Lesson 4-3  OUR SELVES AND BEYOND

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1. Introduction

Rabbi Simcha Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, (1824-1898) taught that we practice Mussar “in simple things, small things, to come through them to the greatest heights.”

He’s pointing to a secret that is visible right before your eyes. The spiritual work that you need to attend to is not beckoning to you from a distant mountain, a cave, or some specialized institution. It is with you in every moment of the day, in how you walk, how you eat, how you pray, how you relate to others. Every gesture, every emotion that you bring into the world is refracted through your *middot ha’nefesh*, the traits of your soul, and that is what makes them uniquely your own. The condition of your *middot* is also expressed in everything you do. Inevitably, some of your *middot* have room to grow and these *middot* define your personal spiritual curriculum. Your spiritual work calls to you from the simple things, the small things of your everyday life. Attend to those, and you will ascend to the greatest heights of holiness and wholeness.

We now come to wrapping up this course, though we reassure you that the path continues. We’ll talk about continuing a bit later on. First, though, we want to cover two other topics: how interpersonal relations provide prime opportunities for spiritual practice, and a few words on the third stage of Mussar practice, the one called *tikkun*, or “transformation.”

2. Bearing the Burden of the Other

Until now, the spiritual practices we have discussed have focused on you as an individual. But we do not live alone, and we are not meant to isolate ourselves from others. In fact, the realm of interpersonal relations offers us tremendous opportunities to work on ourselves, maybe even the best. Indeed, the Mussar masters tell us that action done on behalf of another person is the foundation of spiritual practice. “Spirituality is higher than materiality,” said Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. “But the material needs of another person are an obligation of my spiritual life.”

The Alter of Kelm made “bearing the burden of the other” into the cornerstone of the Mussar he taught. That phrase translates into acts of generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, and care undertaken for the benefit of others. We’re encouraged to pay...
attention and respond to the needs of others because this stance and the ensuing actions bring into focus the preoccupation with self that is a primary spiritual impediment. We have even heard holiness defined as the absence of self-interest.

In endeavoring to help others, we will surely encounter our own personal spiritual curriculum. Our efforts to do good therefore provide us with an ideal opportunity to grapple with our own soul-traits and to grow spiritually. There is a story about Rabbi Salanter and his efforts to get the elders of a town to repair the roof on the poorhouse. When they dragged their feet, Rabbi Salanter went to sleep with the beggars under the dilapidated roof until the city fathers undertook to fund the needed repairs. He summed up the way in which caring for the needs of others can be undertaken as spiritual practice, saying: “A pious Jew is not one who worries about his fellow man’s soul and his own stomach; a pious Jew worries about his own soul and his fellow man’s stomach.”

We are engaged in a struggle to lift ourselves up so that our higher self guides our life. In every decision and choice you make, there will be an option that represents the way of the higher self and another that answers the call of the lower self. For 1000 years the Mussar masters have been developing, recording, and passing on their techniques to help us walk this way of the soul. It is with just this process in mind that they made “bearing the burden of the other” into a primary practice because it stresses “other” over “self.” The ability to transcend self-interest is the concrete manifestation of living as a soul, beyond survival and instinct. The burden of the other is not meant to be borne metaphorically but in real terms. In Mussar, loving-kindness (the middah known as chesed) does not mean beaming good vibrations toward another person, nor cultivating a sentimental attachment to them, but clearly and unequivocally means taking practical action that is of real benefit to the other in concrete ways.

Drawing on a lesson from the Talmud, the Mussar teachers identify the sorts of activities that exemplify bearing the burden of the other. We are enjoined to cloth the naked, visit the sick, comfort the mourner and bury the dead. Of course, these are just examples, since human needs for which we can offer help come in every conceivable shape and form. Yet these four actions do offer us a template for how to care for others. Babies are naked, life is punctuated by sickness, we all need help at the end of life, and sorrows call for comforting. Were you to endeavor to devote some of your life to being of help to others in these ways, you would not only be fulfilling the ideal of a life lived with consciousness of the other; you would create circumstances in which the reality of your own middot would be revealed to your consciousness. The effort to help others will bring your personal spiritual curriculum to the surface, which is the necessary first step in the direction of change, in the direction of holiness.

3. Tikkun – Transformation

Becoming aware of which of your middot have the potential to grow is the first stage of Mussar practice. Attempting to bear the burden of the other is a very effective way to gain that awareness. Last lesson, we dealt with the second stage of Mussar practice, which is taking steps to act differently, and draw closer to the ideal (the stage called

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1 Sotah 14a
kibbush). We’d be remiss if we didn’t mention the third and final stage of Mussar practice, even though this is an advanced level, and nothing we could get to in practice in a course as brief as this one.

The journey to holiness requires real change. Becoming aware of the calibration of your middot is a necessary first step, and making efforts to improve your behavior is an obligation that flows from that awareness. But if that is as far as you go, you will not have reworked your inner nature enough to get close to the peak of the mountain where holiness dwells. When you take action to overcome certain impulses or tendencies, those impulses and tendencies are still operative in you. The final stage of Mussar practice involves such a total rewiring that you change the very impulses themselves.

In the foreword that he added for the republication of the Mussar classic, Cheshbon Ha’Nefesh, in the 1930s (after having been first published in 1811), Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Sher, leader of the Slabodka school of Mussar at the time, wrote: “Even one who recognizes and knows his negative character traits might find the study of mussar to be of no avail, for he cannot undertake to follow the mussar way of life until he fully understands the processes of thought formation and the modes of thought development.”

Rabbi Sher is alluding to the fact that real and fundamental change doesn’t happen at the level of the conscious mind but rather at the level of the sub-conscious, where thoughts originate. To penetrate to that deeper inner level, the Mussar teachers developed visualizations and meditations, along the lines of what we have shared in this course, as well as contemplations and a chanting practice. What these modalities share is that they stimulate inner experiences that are not cognitive; they do not rely on ideas or analytical thought but rather represent “experiential learning.”

As we’ve said, this level of practice is advanced and not something we can include in this course. Nevertheless, in the Practice section of this session, we will provide you with an example of one such transformative practice that is effective for where we’ve arrived in this course.

4. Where To From Here?

In just four weeks, you have acquired the basic tools you need to continue a Mussar practice and to bring about fundamental change in yourself. That may seem remarkable but really, it isn’t. It may have taken a thousand years to do the research but what got developed and refined is, in the end, a set of simple principles and practices.

You’ve got the core of a Mussar practice if you continue to do the morning phrase and evening journal of the Accounting of the Soul practice, moving through a cycle of 8 to 13 middot that you identify as ones that are on your curriculum. You can expect to see results and, like many of our students, you may also one day report, “I’m not the same person I used to be.”

But we don’t want you to confuse “simple” and “easy.” The core practices of Mussar are not hard to explain or grasp because they are simple, but that doesn’t make them easy. For example, we have assigned a journaling practice that involves recording in the
evening anything that happened that day that relates to the middah that you are currently holding in focus. Simple. But during this course, did you write in your journal with consistency? Indeed, perhaps you did. If so, you are not like the majority, who seem to find it a struggle to keep up with their journal.

To help you keep learning and growing using the tools of Mussar, you may wish to read Alan’s book, Everyday Holiness. That book focuses on 18 middot and the techniques of Mussar practice, and so ought to be helpful for you in terms of learning as well as practice.

You might also want to sign up for a deeper experience of Mussar through a course offered by The Mussar Institute. Click here to see all our course offerings. More information on Mussar courses will come to you shortly.

If you have questions about where to go and what to do next in your spiritual exploration in the way of Mussar, please email info@mussarinstitute.org. We want to give you the information and support you need.

5. Practice

As a closing practice, here are a few ways that will help you identify the middot that are uppermost on your own personal spiritual curriculum. Follow these suggestions and you will grasp how important it is to cultivate your middot in the way of Mussar:

1. Pay attention to what you think about during the day, your inner dialogue, particularly what disturbs you.
2. Discover what others notice about you—ask people you trust and who you believe have good judgment.
3. Notice people to whom you react negatively – what about them don’t you like? That could give you a hint about yourself.
4. Make note of problems that arise in your life and see if you can find consistent patterns or recurrent breakdowns which relate to a middah.

The Mussar masters have developed many techniques to transform soul-traits. The common thread is that they work at the subconscious level, rather than the conscious, volitional level. Three practices that illustrate what is involved in the transformation of soul-traits are visualizations, contemplations, and impassioned chanting (hitpa’alut). You’ve experienced the first two of these methods in the audios of earlier weeks. The third one is offered today in the audio we provide. Mussar chanting involves the repetition of a phrase over and over with melody and emotion as well as meaning. We recommend you continue with the chant next week as well, and use it whenever you feel the need. Chant: Elohai neshama sh’netata bi, tahora hee. A translation is “My God, the soul you have given me is pure.”

The Hebrew reads: אלוהי נשמה שנתת ב‐ התורה היא
Listen to the chant and feel free to chant along. Write about your experience in your diary.

**DO: Click here to hear Alan doing hitpa’alut chanting** of the verse: *Elohai neshama sh’netata bi, tahora hee*

Feel free to chant along.

Finally, to close the circle, we ask that you reflect on an intention you can carry forward after today. That might be a more global intention, like striving for inner purity and elevation. Or you might identify and commit to working on a particular *middah*, perhaps one of the *middot* we explored in the course or another one.

**DO: Write your closing intention in your journal.**

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

**DO: Write a final and parting contribution to the Discussion Group,** and read there what others have to say at the end of the course.

### 6. Conclusion

We began this week’s session with a quote from Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, and we’ll end with one from him, too. “Mussar,” he said, “is the work of a lifetime. And that is why you were given a lifetime in which to do it.”

The Mussar teachers tell us that the purpose of a life is to purify and elevate the soul. All else is context and exercise. In the beginning, you are born as a soul. In the end, you die as a soul. In between, life is an unending series of tests and opportunities, all of which are challenges to your *middot*. Challenges, yes, and opportunities for growth as well.

Growth is the inherent quality of life. Everything that is alive is growing. A tree, a flower, a bird or a bear is either growing, or it’s dying. And the same is true for us. We’ve opened to you pathways of growth that have been explored and marked for us over the centuries by the masters of the Mussar tradition. It is our hearts’ wish that you have found here methods that will help you facilitate conscious growth. But as Rabbi Simcha Zissel tells us, what we are engaged in here is nothing less than the work of a lifetime. We hope you will continue along on this path to guide the soul’s growth, for the sake of the soul you are, and the world we share. May your journey be blessed.