



Rabbi Silvers'

Shabbat Message



Good Shabbes...

Why is it hard to be good? It is a question Jewish thinkers have been asking for more than 1,000 years. While the commandments in the Torah and other Jewish texts are laid out pretty clearly, people often have a hard time following them.

Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life, arose as a response to this concern. Mussar is virtue-based ethics — based on the idea that by cultivating inner virtues, we improve ourselves. This is in contrast to most Jewish ethical teachings, which are rule-based. Today, a number of people who do not follow traditional Jewish rules and rituals are attracted to Mussar because it offers opportunities for personal transformation through a Jewish lens.

Mussar masters recognized that simply learning about kindness does not make us more kind. Moreover, they understood that our inner drives, wounds and appetites often manifest as the Yetzer Hara (the Evil Inclination), actively preventing us from behaving as we know we should. One Mussar teacher, Rabbi Elya Lopian (1876-1970), described Mussar as “teaching the heart what the mind already understands.”

The word Mussar appears in the Bible 51 times, more than half of them in the book of Proverbs. It carried a connotation of ethical instruction according to the teachings of the Torah. In the rabbinic period, texts such as Pirkei Avot carried the thread of personal ethical teachings.

In the medieval period, Mussar became a branch of study focused on virtue ethics (as opposed to rules-based ethics), the practice of working to refine one’s character to become a better person and closer to God.

For centuries, Mussar was a field of study and an individual practice. Mussar literature continued to grow as scholars from many different Jewish communities wrote practical advice on how to be a better person. However, Mussar books were considered a minor part of the Jewish literature, until the 19th century, when Rabbi Israel Salanter (November 3, 1809 - February 2, 1883) created the Mussar movement.

Mussar went from individual to community practice under the leadership of Rabbi Israel Salanter in 19th-century Lithuania. Salanter (whose *yahrzeit* was yesterday) endeavored to create a mass movement in society to enable individuals to conquer the Evil Inclination and to serve God wholeheartedly. He ascribed the practice of 13 Middot (soul-traits) to achieve these ends: Truth, Alacrity, Diligence, Honor, Tranquility, Gentleness, Cleanliness, Patience, Order, Humility, Justice, Thrift, and Silence. He also introduced practices of introspection and chanting, to achieve emotions sufficient to overcome the negative appetites buried deep within the psyche.

Today Mussar continues to exist within both the traditional and liberal Jewish communities. As it has become more widely practiced in the liberal Jewish world in the 21st century, many Jews are attracted to the mindfulness aspects of Mussar.

May we all be mindful in the practice of Rabbi Salanter’s 13 Middot so as to better ourselves as Jews and as human beings.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Bob Silvers