

## A teaching from Rabbi Israel Salanter-The founder of the Modern Musar or Jewish Ethical Mindfulness Movement

*When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family.*

*Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world.*

This teaching has haunted me since the first time I heard it, when I was studying at a yeshiva in Jerusalem in the late 1980s.

It's haunted me because I was brought up to believe in the possibility of changing the world, and because I was taught that Jewish tradition placed this idea, now commonly known as Tikkun Olam, at the center of what it means to live a life of purpose and fulfillment. And so, when I was initially confronted with this very different take on how change happens from a highly respected Jewish thinker, I felt that it was calling into question not only my most cherished beliefs about Judaism, but also my most deeply held assumptions about life itself.

Rabbi Salanter of course was not rejecting the possibility of making the world better, but he was setting an extremely high bar for the only way in which he believed it could come to pass. His teaching also seemed to speak with accuracy about the arc of a typical human life, about the heights we aspire to in our younger years, and how those aspirations tend to get modified, as we age, by the unexpected challenges we encounter as we move along our chosen life paths; a process that some might refer to as becoming more realistic.

The good news for me was that, as I thought about this idea, it became clear that, at least on the surface, Rabbi Salanter was wrong about his basic assertion. I could prove this to myself simply by making a list of the amazing chain of transformative events that have taken place in our world just in the past couple of centuries, and of the many individuals, from across the age spectrum, whose commitment and vision were the drivers of these transformations, and, who, at the same time, were clearly not anywhere near achieving an advanced stage of self-realization.

Here is a very short sampling of what could be on such a list: The creation and evolution of this very country, the United States, the military defeat of forces in the second world war that sought to impose their tyrannical will on the rest of the world and to destroy all traces of our people's civilization; the return of significant numbers of Jewish people to the Land of Israel and

the creation of the State of Israel, and the successes in reducing formal and informal discrimination achieved by the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, and the LGBT rights movement.

In light of these examples as well as many others that we could generate if we wanted to, I feel like we can reasonably take exception to Rabbi Salanter's apparent assertion; that no meaningful change can possibly take place in the world until and unless it is brought about by people who have thoroughly explored and transmuted their own internal landscapes, such that they have deep clarity about their own motives and behavior, and can bring that level of mindfulness consistently to all aspects of their lives. It is patently inaccurate from an historical point of view. And not only that, but there is also a danger that those who embrace his argument might never even consider taking the step of becoming an agent of change because of their perception that they still have too much work to do on their own inner lives.

Nonetheless, I do believe that there is an abiding truth in this teaching, a truth that speaks to the potentially powerful inter-relationship between the internal life of those actively working for societal change, and the unfolding of the change process they are attempting to facilitate. I see that truth expressed in the fact that very rarely, if ever, do we see a great accomplishment in some sphere of human life that is achieved without leaving some aspect incomplete, or in which unanticipated outcomes emerge that complicate the picture, or that lead to bitter conflicts, or to morally ambiguous situations.

And, we of course could point to numerous historical and contemporary examples of individuals who have waded into the waters of societal transformation, but who have lacked an awareness of how their own unrecognized pain could spill over into their work, and end up diminishing and even undermining the very changes they are attempting to help bring about. On the other hand, we also can identify numerous examples of people whose engagement in efforts to change the world had profoundly transformative effects on their own inner make up.

So, here is the new understanding I've come to of Rabbi Salanter's teaching: not that change in our own hearts and minds is a pre-requisite for successful participation in societal change, but that there is an inextricable link between these two processes. So, we should not be surprised when that which is unresolved in our hearts gets stirred up, and possibly even put on display in the process of our efforts to make the world a better place.

By the same token, we need to realize that there are some dimensions to our own inner development that simply cannot be addressed without our engagement in the work of taking responsibility for the world in one way or another.

Both we and the world are works in progress and will continue to be so, and the more we can keep that in our awareness, the more successful and effective we will be on both fronts.

Now everything I've been saying up to this point is really is by way of setting a context for me to share something in a bit of a more personal way; which is, that for all the importance that I have invested philosophically, in the real possibility of making the world a better place, I have nevertheless, in practice, tended to fall into the trap of taking Salanter's teaching literally.

Even as I have strongly affirmed, and been a cheerleader for, efforts toward positive change in the world, I have actually leaned away from taking a pro-active role in various change initiatives I could have participated in, at least partly out of the belief that my own emotional and spiritual make up is not yet at a level that would guarantee I could truly be of service to the cause and the greater community in such a role.

I must say that this personal stance has been challenged over the past several years, predominantly through our community's participation in, and a number of our members' very deep involvement with, Greater Cleveland Congregations and its national affiliate, the Industrial Areas Foundation. In the language of community organizing, there has been consistent "agitation" or intentionally pushing people towards the edges of their own comfort zones.

For better or for worse, I have continued to resist the pull to get more directly involved in the hands on work that GCC has so compellingly provided to us. But I have felt something shifting within my own heart recently.

I have felt called in a way I never have before to bring myself, imperfections and all, into more direct relationship with the extremely challenging realities facing our region, our nation and our world. I can't explain exactly why this shift is happening at this particular moment, but I have noticed that three recent stories in the news have touched me deeply, and raised within me the desire, maybe even the need, to do something concrete in response.

The first of these stories is the plight of the refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries that I spoke about on Rosh Hashannah. I have been moved by the desperate situation of these people which has motivated them to risk everything for an uncertain chance to live a more humane existence. I have also been moved and inspired by the groundswell of civilian offers to welcome and support large numbers of refugees in countries like England, Germany, Sweden and Iceland, and even in places like Hungary where the government has officially shut its doors, there have been unofficial citizen efforts launched to help the refugees.

The second story that has had an impact on me is the way in which the global climate change conversation has been re-ignited by the courage shown by Pope Francis in making it a central issue for the entire Roman Catholic Church, and by challenging all of us to get more involved in addressing it.

I have been moved by the many voices of religious leaders from diverse traditions who have responded to his initiative with deep appreciation and enthusiasm around the potential for interfaith collaboration it contains, not a small number of them from within the Jewish community.

In fact, one example of such collaboration is taking place at this very moment, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. A special Yom Kippur service is being held there with an explicit focus on climate change that was organized by a number of Jewish institutions, including the national Reconstructionist movement, and to which other religious communities have been invited. It is very much meant to send a message of Jewish support for the strong stance the Pope has taken on this issue and for his follow up visit to the U.S. this week, both of which have helped many of us to shake off a sense of numbness and disempowerment in relationship to this huge global threat, and to seek out new opportunities to bring more engagement to the way we all think, communicate and act in response to it.

The third story that touched me recently has more of a local connection. It happened for me when I opened up the Plain Dealer this past Sunday morning and saw the front page image of a funeral procession and a series of articles reporting on the most recent deaths of two young children from gun violence in our city. There was a story about the funeral for five year old Ramon Burnett who had been killed a couple of weeks earlier when he was caught in the crossfire of a shootout between two men, as he was playing outside near his grandmother's house. And a second story about three year old Major Howard who was killed under similar circumstances, as he sat with his mother in a parked car, just last week. I realize that these tragedies were unfortunately not isolated incidents, that there have been many others that preceded them, but for some reason, the voice inside me that that would typically have responded, with deeply pained regret, that there was nothing I could possibly do to make a difference, did not appear. Instead, I felt the strongest urge to find a way to do something, to say I was prepared to take some responsibility, regardless of the level of my own sense of readiness for what that might be.

Even as I speak these words, I remain keenly aware of the many ways in which I have much work to do, to become the person I aspire to be, and I pray that the places inside of me that are underdeveloped will not cause damage to any change effort in which I may be involved going forward. But I now have a new teaching that is haunting me, and motivating me. I'm not sure whether it's more ironic or poetic that it happens to come from our movement's founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, but I discovered this week that he said the following: "Not knowing which should come first, to improve oneself or to improve the world, we end up by doing neither. And actually, the only way to improve the world is by improving oneself, and the only way to improve oneself is by improving the world."

May we all in the coming year discern and embrace at least one of the many opportunities we have to follow his sage advice. Shanah tovah, a gut yor, tsom mo'il and gmar chatimah tovah/may our fasting today be effective and may we be sealed for good and sweet year.