple, I wanted to be like him.

In addition to his Gemara *shiur*, Rav Nekritz gave regular *shmuessen* on Mussar and character building. The most frequent theme was honor and care for other human beings – to speak to them with respect, and even if one criticizes them, to do so without hurting feelings, and always to look out for their welfare and well-being. Love and loyalty to God are essential but are most powerfully expressed in kindness to God’s creatures, our fellow human beings.

Every couple of weeks, R. Nekritz would give me an hour of “Mussar analysis.” I would report to him on my Mussar activities and attempts to improve my temperament, and he would give me his assessment, and would also try to offer me analyses of problems and suggest where I should focus my efforts at self-improvement.

The whole yeshiva studied Mussar texts daily, including such classics as R. Moshe Hayim Luzzatto’s *Mesillat Yesharim* and Rabbenu Bahya ibn Pakuda’s *Hovot HaLevavot* at the end of morning *sefer*. The yeshiva’s particular specialty was *Madregat HaAdam* (*The Stature of the Human*) by Novardok’s founder, R. Yosef Yoizel Hurwitz. This book mostly focuses on character traits and critiques socialization to conventional expectations and societal standards (which were not up to religious standards). However, I most responded to its focus on “*zikui harabbim*” (“uplifting the masses”) by reaching out to people to teach them Torah and Mussar. The yeshiva’s stress on bringing Torah to others made a permanent

mark on me. It surely played a role in my ultimate career decision to turn away from academia and instead focus on bringing Torah to American Jews and their communal leadership.

I also was introduced to R. Menachem Mendel Lefin's *Heshbon HaNefesh*. In his book, Lefin lists thirteen character traits, defines them, and explains how to work on developing them. These traits include diligence, order, being just, inner tranquility, and patience. I was taught the method of working on one trait for a week. This included keeping a diary of every incident in which this trait was invoked (or was not used properly). At the end of the week, I met with an individual who reviewed my reports and critiqued what I had done or suggested where an alternate behavior would have been better. I should add that the students often told stories about especially kind or thoughtful behavior by R. Israel Salanter and by many of their teachers. The students set up an ideal model to emulate. They continually showed kindness and patience in all their interactions. There was never bickering or petty arguments or gossip or badmouthing. I wanted to be like them.

Over time, as I earned more trust, I was admitted to some inner group activities that were reserved for the original (European) students. Among these activities was working on being unaffected by the conventional opinions of others. I gather that one of the techniques used in Europe – doing public acts that seemed ridiculous, like going into a pharmacy and asking for a box of nails or a container of *yirat shamayim*, thus instilling in the students indifference to the social environment and public opinion – was no longer done. On the other hand, we practiced being unmoved by criticism or being able to go against a chorus of unanimity to offer a different response if we thought we were in the right. I believe that there were groups practicing even more private Mussar techniques to which I was never invited.

I also never encountered the exercise of the *birzhe*, for which Beis Yosef was famous in Europe. In the *birzhe* (bourse, stock exchange), students would walk around the room, like traders on the floor of the stock exchange, and talk with other individuals, exchanging views, Mussar instructions, and the latest information on personal and group religious development. I did not learn about the *birzhe* phenomenon until years after I graduated from Beis Yosef. I do not know if they no longer

practiced this activity or whether I was not admitted into the group that carried on this practice.

In retrospect, the yeshiva succeeded in implanting a less extreme version of Novardoker Mussar in its students. They did less ego busting but did give over the message that it – life, one’s social circle, behavior in the workplace – is not about you. They communicated that getting credit for an accomplishment was not so important; that being the center of attention was not a great achievement or proof of importance. They transmitted that the real test of rightness was not the approval of your social peers. They taught that the correct response when facing majority disapproval was to check whether you were living up to your own principles and whether you were being faithful to your values. When you faced dismissal for holding views or principles that were not the consensus, they modeled turning to God to assess whether you were in the right according to a higher authority.

There was one other spiritual service that the yeshiva provided for me. The student body’s atmosphere of prayer was intense, and *tefilla* was often a deeply moving experience. The presence of the Divine was strongly felt, and the sense of connection to Hashem was intense. At Brooklyn College, in various courses, I ran into strong religious challenges. Among these “shocks” was critical historical scholarship, conflicts of science and religion, and philosophy undermining religious assumptions. The yeshiva *rebbe’im* had no familiarity with or answers for these issues. However, the religious intensity and palpable sense of connection to God sustained me and enabled me to live with the contradictions.

For years after I left the yeshiva, I felt keenly that I was walking with God in my life activities. I followed this path to a PhD and to the academic career that I had laid out for myself in my teenage years. But I wrestled internally with the urge to bring Torah to the masses and the sense that Hashem had a mission for me to bring Torah to my fellow Jews. That summons from Hashem led me to become the rabbi of Young Israel of Brookline while still in graduate school. Later, I accepted an offer to join the faculty at Yeshiva University, because it implied that I could be close to or connect to Jewish teaching as well as pure academics.

Eventually, I came to see that signals from Hashem are more complex and ambiguous than I had thought based on my Beis Yosef



## *Preface: My Personal Encounter with Mussar*

experiences. Sorting them out and finding their direction required more personal judgment and informed choices from me than I had naively thought. Still, I never completely lost the sense of walking with God and being sustained by Hashem's love and partnership as I pursued my life activities. I also internalized the challenge to live by a higher standard of care and respect for my fellow human beings as I made my life choices.

In summary, I found that Beis Yosef's continuous focus on improving behavior and character traits did affect me. This included learning to forgo seeking credit or being proud of an accomplishment. Most of all, I was drawn to become more like the yeshiva students who were consistently doing *hesed* (acts of loving-kindness) for others, while being patient, unruffled, modest, and self-effacing. Working on ethical self-improvement with a supportive but demanding group really conditioned one's personality and behavior for the better.

Although I left the yeshiva after my ordination in order to go on to graduate studies in history, the yeshiva never really left me. My experience led me to believe that Mussar could be – should be – revived as an educational technique and given a central place in religious education. That is what led me to jointly translate *Ohr Yisrael* into English and publish this volume, including personal accounts and practical advice on pursuing Mussar techniques in today's daily life.