

When Teaching Right Behavior Is Not Enough: A Mussar-Approach to Creating Mensches

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Rabbi Chaim Tchernowitz (d. 1949) relates in his autobiography how the synagogues of his youth in Russia were divided by profession. There was the shoemakers' *shul*, the hatmakers' *shul*, the carpenters' *shul*, and the horse thieves' *shul*.

We need to look no further than the institution of a horse thieves' *shul* for evidence of a breakdown in Jewish moral behavior. What were they thinking during *Parashat Yitro* when the Torah reader got to "Do not steal?!" This breakdown is symptomatic of a gap that exists between the ideals of Torah and our actual individual and communal behavior. It is the persistence of this gap in the human condition in general that has fueled religio-moral and psychological speculation and research into human behavior for millennia. This gap is a particularly painful for the Orthodox Jewish community, a community committed to the complete fulfillment of the mitzvot and extra-halakhic ethical demands. How can it be that the otherwise observant father of six and pillar of his Orthodox community has been embezzling funds from his company, breaking federal lobbying laws, or committing sexual improprieties, to name a few of the real-life examples of the gap we've seen over the past several decades?

This gap does exist, and we will never fully overcome it. Physical drives, the emotional residue of ways we were hurt as young people, and many other factors lead us to deceive ourselves and exercise bad judgement when balancing competing values. What can we do to bridge the gap and align our behavior as much as possible with the Torah and moral ideals we profess to believe? The answer is actually quite simple but not something most people want to hear. The answer is not to just learn the ethical principles and mitzvot of the Torah with more diligence. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (d. 1883) warned us long ago that learning Torah on its own is not enough to overcome our inclination toward self-deception and to change behavior. Rather, we must engage the heart to make the Torah's teachings

part of us to such an extent that they can influence our behavior. We engage the heart through a commitment to evoking emotion, practicing and repeating behaviors, holding each other accountable, inspiring each other, engaging in multiple modalities of learning, and acting with integrity.

I worked for over a decade at Gann Academy, a community Jewish high school in Waltham, MA, as an instructor of rabbinics and later as the *Mashgiah Ruhani* (spiritual advisor). Early in my tenure, we wanted to do something to bridge the gap between our professed commitment to Torah values, such as honesty, humility, and compassion—and the plagiarism, sense of entitlement, and social exclusion practiced by some of our students. We looked to Rabbi Salanter and the Mussar movement for inspiration and practical instruction how to bridge the gap. We first identified the six key *middot* for our school and made those our curriculum. We then created a monthly small group-based program called *Chanoch LaNa'ar* (CLN) that involved learning Mussar and classic Torah sources about the chosen *middot*, a rigorous protocol for sharing personal experiences with the *middot* and taking on daily assignments to practice the *middah* of the month. Each faculty facilitator had one year of training under my direction before leading his or her own group. Each year we had faculty-only groups, student-only groups, and faculty-student groups. These latter groups were the most popular and provided a rare opportunity for teens and adults alike to learn more about each other's lives. Groups met monthly during the school day for 75 to 120 minutes. In between meetings, participants would meet at least once with a *havruta* (study partner) to discuss the *middah* and their own practice. Group facilitators would write weekly reminder emails to their participants and would track their group members to make sure they were following up with practice and meeting with their *havruta*.

Over the past eight years, we've run over 40 groups involving over 75 percent of the full-time faculty and reaching up to 25 percent of the student body in a single year. During this time, the school's senior leadership team studied Mussar for two years. In the last two years, classroom teachers began to integrate Mussar concepts and practices into student work in math, English, Hebrew, and other courses. While not as intensive as the monthly small group work, by brining Mussar into the classroom, many more students are exposed to, and get practice with, Jewish wisdom about good character.

Eight years after beginning this effort awareness of Mussar permeates the school and the language of *middot* are found everywhere from student publications to geometry class. Year after year, graduates of the school are heard integrating an understanding of *middot* with self-reflections about their own growth as students and their aspirations for life after high school. Department chairs report being able to refer to *middot* and Mussar concepts when working through difficult relational issues between teachers and students. At this point the program is firmly rooted in the school culture and continues to grow in participation among students and faculty. This article describes what we learned about applying the multi-modal techniques of Mussar in the school environment and how this approach can be applied to all sectors of the Jewish community.

Why Mussar?

Mussar is the Jewish discipline of ethical character development and is as old as the Torah itself. *Kedoshim tihyu* and many parts of the Book of *Devarim* are Mussar texts, urging the Israelites to heightened ethical awareness and behavior. *Pirkei Avot* and many passages in the Talmud are also Mussar texts, but we do not get actual instruction about how to develop character traits until the tenth and eleventh centuries, with the writings of Rabbi Saadia Gaon and the *Duties of the Heart* by Rabbi Bahya Ibn Pequda. The latter provided meditations and practices for developing traits such as humility and trust in God. This book ignited a 1,000-year genre of Mussar literature that grew in every corner of the Jewish world, including the medieval rationalists (Maimonides' *Shemoneh Perakim*), Kabbalists of Spain (Rabbeinu Yona's *Sha'arei Teshvua*), Kabbalists of Tzefat (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*), Central Europe (*Orhot Tzaddikim*), Enlightenment Europe (Rabbi Mendel of Satonov's

Sefer Heshbon HaNefesh), and Lithuanian yeshiva world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's *Ohr Yisrael*). It was in this latter world that Rabbi Salanter created the modern Mussar movement, reprinting classic Mussar texts and designing a program of practice to internalize Torah and develop the *middot*.

One key element of Rav Yisrael's program was that the Torah's ethical teachings needed to be activated by accessing the emotion. It was not enough to learn a text in a dry, intellectual way. Indeed, he echoed the warning of Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto, the author of one of the most popular Mussar books of all time, *Mesilat Yesharim*. In the introduction, the Ramhal laments that people with the quickest minds tend to pass over classic Mussar teachings such as "love your neighbor as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18) and "Jealousy, lust, and honor-seeking drive a person from the world" (*Pirkei Avoth* 4:21) because they are straightforward and not intellectually challenging ideas.^[i] However, such a learner misses the point of these, and other Mussar teachings. These words are not simply to be understood intellectually, but to be integrated into the heart. This happens when the words come alive. The twentieth-century Mussar master, Rabbi Shelomo Wolbe, describes the Ramhal's affective style of learning, *Hitbonenut*, as follows:

Hitbonenut is one of the great secrets of the Torah. This is how it was explicated by Ramhal (Rav Moshe Hayim Luzzatto) in his *Derekh Etz Hayim*:

"See now that both of them—the human mind, and the Torah which informs it—are of the same character. 'Torah is light'—actual light, not mere wisdom. The Torah is compared to fire, for all its words and letters are like coals, in that when left alone they may appear to be only coals that are somewhat dim, but when one begins to learn them they ignite. This is what characterizes the human mind as well, for its power of great understanding causes it to glow with the force of *hitbonenut*."

This explains what is found in the introduction to *Mesilat Yesharim*, that "the better-known these things are and the more the truths [of Mussar] are obvious to all, so do we find them being ignored and forgotten." The reason for this is that, since these facts are so widely known, *hitbonenut* regarding them is lacking, and therefore they lack the character of light, and are only wisdom, which means that their influence is hardly felt, and they are largely forgotten!

This, then, is the work of Mussar....We may know about Providence, but this knowledge has no light. We may know what our duty is in this world, but this knowledge has no light. *Hitbonenut* turns knowledge into light.^[ii]

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter distinguished between learning Torah related to the *middot*, which require the generation of this "light," and learning other kinds of Torah:

The intellect functions to uncover the hidden-most secrets of wisdom.^[iii] It stimulates knowledge and council (Proverbs 1:4) to seek and inquire, and to clarify matters that are in doubt. The emotions serve to open the sealed chambers of the heart and to pour waters of understanding upon it; one begins to understand that which he already knows intellectually, but has not entered into the inner sanctum of his heart. Consequently, the study of improving one's character and purifying one's negative traits is different from that of all other areas of Torah study and wisdom. Concerning Torah study, knowledge and the knowledgeable person are two separate entities. Man's mere mastery of Torah knowledge suffices for him to acquire perfection and to conduct himself according to his clear and accessible Torah knowledge. However, such is not the case with character rectification and the purification of negative emotional forces. The mere acquisition of knowledge does not help a person to conduct himself in an upright fashion. Rather, the principles he has learned must be inculcated within his

heart—bound and joined to him so that they and he are united as one.

The special method of implanting the wisdom of Mussar within his heart is called *hitpa'alut* [i.e., the conscious awakening of the heart through fervent recital of Mussar concepts]. The power of *hitpa'alut* bequeaths a blessing to [change the nature of] people. Even after one ceases from actively employing this exercise, the blessing is neither diminished nor lost; rather, it leaves behind a subtle imprint that continues to inspire the spirit. By profuse engagement in *hitpa'alut* (particularly at properly organized times, each person according to his or her situation and circumstances), the fruits of their efforts will increase and be intensified, and ultimately their temperament will be transformed for the better. (*Ohr Yisrael*, letter 30)[\[iv\]](#)

Mussar and any teachings about character development cannot be taught like other Torah subjects. If these ethical teachings are going to actually make a difference in behavior, the pedagogy needs to make the teachings come alive and enter the student in many different ways. This was our charge when created the *Chanoch L'Na'ar* program at our high school.

Emotion and Experience—Head, Heart, and Hand

My school, like most elite Jewish educational institutions in North America, excels at intellectual, text-based learning. We challenge the minds of our students and they engage in high-level discussions and produce intellectually complex written work. These analytic processing skills and mastery of content are important for many areas of life and Jewish practice. However, they only have a minimal impact on the character development we seek. Indeed, the analytic bias of our educational institutions can actually be an obstacle to achieving our character development goals. Even more hidden is a possible gender bias in the hierarchy of Jewish learning values. Analytic disciplines like Talmud are the gold standard, and an excellence at this discipline is a high-status activity. Study of *middot*, which is not as analytically rigorous, is lower status and is seen traditionally as a feminine activity because it involves the emotions. I have found this bias to be most acute in the Modern Orthodox world, where status is reserved only for the sharpest analytic minds. We must overcome this bias and embrace the affective components of Torah learning if we are going to make a dent in the character issues in our community. The nineteenth-century Mussar movement and Rabbi Salanter received ferocious attacks for suggesting that time should be taken from straight analytic Talmud study, to spend an hour each day in more affective Mussar learning. Let's not continue that mistaken attack in our own day.

Rabbi Salanter's method of learning involved fervent repetition of Torah and Mussar texts after engaging in the regular analytic study of the text. These sessions could include crying, shaking and other emotional discharge. Rav Yisrael described how his thinking would clear after these emotion-filled sessions. Despite the transformative power of this technique, we determined that this practice would be too intense for our high school students. If we weren't going to use this method, we needed to find some way to engage our students' hearts in *middot* study. Relevance and deep personal exploration became our paths to the heart.

Even though we did not employ the full learning regimen of R. Salanter, we did draw on two of his three steps. The first step is to learn a Torah or Mussar text as you would any piece of Torah. You apply all your analytic abilities to understand why those particular words were chosen and what their plain and deeper meanings could be. Once you have a working understanding of the passage, the second step is to create a clear image in your mind of how the teaching relates to your life. This image can come from something present or in your past. It is this second step that makes the teaching personally relevant to your life. The third step is to repeat the verse many times, evoking emotion with each repetition. We left out the third step and focused on the first and second steps, encouraging our students to find personal relevance in Torah and Mussar sources about humility, patience, trust, honor,

and other *middot*. Searching and finding how these ideas actually showed up in their relationships with friends, parents and in their school and extracurricular experiences made these texts come alive in ways that analytic discussion fails to do. This focus on personal relevance contributed to students integrating these teachings into their lives.

The other method we chose was a protocol for creating a trusting environment for people to open up and share vulnerabilities with each other.^[v] In this “focus person protocol,” one student at each group session would describe a question about how to apply that month’s *middah* to a challenge in their life. The faculty facilitator would prepare the student in advance, talking through the *middah* challenge and helping the student discern how vulnerable he or she could be in front of the group. The other group members, both faculty and students, were trained in a rigorous form of question-asking that would help the presenters explore their inner life. Advice and judgement were explicitly discouraged to cultivate a welcoming environment of trust. The discussion and sharing in these groups were often profound in their content and emotional valence. Students and faculty alike reported gaining important new insights and abilities to integrate the *middah* into their life. I attribute this success, at least in part, to the ability of participants to access emotions such as fear, vulnerability, hope, intimidation, courage, and shame in the context of studying Torah about a *middah*.

Practice Is the Language of the Heart

Mussar is not a theoretical discipline. We get the heart to feel what the head knows through practice. Built on the concept of *na’aseh veNishmah*—“we will do and then we will understand,” an essential part of Mussar practice is something called the Kabbalah—small, concrete challenges done daily to activate the *middah*. Twentieth-century Mussar master Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explains that these daily challenges need to fly under the radar screen of the *yetzer haRa* so as not to evoke a spirit of rebellion and thus become counterproductive.^[vi] When we learn that a Torah approach to humility involves being right-sized for any situation, the next step is to create a daily practice for trying out being right-sized. For students who habitually speak first and take up lots of time in class discussion, their Kabbalah will be to let three people speak before they offer their first comment in one class each day. It is not that this student doesn’t have important thoughts to offer to the class. Rather, Mussar practice is designed to shake us out of habit and feel whatever feelings the habitual behavior may be covering. For this student, it could be that speaking first and often covers feeling of inadequacy or impatience. After practicing for several weeks, and reflecting on the experience of challenging the habit, this student should be better equipped to make an appropriate decision when to speak in class free from the habitual drive to immediately raise his hand.

Habit Formation

Habit formation is another key feature of repeating the Kabbalah over a period of several weeks. It is not the flash of insight that changes behavior but regular repetition of the desired behavior or mental process. Professional athletes will testify that they couldn’t perform under pressure the way they do if they hadn’t spent many hours habituating their bodies to making that shot or swinging the bat in that particular way. The same goes for *middot* and ethical behavior. If I want to curb the way I speak *lashon haRa* I cannot just decide to stop saying negative things about people. I need to commit to a daily practice, for example, substituting saying something positive when I feel the impulse to say something negative about someone, or catching myself each day during lunch when I notice I’m about to say something negative about a student or colleague. While this practice is forced and artificial, it is no more forced than a baseball player going to a batting cage to take 100 swings every day to get ready for a game. When in the grips of the *yetzer haRa*, it is nearly impossible to change your behavior. The work needs to happen away from the moments of challenge so that when the challenge presents itself you’ve built the muscle memory to act aligned with your values. Repetition is what builds this muscle and it is why repetitive action is such an important feature of Mussar.

Accountability

Anyone who has tried to change any behavior, be it diet, exercise, or religious observance, will testify how difficult it is to maintain the practice needed to form new habits after the initial burst of motivation wears off. One way the most successful programs like Weight Watchers get people to stick with their commitment is through personal accountability to another person or to a group. Rabbi Salanter built such accountability into his Mussar program. Although Mussar can be studied alone, it is most effective when studied in a group dedicated to *middot* development. At the end of the group meeting, the members specify their practice goals to each other for the next week. The next session starts with a check-in when members will own up to which commitments they followed through on and which they did not. Additional accountability can be built in by assigning partners to check in between meetings. Rav Wolbe's Mussar groups included a person who would check in daily with members about their practice.^[vii] I can testify from experience that the chance I will do a practice increases when I know I will have to report back. The more frequent the accountability, the more likely practice will take place. Even if we feel a strong desire to grow and change our *yetzer haRa* makes us forget. Accountability to another person and to the group provides peer pressure in a positive way to help us remember.

Our school-based groups employed a non-judgmental form of accountability based on the belief that participants would feel guilty enough if they did not do their practices and didn't need others to shame them into compliance. Participants were trained to ask each other about their practices and then listen quietly, giving space to the speaker to explore why they did or did not follow through. Listeners could ask questions to help the speaker explore their motivations. This non-judgmental approach is a distinct departure from classic Mussar groups developed in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century yeshivot. There, the discourse in the group was much more critical. According to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, who attended a Navarodok yeshiva for high school, "We had a *va'ad* (Mussar group). We kept a spiritual diary of the week that tracked where you failed. Then the group would tear you apart and tell you where they thought you were off."^[viii] Today I think this type of critical approach could easily backfire and drive students away. Rabbi Wolbe emphasized that this generation needs Mussar to be positive. Whether positive, neutral or critical, the main thing is to create a system of accountability that will remind participants of their commitments.

Peer Inspiration

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) instructed his followers to do three things every day—have a personal conversation with God, study the *Shulhan Arukh*, and have a conversation with a friend about your spiritual life. The purpose of this last practice, called a *sihat haverim*, was to inspire one another through listening to each other's yearning for and process of spiritual growth. While not a classic Mussar movement practice, we integrated this *sihat haverim*, or spiritual *havruta* (to borrow the phrase from Rabbi Aryeh ben David's *Ayeka* program) into our program. Pairs of students and faculty meet at least once between *va'ad* meetings to have a structured conversation about their experiences with the *middah* and the practices. I find these meetings invaluable to help clarify my own thinking and for the inspiration I get hearing someone else talk personally about their spiritual life. We are social creatures. Hearing how a friend is using the *middah* challenges us, through either a feeling of competition, or an aspiration to grow, to more seriously consider adopting the desired behavior.

Multiple Modalities for Learning

Different learners integrate information in different ways. Traditional Torah learning is both auditory and visual and takes place through individual reading, learning in *havruta*, listening to a lecture, and class discussion. That is a good start for a multi-modal approach but more can be added. Our sessions always involve *havruta* learning, personal journal reflection, large-group discussion, presenting in front of the group, and mini-lectures. The *kabbalot* mentioned above enabled students to bring a physical dimension to their learning, living out a *middah* through the way they used their bodies and interacted with others.

Modeling Integrity

Hypocrisy undermines all that we teach about *middot*. Our students are keen observers of our behavior as adults and are constantly on the lookout for gaps between what we preach and how we behave. These gaps can sometimes inspire students to live with more integrity, but more often they function to offer an excuse for students to justify slacking off on their moral commitments or for choosing behavior that allows them to follow their lower, self-preservation instincts. This type of integrity was key to Rabbi Salanter's Mussar program as testified by the many stories about his championing workers and the poor in the communities of Vilna, Kovno, and beyond. In one example, Rabbi Yisrael was appalled by the way the community let its version of a homeless shelter fall into disrepair. He told the community leaders that he was going to sleep in the shelter until they made improvements. The leaders were horrified that their exalted Torah scholar was going to sleep in such filth. They quickly made the needed improvements. Rabbi Salanter's Mussar program wanted no daylight between Jewish ethics and Jewish moral behavior.

At our school we knew we needed to eliminate these areas of hypocrisy and live as close as possible to our professed values. One example was the creation of an ethical contractor policy in the early years of the Mussar program. We created this policy after it became clear that the night cleaning crew was not being treated well by their employer. The Head of School charged me and our Chief Financial Officer with creating a policy that would enshrine Jewish values as the guide to behavior for all of our contractors, from janitorial to landscaping. Such values included safe work conditions, training, and fair wages. The policy helped us bridge the gap between our professed value of dignity for all human beings, and the actual working conditions of the lowest income workers in the building. The policy signaled to our students, parents, and all stakeholders that we were serious about living our Jewish values that we would pay more for a contractor who would meet our standards rather than go for the lowest bid. After we created the policy based on our janitorial contract, we had students research the work conditions and communal standards for landscaping. The student leaders came away with a visceral sense that our school walked the talk of Jewish values. This type of integrity is key in modeling for students that *middot* are not just an ideal, but are something that can and should be lived.

The other way we modeled integrity was by never asking students to do something that the adults in the building were not willing to do themselves. For this reason, our first Mussar groups were for faculty, and students only began to join groups in years two and three of the program. The entire management team of the school engaged in Mussar learning and practice for over two years. I cannot overstate the importance that school leadership and faculty actually practice *middot* development themselves. This signals to the students that adults are serious about *middot* and these are behaviors that people with authority try to do.

What we learned about creating a culture of *middot* has implications beyond our Day Schools. Jewish communal organizations, Federations, and synagogues can implement similar practices to align behavior of their members and staff with professed Jewish values. For example, boards of directors of Jewish institutions could engage in Mussar learning and implement a Jewish Values Alignment Audit

to identify gaps between values and behavior. I recommend starting with leadership to signal to the entire organization or community that practicing Jewish values is a serious organizational priority.

I have two warnings for any school or organization considering adopting a Mussar approach to character development. Mussar works best when it is a voluntary commitment. While it is tempting to force all students or staff members to learn Mussar, I've seen this backfire. The level of personal commitment and vulnerability required by this discipline calls for an opt-in approach. This is the approach we took at the school and it did not take long to get a critical mass opting in. This year over 25 percent of the student body choose to participate in Mussar *va'ads*. The other warning is to not cut corners. The lowest common denominator in Jewish character development programs is to teach *middot* or Mussar in a purely cognitive way. The efforts described in this article demanded a rigorous commitment to process. We needed well-trained faculty who could prepare students and peers to be emotionally vulnerable while creating strong group boundaries. We needed to be serious about organizational integrity, as well as holding each other accountable and encouraging regular practice. If our communal institutions can make these types of commitments to real character development, we will create the conditions necessary to take on some of our biggest communal challenges.

[i] *Mesilat Yesharim*, Introduction.

[ii] *Aley Shur*, vol. 1, 89–91, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, as quoted and translated in *Musar for Moderns*, Rav Elyakim Krumbein (KTAV, Jersey City, NJ) 2005, 83–84.

[iii] This and the indented quotation on the next page from Rabbi Yisrael Salanter are from *Ohr Yisrael*, letter 30 and the translation is adapted from Rabbi Tzvi Miller's edition of *Ohr Yisrael*.

[iv] Translation by Rabbi Zvi Miller (Targum Press: Southfield, MI) 2004.

[v] We adapted this protocol from the work of educational philosopher, Dr. Parker Palmer. See *A Hidden Wholeness*, ch. 8 for a detailed description of his version of this work.

[vi] *Aley Shur*, vol. 2, 190.

[vii] *Ibid.*, 191.

[viii] Jaffe, David, "Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and a Post-Modern Mussar," in *A Torah Giant*, ed. Rabbi Shmuly Yankelowitz, 2017.