



**EVERYDAY HOLINESS**  
**Jewish Teachings on How To Live Well**  
**at Congregation Schara Tzedek**

**Talk given by Dr. Alan Morinis**  
**September 30, 2007**

Thanks to Rabbi Rosenblatt for graciously having me here this evening, and to the inimitable and irrepressible Shelley Karrel for all the arrangements to make it possible, and to my friends at Banyen Books – especially Kolin Lymworth and Michael Bertrand – for co-sponsoring this evening. Special acknowledgment to Meyer Grinshpan, who has long encouraged me to teach locally, in the spirit of love and remembrance for his family who lived where Mussar lived, in Lithuania, and who perished there in the Holocaust. May their memories be for a blessing.

Since the publication in May of my new book *Everyday Holiness*, I have logged many miles on tour. I've been in Montreal and Malibu, in Montclair (NJ) and Melbourne (Australia). I've been in a synagogue where the President of the congregation came to services in formal tails and a top hat and to a service where the woman just over from me had a live snake wrapped around her neck. I've seen enough of the myriad goings on that take place in the name of Jewish life to fill a whole other book.

Now it's my honour and pleasure to be addressing a home town audience, something that I have quite rigorously avoided during the 10 years that I have been investigating the little-known and Jewish spiritual tradition of Mussar, and sharing what I have found.

I have to tell you that you are a challenging audience for me, because I know that some of you are very familiar with Mussar, while for others this will be a first exposure and there is a full range between these two poles. Because my life took a rather unusual route to introduce me to Mussar, and because I have developed a personal perspective on what Mussar has to offer, I hope everyone here tonight will come away with at least something that can be taken into your life, to make a difference.

I was teaching in Palo Alto, home to Stanford University, and after my talk a professor came up to me and pointed his finger at me and said, "You didn't define your terms." It was like being an undergraduate all over again. And I thought about it and he was right. It is important to define terms so we can be sure we understand each other. Definitions satisfy the intellect, and for that they are valuable, although definitions don't always capture the whole truth, especially because the spiritual realm that concerns us tonight extends beyond what the intellect can know, and embodies other ways of knowing too.

This is important to put out as we join together in an exploration of inner life. As I wrote in *Everyday Holiness*

Spiritual truths are not so much learned as recalled. Some ideas that we encounter, even if for the first time, don't strike us as new information but more like memories being reawakened within us. It is as if our hearts innately possess these truths and so we don't need lessons, only reminders of wisdom that we already know. These reminders awaken us, and then we see life more clearly and we know what we must do.

My illustrious Mussar ancestor, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, said this much before me. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he stated his intention for writing his book *Mesillat Yesharim (The Path of the Just)*: "I have come only to remind you of things you already know."

You will know that we are roaming into important areas of the spiritual when you experience bells of recognition going off in you. I want to alert you to that experience because you may otherwise not realize how important it is to pay attention to those inner resonances, which often point to something that is of importance to your inner life.

As you may recall, the title for this talk is "Jewish Teachings on How to Live Well." I'll be drawing mostly on the 1000 year old Mussar tradition to address this topic, because in those thousand years, much has changed, but not human nature, and so what has been discovered, tested, refined and passed on has as much relevance to our lives today as it has in centuries past. This is actually one of the things that is valuable about the Mussar tradition – it is time-tested. It has been found valuable by numerous previous generations. What it has to offer is relevant to us too, as I have found in my own life. It's only because I have applied Mussar and found it so useful that I continue to feel obligated to share what I have learned with others like you.

My message to you this evening is very simple. In fact, I'm going to take away all the suspense and give you the conclusion right now, so you can track all of what we will be looking at in terms of the conclusion we are working toward. I can summarize what I have to say to you in just two statements, which are the simple conclusion of everything we will work through in our time together.

The first statement is:

1. Your life embodies a personal spiritual curriculum. Everyone has a different curriculum, though all are variations on the same theme. You have already been assigned your curriculum. In fact, you have already been running into it and hopefully working on it, and you are likely already very familiar with it in some ways. What you may not have realized, however, is that your ordinary life with all its challenges, tests, and opportunities is meant to be seen by you as the key curriculum you have been assigned in this lifetime.

The second statement is:

2. Mastering your spiritual curriculum requires practice. You don't have a choice about having a spiritual curriculum. You have one. Life is set up to assign you such a curriculum, and I guarantee you that you have yours. The choice you do have, however, is whether or not you engage consciously with the lessons on your curriculum. You will grow by means of your curriculum only if it becomes the basis for practice. If you never come to the realization that your life contains a curriculum, or if you choose to ignore your curriculum, then you will still grow, because life is a journey of growing, but in that case, your growth will likely be less, indirect, inefficient and certainly more painful than it needs to be.

That is what I want to share with you this evening, and now we can begin to flesh out these two points: you have a spiritual curriculum, and working on it is a matter of practice.

It turns out that our topic for this evening is very timely in terms of the Jewish calendar. Just yesterday was the one day in the year when the Book of Ecclesiastes [Kohelet] is chanted in the synagogue. You may be familiar with this book of Solomon's wisdom, which is entirely concerned with how to live well. In his words: "I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives."

What is worthwhile to do during the few days of our lives seems to be a topic well worth pursuing. Since living well is the outcome of choices you will make every day in many ways, if you have a false or misguided sense of what it means to live well, then you will make decisions that don't lead to living well, even though that is fully your intention and motivation.

Living well means that you experience full, rich, lasting satisfactions in this life. We all seek that. As human beings, we are born to be hungry and to seek satisfaction. That's in our natures.

Experience tells us that some things provide a lasting and fulfilling satisfaction, and there are others that are trivial and transient. The delight of a good meal passes once the food has left the tastebuds, and in only a matter of hours, you are hungry once more.

Princeton psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who was born in Tel Aviv in 1934, won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002 for his studies of consumer behavior. One of the things he found was how quickly people become dissatisfied with their new purchases.

What a satisfaction it is to get a new car, or the latest computer, or handheld communication device, or iPhone, or whatever. But so soon it is dented, or a newer model comes out, or you realize you didn't need it. So very soon the satisfaction passes.

There is nothing novel in this. It's just what King Solomon reports in Ecclesiastes. Of course, he had different hardware and software options in his day, but hear what the king says:

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man.

I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.

Having established a life of extraordinary material success, King Solomon concluded:

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was vanity, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun.

The Hebrew word translated here as “vanity” is *hevel*. Our sages tell us that the word *hevel* literally means “mist” or “fog”. All the worldly accomplishments the king achieved were as insubstantial and transient as mist rising off a field, burnt off in an instant.

The same is true for us. We live in a world of constant improvement and yet the percentage of people who say they are very happy has fallen slightly compared to surveys done in the early 1970s.

Since the 1950s, reports of major depression have increased tenfold. While much of that increase undoubtedly represents a new willingness to diagnose depression, there is a general consensus among mental-health experts that it also reflects that people today are generally more fearful, anxious and pessimistic.

We've seen huge advances in technology, all with the stated purpose of improving our lives. But I notice that in the 50s and 60s, technology was referred to as "labour-saving devices." That label is heard no more. When you listen to everyday conversation, you realize how much of the time we are dissatisfied with the machines that we bought so they could help us achieve satisfaction. And no matter how dramatic a new innovation may be, no matter how much easier it does make our lives, very soon the shine wears off and we take it for granted. It doesn't yield any more satisfaction because it has become just a necessity of life.

Today, 98% of North American homes have a TV set, and 40% have three or more, and yet owning a TV set no longer gives anything like the satisfaction that owning a black-and-white set did in the 1950s.

In contrast to the transient *hevel* [mist] with which we occupy ourselves for so much of our daily existence, the Mussar teachers tell us to pay attention to our spiritual lives. None of us is likely to achieve more material success in our lives than did Solomon, so why should we expect to reach fulfilment on that path? It's by recognizing your spiritual curriculum and living your life in relation to that curriculum that you will discover the path to living well.

Another way of saying that is that we need to know that spiritual life is more satisfying than material life.

I'm going to make good on my promise and define what I mean by "spiritual".

In one way, "spiritual" is easy to define. The great Mussar teacher Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, who left us only two years ago, defined the spiritual as "building your interior world". That's what I understand as the spiritual too. It isn't something far off, only known to saints and not about ordinary life. The totality of your inner experience, from the gross to the refined, from the common to the rare, is your spiritual realm. From this point of view, your emotions, your values, your proclivities, talents and inclinations are all part of your spiritual self.

That's all true, but there is another dimension of the spiritual that I not so easy to pin down. The spiritual within a human intersects with a mysterious dimension as well. Some might use a name like "God", but more often in Jewish thought this other dimension is not explicitly named, or is known by a euphemism like "The Name" because as soon as it is named, that's not it; it's not graspable intellectually.

Mussar is a Jewish spiritual discipline because it is entirely concerned with helping you to build your interior world. This is a project that has been going on since the first springs of Mussar began to bubble up in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though there are older sources as well.

## 2. Mussar: history, definition and goal

I mentioned that the first real work with the intention of giving us guidance on how to build our interior worlds was from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, written in Babylonia by a great sage named Saadia Gaon. Then in every succeeding century, in Spain and then Italy and then Lithuania, insightful researchers and teachers have studied our lives, and have recorded their advice on how we can build our interior worlds in the best possible way.

Traditionally and almost exclusively throughout its history, the practice of Mussar has been intimately tied to a Jewish way of life. The backbone of a traditional Jewish life has always been defined by adherence to the behavioural code defined by the 613 commandments, and one of the purposes for which Mussar was developed was to help with mitzvah observance. The commandments define the ideal but the ideal is not always easy to attain, and Mussar helps to close that gap.

But Mussar is useful in other ways as well. It is well-known that one can be, in fact, punctilious in observing the codes, and learned in the laws and also the texts, and still be lacking in ideal qualities of the inner life. There is a story told about Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, who founded the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mussar movement, that he had come to the synagogue on one of the festival days without a prayer-book (a Machzor). He found himself standing next to an illustrious scholar and he motioned a request to be allowed to look into his neighbor's Machzor. The scholar's "response" was a shove. This discrepancy so pierced Rabbi Salanter that it is said that this incident is one of the experiences that caused him to found the Mussar movement.

The first 900 years of Mussar (from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) were largely concerned with MAPPING the interior territory. If our teachers were going to help us navigate the inner life, they had first to understand and describe the territory. They have bequeathed us an extraordinarily acute and useful map of our inner lives that I will share in a moment.

Then, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mussar became the focus of a movement centred in Lithuania. At this time, the map was augmented, and Mussar was filled out not just as a map but as a body of practices.

Throughout all this time, Mussar has had one purpose, which is summed up well by Rabbi Elya Lopian, who passed away only in 1970. Rabbi Lopian said that: "Mussar is making the heart understand what the mind knows."

This is a good definition of Mussar because what the Mussar masters saw about us is that there is very often a big gap between what we know or hold to be our values and objectives and how we actually live.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, who as I said initiated the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mussar Movement, reflected on this by saying that "the biggest distance in the universe is between the head and the heart."

Mussar exists to close the gap between the ideal that we know and hold for ourselves... and the reality of who we are at this moment in time.

Closing that gap might mean adding something to the mind in the way of knowledge or understanding, but it is more likely to involve transforming the heart through small steps of practice.

In Jewish thought, the heart = *lev* = is not the emotional centre. Or rather, it is not just the emotional centre, because it is that and much more, more akin to what we might call “second nature.” The Mussar masters set as their goal to help us transform our second natures so that we would move closer toward the ideal of whom each of us could be, if we mastered our spiritual curriculum. That transformation is done by means of practice.

The teachers expressed the goal of Mussar in a few of other ways too.

*Shlemut* – wholeness

*kedusha*– holiness

Rabbi Yechezkiel Levinstein, who was the Mussar supervisor at the great Mir and the Ponovezh yeshivas 50 years ago, said that “A person’s primary mission in this world is to purify and elevate his soul” (p.12-13 *Sichos Mussar*).

Let me repeat that: “A person’s primary mission in this world is to purify and elevate his soul”.

Now let me rephrase that: “Your primary mission in this world is to purify and elevate your soul”.

Our question for this evening is how to live well, and surely we will only live well if we are living in harmony with our mission. Rabbi Levinstein articulates the general view within the Mussar teachings that our mission in life is to purify and elevate our souls. Whatever we do that has the effect of purifying and elevating the soul will be in consonance with our mission, and will be ultimately satisfying.

But that is a bit of a trick answer to the question, because it presupposes that you know what does and does not purify and elevate the soul. It also presupposes that you know what “soul” is. Neither of those assumptions is warranted. Helping us understand what the soul is and how to purify and elevate it is the focus of much of what the Mussar teachers have bequeathed us as a tradition.

The soul is the territory that the Mussar teachers carefully mapped in the centuries that they were observing human life.

How to purify and elevate our souls is the focus of the transformative discipline of practices they evolved.

Let’s explore both these things.

### 3. The Soul and its journey

When I say “soul,” I am referring to all the non-tangible aspects of our inner life. The emphasis here is on the word **all**. In English, we have one term that wraps up all these characteristics in a single package – the soul. Not so in Hebrew nor in Jewish thought. Going right back to the Torah, we find that the soul is named by three different words, and these three terms continued to be used through the centuries to help us understand our inner reality. Some later thinkers added two additional designations to the soul, but these three are the ones that are used most consistently to across the breadth of the Jewish tradition to describe the key realities of our inner life.

These terms are *neshama*, *ruach*, and *nefesh*, and it’s these aspects of the soul that I want to focus on in this session.

When I speak of the three primary aspects of the soul, I want to be very clear that this is just a way of talking so we can understand the subject. In reality, the soul is an undivided whole. At the level of soul, there is no break between heart and mind, emotions and intellect. All are faculties of the soul.

#### Neshama

1) At the very core of the soul is an inner dimension shaped in the “image and likeness” in which we are created. This essential kernel within us is inherently holy and pure. It isn’t possible to taint it, no matter what evil deeds we do. It glows with the warm and steady flame of a candle, and its light is constant. This spiritual nucleus is called *neshama*. The *neshama* is the source of all the holiness and completion we seek in our lives, and it exists within us now, though the way to it is not cleared.

We get a sense of the pure essence that is neshama from the liturgy, where we read “*Elohai neshama sh’natata bi tahora hi*” – God the soul you have given me is pure.

The poet Moses ibn Ezra, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in Spain, wrote beautifully of the *neshama* in a poem.

#### HANDOUT 1.

*In my body He has kindled a lamp from His glory;  
It tells me of the paths of the wise.  
It is the light which shines in the days  
Of youth, and grows brighter in old age.  
Were it not derived from the mystery of His light  
It would fail with my strength and my years.  
With it I search out the chamber of wisdom,  
And I climb with no ladder to the garden of delights.*

We have essences that are pure because we are made in the image of God (*b'tzelem Elokim*). And because we all have essences that are pure and holy, we are all redeemable. We may have gone far off the track and lost our way, but we are ever and always redeemable (*teshuvah*).

## Ruach

2) The **next** dimension of the soul is that aspect of the soul that is the source of animation and vigour – no more, and no less, than the “spirit of life.” This is called *ruach*. The word *ruach* literally means “wind,” which gives an image of the kind of immaterial force that blows through us.

The word *ruach* occurs 389 times in the Torah. Frequently rendered *spirit* though the meaning of the word is to be deduced only from its *usage*. The one root idea running through all the passages is *invisible force*.

## Nefesh

3) The **third** aspect of the soul is the *nefesh*, the aspect that is most visible and accessible to us. Here we find all the human traits we see in others and ourselves, like emotions and thought, desires and talents. This dimension of soul interfaces with this world and is the home of the personality, identity and character with which we identify in this life.

With only limited exceptions, everything that exists in our inner world is an aspect of soul. Some features of the inner life are familiar to us, factors like personality, emotions, talents, desires, conscience, wisdom, and so on. Even the faculties we ordinarily allot to the “mind,” like thought, logic, memory and forgetting, are all powers of the soul.

While the powers of the mind are all faculties of the soul, we have to be careful to distinguish that thoughts are not the soul. We are very familiar with our thoughts, and we identify with them, but soul is a much deeper level of being. Soul is the ground of being, the fundament of who you are as a being.

So the tradition offers us a three part model of the soul: at the core is the radiant, holy and untainted kernel called *neshama*, surrounding it is the *nefesh* that houses all are familiar human qualities, and animating it all is the spirited wind of the *ruach*.

At birth, each of us is endowed with every one of the full range of the human traits. All of them, we are all born with all of them. What sets one person apart from another is not whether they have a trait that is different from those of someone else – that’s not possible because we all have them all – but the degree, or measure, of the traits that live in each of our souls.

The Mussar teachers focus on the level of soul called *nefesh*. The *nefesh* is home to all the traits that we recognize as distinctive to the everyday reality of human life. In Hebrew, the collective word for these soul-traits is *middot*. That word is always translated as “traits of character,” but literally it means “measure.” We learn from this that the differences between people, and also what separates us from our own integrity, is not whether a trait is present in us, because we all have them all! And so the angriest person, for example, must have at least some degree of calm within that raging soul. The stingiest person still has to have at least a grain of generosity, and so on with all the traits. It’s not whether we have the traits – all of us have them all – but the **level** of each trait, that gives us our distinctive way of being in the world, and also sets our personal curriculum for growth.

Focus on the *nefesh* because it is the level or dimension of the soul that has the capacity to be clear, in which case the holy light of the deeper kernel of being (*neshama*) shines readily into your life and through you into the world. Or the *nefesh* can be clouded and darkened by obstructed traits, in which case the light of the *neshama* is obscured.

All very heady. Let’s do a meditation that gives some sense of the holiness of the inner core of being.

MEDITATION      light on eyelids

This perspective offers a very practical lesson on how to understand your own life. It’s so important a lesson that I want to linger on it for a while. To do that, I want to introduce you to a classic Mussar text that elegantly conveys what I have been saying. This selection of text comes from the 16<sup>th</sup> century book *Orchos Tzaddikim*.

HANDOUT 2.: a teaching from *Orchos Tzaddikim*

Learn in *chevruta* (or all together) and then discuss.

So that’s the picture of human inner life that the Mussar teachers want us to see. Every trait that tends toward the extreme is an obstacle on your spiritual journey. Here we have identified what it is that stands as the obstructions that hinder you from living well. It’s not how much money you have, or where you live, or what job you have, or how straight your teeth may be—and we know that because we know that people can be very wealthy, or can have what seems to be the ideal job, or the best address, or be the most beautiful—and still be miserable and unfulfilled.

The gift of this text is to identify that the road to living well involves fitting yourself into the picture that *Orchos Tzaddikim* paints, so that you will come to understand your own personal SPIRITUAL CURRICULUM.

Your personal spiritual curriculum is the unique configuration of inner traits that you

have that tend toward the extreme on the range and so are obstacles on your journey toward wholeness, or holiness, or just to living well.

Here is how I described your personal spiritual curriculum in *Everyday Holiness*.

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. My purpose in this book is to help you wake up to your personal curriculum and to guide your steps toward mastering it.

What I am calling your curriculum shows up most clearly in issues that repeatedly challenge you. I'm talking about the behaviors that dunk you in the same soup, time and time again. You probably can identify one or two of these patterns without much effort, in a string of soured or even broken relationships, in financial dreams that are never realized, in fulfilment that is forever elusive. But despite your experience, you may not have realized that there is a curriculum lying embedded within this personal history. The sooner you become familiar with your curriculum and get on with mastering 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.

Your personal spiritual curriculum is composed of those inner traits within you that are located toward the extremes of a continuum.

### HANDOUT 3.

e.g. 1

arrogance      pride                  humility      self-debasement  
!-----!-----!-----!

e.g. 2

rage                  anger                  calmness                  passivity  
!-----!-----!-----!

In this view, there are no virtues and no vices insofar as the intrinsic nature of a trait is concerned. What turns a trait into a negative influence in your life is its tending to be located at either extreme of the continuum.

### **e.g., jealousy**

Negative:      “Jealousy rots the bones” (Mishlei/Proverbs 14:30).

Our sages added to this when they said, “Jealousy, desire, and honor take a

person out of the world” (Pirkei Avot 4:21).

Positive: *kinat sofrim tarbeh chochmah*

the jealousy of the scribes increases wisdom (Bava Batra 21a)

Or an example closer to my own home is the trait of patience. Patience is on my spiritual curriculum for sure:

Leora and Mussarman.

So it is with all the other traits. We think of patience as a virtue, but can you have too much patience? Or too much compassion? Or too little stinginess? It's not the traits themselves that are at issue, because each trait can have a positive or a negative role to play in any situation. Mussar teaching tells us that it is the measure of the trait in the particular context that determines whether or not it sets an obstacle before us.

I'd like to offer another perspective that corroborates this one. I've been saying that your personal spiritual curriculum is made up of just those traits in you that tend to the extreme, whether in excess or deficiency. You might already see the truth in that perspective, but there is another common aspect of all our lives that backs it up, which is that life comes with TESTS.

Trying situations – large and small – crop up in everybody's life. The Mussar teachers tell us that this is not accidental. Life is constructed in such a way as to us give us trials (*nisyonot* in Hebrew). Of course we know from experience that what looks like a big test for one person is not necessarily a test for their friend. What makes a life situation into a test is when that situation scores a direct hit on the traits of your inner life where you have a tendency toward the extreme range, be that anger, compassion, greed, generosity, and on through a long list. It is your personal vulnerability to that trait that makes them tests.

If you are a person prone to anger and someone steps on your toe (literally or figuratively), or you are sorely tempted to steal and someone leaves an open purse right under your nose, or you tend to be impatient and you walk into the bank and there are 10 people in front of you in the line, then here we have a spiritual test.

But if patience does not figure on your spiritual curriculum, then the bank lineup is no test. You just naturally take the time to read, make a call on your cell phone, or just breathe. And so on with all the traits. The tests in your life are tests only because you have certain traits tending to the extreme of the range.

#### 4. Mussar's transformative discipline

Does this make sense in relation to your own life? It is meant to give a perspective on your life as you already experience it. It makes sense of what you are experiencing in the context of seeing life as a journey of purification and elevation.

So if this makes sense, that's great, but that can't be the end of the story. Understanding is important, but it is only preparation for the real focus of Mussar, which is to bring about change. Now that you have identified the gap between your ideal and your real, how will you close that gap?

The question that Mussar masters took on was all about change: how does the impatient person become patient? The miser generous? The envious person content? The angry person calm? How?

The difference between Mussar practice and Mussar work.

HANDOUT 4.: a teaching from *Madregas Ha'adom* by Rav Yosef Yoel Hurwitz

But if he knows all this only with his mind and not with his senses, he will find that his mental effort yields only a mental [i.e. abstract] result, not a sensory [i.e. actual] one... At the moment of trial, he is like a blind man who never saw the light, because then the cloud covers the sun and he can see nothing. His whole exalted knowledge exists either before the fact or after the fact, but when the [trying] situation is at hand, the distraction of the trial makes him like a different man. In retrospect, he will say, "At the time of the trial, I wasn't the same man that I am now, after the trial.

The need for practice to alter *middot*.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter taught that there are three stages to the practice of Mussar:

1      sensitivity

AN EXERCISE to become sensitive to what is on your spiritual curriculum.

Meditation on *Shma*

HANDOUT 5. 46-47 *Cheshbon ha-nefesh*

Harvest distractions

2      restraint

kabbalot

3 generous acts a day  
patient for 15 minutes at a stretch (R' Wolbe)

3 transformation

## HITPA'ALUT/HISPAILUS CHANTING

*“Elohai neshama sh'natata bi tahora hi”*

God, the soul you have given me is pure.

### 5. Conclusion          Everyday Holiness

It may be clear now why I titled my book and this talk “Everyday Holiness”. The Mussar masters don't shy away from telling us that we can and should pursue holiness. To be holy is our highest potential. They have never wavered from encouraging us to shoot so high because they have always held dear the teachings of the Torah, and in the Torah in several places it tells us *kedoshim tihiyu* – you shall be holy, as in Leviticus 19, the part of the bible known as the Holiness Code.

To be holy does not mean other worldly, saintly. It just means being the most purified and elevated version of yourself that you can be. More than a status or an achievement, the pursuit of holiness is an orientation.

Holiness often expresses itself in our lives in very ordinary ways.

The holiest and most revered time on the Jewish calendar is the evening when Yom Kippur begins. This is still true, as there are people who do not ever visit a synagogue, except on that evening, known as Kol Nidre.

On the evening of Kol Nidre in the town where Rabbi Yisrael Salanter was living, people had congregated in the synagogue for the evening ritual. They waited for Rabbi Israel but he did not appear. Since it was getting late, they recited Kol Nidre without him. Then they sent out to look for him, but no one could find him. The crowd was growing panicky; soon the service would be over. Then, abruptly he entered, took his accustomed place, drew the prayer shawl over his head and began to pray.

After he finished his prayers, he recounted what had happened to him. On his way to the synagogue for Kol Nidre, he heard a child crying. He went in the house, saw an infant crying in its cradle, a bottle of milk just out of its reach. The mother had prepared the bottle and gone off to the synagogue, expecting her six-year-old daughter to give the baby its bottle. But the little girl had fallen fast asleep and did not hear the baby crying. Rabbi Israel fed the baby and put it to sleep. When he was ready to leave, the little girl awoke and begged him not to go for she was afraid to be alone. He stayed until the mother returned from the synagogue.

Another and related story concerns Rabbi Meir Chodosh (1898-1989), the late Mussar supervisor of the Chevron yeshiva, which took place when he was in the hospital with his final illness. His room was usually full with the many visitors who came to see him every day.

One day a young intern came into the Rabbi's room to draw blood from his arm. Before the intern could start, the Rabbi sent everyone out of the room. This was surprising, because Rabbi Chodosh usually appreciated when his family and close friends were present during doctors' visits and medical procedures, so they were up to date on his medical status. The visitors tried to dissuade the Rabbi from being alone, but he emphatically asked them to leave.

A while later, after the intern left with a small vial of blood, the Rabbi explained to his returning visitors, "It is very hard for any doctor drawing blood to find the veins in the arms of an older person. Usually the doctor must stick his needle in a few times until he finds the appropriate vein. For a young doctor the problem is compounded; first there is his inexperience in drawing blood from any patient regardless how old he is, and secondly, my being an 'old man' makes it harder for him to locate the proper vein.

It would have been very embarrassing for him to have to pierce me numerous times in front of you until he found the vein. That is why I had to ask you to leave—to spare him shame."

"Imagine," said Rabbi Arieli in amazement. "Rabbi Chodosh is being poked and stuck numerous times and each time it is painful. But *his* pain is not what disturbs him. It is the pain of the young doctor's humiliation that disturbs him. That's his concern!"

These are both stories that tell of enormous personal sensitivity of those who have practiced Mussar. I want to point out as well that in both cases, the focus of the story is care of another. Mussar is a personal spiritual discipline but it is not meant to be practiced in isolation, nor for the purpose of saving your own soul without concern for others. Mussar practiced just to benefit oneself is corrupt Mussar, because we are here on earth to benefit one another.

Rabbi Salanter captured this commitment to the well-being of others nicely when he said: "The spiritual is surely higher than the material, but the material needs of another person are an obligation of my spiritual life."

His chief disciple, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, who founded the Kelm school of Mussar, set his entire teaching of Mussar around the central pole of "bearing the burden of the other." There is no better or more worthwhile place to work through your personal spiritual curriculum than with other people. On our own, it's easy to be a saint. Bring other people into the picture, and then you've got a challenge.

To be holy means being capable of being sensitive when an opportunity to be sensitive presents itself, and equally to be firm when firmness is called for, and to know the difference, and to express either soul-trait from within you in exquisite measure and balance. And always to have your eye on the impact what you do and who you are has on other people.

Rabbi Salanter said that when you put on your *tallis* [prayer shawl], be sure not to whip anybody with the fringes. That is a Mussar attitude.

The person who told the story about Rabbi Chodosh ended it by sighing, “Where do you find such people? And how does one become such a person?”

To answer these questions, once again our reference point is the Torah.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we are told: “You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart” (Deut 10:16). That enigmatic image occurs only one other time in the Five Books of Moses, in the variant: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart” (Deut. 30:6). I understand “circumcision” here to be a metaphor for spiritual initiation – removing the obstacles to having an open, sensitive, initiated inner life. In the first quote, we are offered the option of initiating ourselves. The second tells us that God will do it. The second verse begins with the Hebrew letter “*vav*” which can be translated “or.” Initiate yourself, or God will initiate you. Torah gives no third option.

Unguided in how to initiate themselves, too often people go after the wrong things, or, if they get it right, go about it in the wrong way. They stumble after false answers to the questions on their curriculum. If only I were rich. Nip and tuck by the plastic surgeon might do it. Defeat that enemy. 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 cause us to grow, with certainty. It seems a pity, though, that entire lives are spent fumbling blindly, in personal suffering and at the cost of an increase of evil – yes, evil – in the world, when each of us has another choice as to how we can grow. The Torah says so clearly that you have the option to take steps to initiate your own heart.

You have no choice about having a spiritual curriculum. And you have little choice about whether you will grow in life or not. Where you do have choice is whether or not you will choose to take steps to engage consciously with your spiritual curriculum.

As we would expect, King Solomon got here first in reaching this conclusion. Though he didn’t refer to the verses about circumcising the heart, what he did say in Ecclesiastes / Kohelet was simple and to the same point: “The wise man, his eyes are in his head; But the fool walks in darkness” (2:14).

Now I can finish up by repeating what I said at the beginning would be the two primary statements that I wanted to impart to you through this talk.

The first statement is:

1. Your life embodies a personal spiritual curriculum. Everyone has a different curriculum, though all are variations on the same theme. You have already been assigned your curriculum. In fact, you have already been running into it and hopefully working on it, and in some ways, you are likely already very familiar with it. What you may not have realized, however, is that your ordinary life with all its challenges, tests, and opportunities is meant to be seen as the key curriculum you have been assigned in this lifetime.

The second statement is:

2. Mastering your spiritual curriculum requires practice. You don't have a choice about having a spiritual curriculum. You have one. Life is set up to assign you such a curriculum, and I guarantee you that you have yours. The choice you do have, however, is whether or not you engage consciously with the lessons on your curriculum. You will grow by means of your curriculum only if it becomes the basis for practice. If you never come to the realization that your life contains a curriculum, or if you choose to ignore your curriculum, then you will still grow, because life is a journey of growing, but in that case, your growth will likely be less, indirect, inefficient and certainly more painful than it needs to be.

I hope you won't be like the man I met in Minneapolis. My friend introduced me to him and told him of my interest in Mussar. "I'm very into Mussar," he replied. "For other people."

It's easy to recognize other peoples' spiritual curriculum and to know exactly what they ought to do about it. It's easy to be a genius about somebody else's life. But what about your own?

## 6. Where to from here?

For more information about courses and the work of Mussar, please see our website, the [www.mussarinstitute.org](http://www.mussarinstitute.org) or call Shelley Karrel, at Schara Tzedek 604-736-7607 about programs being held at the synagogue.