Lesson 1-1  THE MUSSAR PATHWAY

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1. Introduction

Today you begin your journey into Mussar. The ultimate goal of Mussar study and practice is to help you become a more whole and holy person. The path is simple (at least to describe): learn to be what is called in Yiddish a mensch, a deeply good and decent human being, and make that the foundation of your spiritual life.

Even if you grew up in the Jewish world, chances are that you never heard the word Mussar until you encountered it here. But we assure you that Mussar is a venerable and well-established Jewish tradition that is now becoming more widely known. For centuries, Mussar has provided an illuminating, approachable, and highly practical set of teachings and practices for cultivating personal growth and spiritual realization in the midst of day-to-day life.

The core teaching of Mussar is that our deepest essence is inherently pure and holy, but this inner radiance is obscured by extremes of emotion, desire, and bad habits which veil that inner light. Our task in life is to transform the “veils” and so uncover the brilliant light of the soul. The Mussar masters developed a range of teachings and practices—some of which are contemplative, some of which focus on how we relate to other people in daily life, some concern God—to help us heal and refine ourselves. A current Mussar student put it well, “Each week I feel like I'm entering and spending time cleaning out the accumulated dust and grime covering my soul and mind.”

We’ll begin with a brief overview of the most essential elements of the Mussar approach to spiritual living.

2. Life Is a Curriculum

Consistently through time, the Mussar masters have taught that every one of us is assigned to master something in our lives. You have already been given your assignment and you have already encountered it, though you may not be aware that what faces you is a curriculum, nor that this is the central task of your life.
Your curriculum shows up most clearly in issues that repeatedly challenge you, time and time again: a string of soured or broken relationships, financial dreams that are never realized, fulfillment that is forever elusive. Embedded within this personal history there is a curriculum, and the sooner you become familiar with your curriculum and get to work on it, the faster you’ll get free of these habitual patterns. Then you will suffer less. Then you will cause less suffering for others. Then you will make the contribution to the world that is your unique and highest potential.

Every life has its challenges and you are not a stranger to the ones that seem to be a recurrent feature in your life. Through the experiences you have dealing with those challenges, you grow as a person. No one has a choice about that. It seems to be part of the plan for human life that it causes us to grow. Look back over the last five years. Haven’t you grown?

Where you do have a choice, however, is whether you just let your curriculum play out in any way it will, without preparing yourself through study and with guidance, or whether you will seek to uncover pathways for living and growing that prior generations already marked and illuminated to help you grow in a conscious, directed way. That important choice is in your hands.

That primary source for all Jewish thought and practice, the Torah, acknowledges this very choice, whether to grow by conscious intent or by blindly stumbling into life experience. In book of Deuteronomy (10:16) we are told: “You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart.” That image occurs only one other time in the Torah (Deuteronomy 30:6), in the variant: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart.” Circumcision is a metaphor for spiritual initiation—removing the obstacles to having an open, sensitive, initiated inner life. In the first verse, we are offered the option of initiating ourselves. The second verse tells us that God will do it. The second verse begins with the Hebrew letter vav, which can be translated “or.” In other words, you can initiate yourself, or God will initiate you. The Torah gives no third option.

Too often people stumble after false answers to the questions posed by their curriculum: “If only I were rich.” “Nip and tuck by the plastic surgeon.” “Support that cause.” “Join that club.” Recourse to those sorts of answers to your inner challenges is equivalent to turning yourself over to God to be wisened up, which unfortunately usually happens through bitter experiences of loss, failure and brokenness. Those experiences do, indeed, cause us to grow, with certainty. It seems a pity, though, that entire lives are spent fumbling blindly, in personal suffering and at great cost to the people around us and to the world, when each of us has another choice: take steps to initiate your own heart.1 That is what we are here to do in this Taste of Mussar course, by sharing teachings and practices from the way of Mussar.

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1 Here and throughout the course, we use the word “heart” in the sense of the Hebrew lev. The lev is the metaphorical center of a person’s being. It is neither a physical organ nor just the home of emotion or sentiment, as often used in contemporary culture. In Hebrew, the lev can think, listen, be wise, remember, forget, stand, fall, cry, sing, break and so on. Everything that a person is or does revolves around the core that is the heart.
3. What is Mussar?

What exactly is Mussar? That term names a spiritual perspective and also a discipline of practices that can significantly change the way a person perceives the world and acts in it. Mussar also names a popular movement that developed primarily in Lithuania in the second half of the nineteenth century. The word mussar itself\(^2\) means “correction” or “instruction” and also serves as the simple modern Hebrew word for “ethics.”

But Mussar is most accurately described as a way of life that leads to realizing our highest spiritual potential, including an everyday experience infused with happiness, trust, and love. The origins of Mussar can be traced back to tenth-century Babylonia,\(^3\) and until the nineteenth century, Mussar was solely an introspective practice undertaken by an individual seeker. In the mid-1800s, however, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883) perceived that the modern world presented unprecedented spiritual challenges, and so he called on people to learn and practice Mussar as a means to strengthen the final and most important bulwark for the defense of spiritual life: the solitary human heart.

The teachings of Mussar are as applicable to our lives today as they have been to generations gone by. While the circumstances of our current lives are very different from those of our ancestors, the passage of time has not altered human nature. As a result, the Mussar teachers’ insights into the makeup and dynamics of your own inner life hold as true today as they did for people living in those earlier ages. Our lives have changed in so many ways through the centuries, yet at our deepest core as human beings, we’ve really not changed at all.

4. The Soul and its Traits

This course will adopt the focus the Mussar teachers have emphasized, which is to encourage you to examine the role that specific inner traits play in the curriculum of your life. This is far from their only spiritual concern, but they recognize that everything depends on this inner spiritual foundation. Each trait is a building block for a life of wholeness and holiness. Any trait that is not operating in an optimum way in effect occludes the light of the soul from shining into your life, and through you, into the world. So we need to understand each trait and then to assess the state of that quality within our own lives. That understanding will, in turn, be put to practical use because it is a Mussar principle that it is practice, more than thought, that brings about personal change.

All of the inner traits, taken as a group, are called in Hebrew middot (plural; the singular is middah). While almost always translated into English as “trait of character,” the Hebrew word middah literally means “measure.” Each of us is endowed at birth with every one of the human traits, and what sets one person apart from another is not whether they do or don’t experience anger or humility or generosity or worry or laziness or any other of the many inner traits—because we all do experience all these traits—but rather the degree, or measure, of the traits that live in their souls. The angriest person, for

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\(^2\) The term mussar occurs in the Torah, e.g., Proverbs 1:8.

\(^3\) In the writings of Sa’adia Gaon, the leader of Babylonian Jewry of the time.
example, may have an excess of the anger trait, but Mussar insists that there must be at least some degree of calm within that raging soul. In parallel, there must also be a touch of anger in even the calmest individual. The stingiest person still has at least a grain of generosity, and the most generous must experience tightfistedness on occasion. And so on with all the traits. The spiritual issue is not whether you have the traits—you, just like the rest of us, have them all—but rather their measure on a continuum. Nor should we aspire to rid ourselves of certain traits. Each has its role, though each of us will experience certain traits in too high or too low a measure. Those traits are what sets our spiritual curriculum for us.

In this course, we will later come to focus on six middot, and at the same time, on the qualities which represent a deficiency in those same areas. The list is:

- Generosity / Stinginess
- Gratitude / Entitlement
- Patience / Impatience
- Trust / Worry
- Humility / Arrogance
- Enthusiasm / Procrastination

In reality, some of these traits may be a high priority on your spiritual curriculum. But that priority could go to some other quality entirely. By working together on this sampling of the middot, we are not suggesting that you need to work on just these six traits. We are using these traits to illustrate the Mussar perspective and approach, which you might later apply to these or perhaps other traits that are really of central significance to your spiritual growth. This course, after all, offers a “taste” of Mussar.

5. Practice: “Accounting of the Soul” (Cheshbon Ha’Nefesh)®

So how do you work on your personal spiritual curriculum? The Mussar masters advocate daily practice, and the core of that practice is an “accounting of the soul,” a direct translation of the Hebrew phrase “cheshbon ha’nefesh.” We will introduce the several elements of this practice over the next few lessons. Rabbi Y.B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) pointed out that after each day of creation, God looked back at the day and evaluated it: “And He saw that it was good.” Since one of the guiding principles of Mussar practice is to “walk in His ways,”4 in other words, to learn from and try to emulate the divine, so we, too, should be looking back at our actions and evaluating them. That means doing an Accounting of the Soul.

Done in a systematic and thorough way, this practice provides clear knowledge of the forces and contours of your own inner landscape. That interior world of personality, thought, values, wisdom and emotions, along with its eternal essence, is what we know as “soul,” and a rigorous process of soul-accounting delivers up penetrating insight and, ultimately, change.

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4 based on the biblical injunction to “walk in His ways” found in Deuteronomy 28:9.
An Evening Diary Practice

The first element in this practice we want you to take on is to keep a diary or journal.

**DO:** Acquire or assign a small notebook for journaling.

Keep your notebook beside your bed, along with a pen. A blank journal of any kind can be used for this practice, but we recommend that you print out the loose-leaf diary pages that we have prepared and provided just for this purpose.

The first focus for your journaling is the six traits that we are focusing on in this course, as listed above. Starting tonight, just before you go to bed, reflect back over your day to see what you can identify that in any way reflects experience you had specifically with any of these six traits. Was there a situation in which you were impatient? Or patient? Perhaps you didn’t express gratitude to someone who helped you. Or perhaps you went out of your way to say thank you to someone. And so on through the other traits we are holding in focus for this course.

Be on the lookout especially for any breakdowns, problems or troublesome feelings that arose, as well as any positive motivations, actions or successful behaviors you can identify in relation to these six categories.

The notes you write in your journal should be brief, just an outline of the facts that reveal something of how you experienced the event/feeling. Don’t worry if what you write won’t pass as literature. No one but you ever need see this notebook. The point of the writing is to bring your spiritual curriculum to conscious awareness. That is the first step in doing an Accounting of the Soul, and we will add further steps to the practice as time goes on.

**DO:** [Download journal pages by clicking this link.](#)

Here at the beginning of the course, it is a good idea to clarify your intention for your practice. Such a conscious intention is called a “kavanah” in Hebrew. Your intention may relate to a specific middah that we will be focusing on, or to a more general goal you intend to pursue.

Begin your journal practice by considering what are your intentions here. What do you want to gain from this course? What commitments do you want to make?

**DO:** Write your intention [kavanah] at the beginning of your journal.

For this and other writing assignments we will give you in this course, we are providing sample journal entries that were collected from students doing this course. We provide these examples to you to give you some ideas about how you might do your own journaling. These examples are meant to illustrate a range of possibilities; you don’t need to copy any of them, and you may find yourself wanting to approach your journal in a different way, which is fine, too.
Our main intention in providing these examples is to help you kick-start your own journal practice by seeing what others have written in response to the A Taste of Mussar assignments. These examples will show you that the notes we ask you to keep are well within your capability.

VIEW: sample kavanot to see some examples of what previous students have entered in their journals in response to this assignment.

In each subsequent email, we’ll ask you reflection questions to ponder in your journal and observations to make on your middah practice.

6. Support

In traditional Mussar practice and in courses that The Mussar Institute offers beyond A Taste of Mussar, students are assigned partners and sometimes a small group with whom they share the journey of working on themselves. While those interactive components are not part of A Taste of Mussar, we do encourage you, if possible, to share doing this course along with a friend or partner. You’ll find your experience strengthened and the effect of the course deepened by having a study partner.

We also invite you to participate in the course Discussion Group. This is an on-line forum in which to ask questions, share experiences and develop community. It’s a peer list, which means it is not moderated and there is no teacher assigned to answer questions. Consider it like the student common room. Sometimes, that is where we learn the most.

DO: Sign on to the course Discussion Group by clicking the link, or entering the following address into your web browser: http://tasteofmussar.proboards.com/

During the course, you may have questions or issues for which you would like some experienced help and response. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with our Support line. Email support@mussarinstitute.org or telephone 1-778-300-6174 and an experienced Mussar student will respond as soon as possible.

7. Conclusion

With this, you begin your journey into the learning and practice of Mussar. We wish you much insight and growth along this way, and we pledge to offer as much help and guidance as we can. At the same time, no matter what we provide, the factor that most determines what you glean from this program is your own diligence (and, yes, diligence is a soul-trait, too). Read thoroughly and with enough time to contemplate what you read, practice consistently and with commitment, and seek the truth in your heart, and in just the few weeks that we will be engaged together, you will come away with gifts that will begin to change your life. The lessons we will share are for you to apply right now as well as throughout your life, after and beyond this course.