

Everyday Holiness

The Jewish Spiritual Path of
Mussar

Alan Morinis



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Introduction

Life Is a Curriculum

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 fulfillment 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.

Will this help you to accomplish all your dreams? No, not at all. I'm referring not to dreams but to reality. It is a fact that your life embodies a curriculum. Why? Because life is set up so you will be challenged, and through the experiences you have dealing with the challenges, you will grow as a person. You are likely to find, then, that new dreams have grown up, too.

As for growing, none of us has a choice about that. Life makes us grow. You do have a choice, however, of 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 engage with your curriculum and grow in a conscious, directed way. That important choice is in your hands.

Because this book tracks a Jewish spiritual path, it is useful to see that the Torah acknowledges this primary choice that confronts us. In the book of Deuteronomy we are told: “You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart.”¹ That enigmatic image occurs only one other time in the Torah,² in the variant: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart.”³ 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 quote 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. The 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 states very clearly that you have the option to take steps to initiate your own heart.

Your Guide to the Way of Mussar

This book introduces a practical way to tackle this universal situation of how to initiate our hearts to better ourselves and the world, drawing on a body of ancient teachings developed just for this purpose. These guidelines, known as Mussar, have been compiled over the past thousand years by great Jewish thinkers and spiritual seekers.

In offering my own lessons in Mussar, I do so as a student of this tradition, not an accomplished master. My journey of seeking is not over, and what I offer here is a description of the path I am walking right now. I write as one student addressing another, sharing the gifts of this tradition just as I have received them.

There are others who know Mussar far better than I do, people who grew up in a world where Mussar was integral, as I did not. Yet that very history turns out to be the chief reason that this project has become my personal task, for I see and appreciate Mussar differently from one to whom it is just a constituent part of their world. Though I open myself to criticisms of all sorts, I am inspired to take the risk by the words of Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, whose classic work of Mussar was published in the year 1070, and who seems to have faced similar doubts to my own:

I knew many good ideas were rejected because of fear, that dread causes a lot of damage, and I recalled the expression, “Be careful not to be too careful!” I realized that if everyone who ever resolved to do something good or to instruct others in the path of righteousness kept still until he himself could accomplish everything he set out to, that nothing would have been said since the days of the prophets.

I can, however, speak with real authority about the potholes that exist on the road of life, because I have fallen into so many myself. I am committed to sharing the lessons of Mussar because in hindsight I see how I could have avoided the jolting pain of having hit them square on. I am sharing what I have learned in the hope that it will smooth and straighten your way.

I don't want to give the impression that my life has been a disaster. It hasn't. I am healthy and come from a loving and stable family. I was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship that took me to Oxford University, where I got my doctorate, and my dissertation was published by Oxford University Press. Three other books followed. I had no trouble getting a university job, and later on, when I reached for more fruit from the tree of life, I started a film production company that eventually went public, with me as the CEO. My films won awards and I made money. I have been married to the same dear woman for over thirty years, and we have two wonderful and accomplished children. We have a nice house in the nice part of town.

At this point the story usually goes: and then it all fell apart. But that's not how it went for me. Only one thing fell apart, and that was my work life. The collapse of my company was a crisis, but it also turned out to conceal a gift, because that's what brought me to discover Mussar. My company had collapsed because I had acted badly. I was disgusted with myself, and my pained heart was cut open. I felt compelled to change my life, from the inside. That's what sent me searching, and Mussar is what I found.

I have already told the story of my discovery and early steps in the learning of Mussar in my earlier book, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*. There I describe how I encountered Mussar, and the extraordinary, deep teachers I met in that way: Rabbi Yechiel Yitzchok Perr, of the Yeshiva of Far Rockaway, on Long Island, New York, and his wife, Rebbetzin Shoshana Perr, who continue to be my guides. This book takes that story further, though now the story isn't so much about me as it is about you. I have learned so much that I want to share in the hope that my experience will be of value to you. I especially hope that sharing the many lessons I have learned (some the hard way, some through imbibing Mussar) will spare you from having to stumble through similar experiences yourself. Mussar has helped me and others I know to become better at guiding our own lives. I am convinced it can do that for you, too.

How to Use This Book

This book is meant to provide you with what you need to understand Mussar, to garner its insights and, if you choose, to guide you into a Mussar practice of your own, so you can engage with and master your own personal spiritual curriculum.

Part 1 provides an overview of Mussar as it has evolved in the centuries that the masters of the tradition have been observing and experimenting with it. Part 2 is made up of eighteen chapters, each of which focuses on an inner trait the Mussar masters tell us is important to our lives. (The masters have identified and illuminated many more traits than these eighteen, many of which are listed in the appendix: A Soul-Trait Inventory.)

All the traits examined in part 2 have names you will recognize and think you understand—common names like *humility*, *generosity*, and *truth*. Unless you are already familiar with the Mussar teachings, however, you will not likely define these terms as the Mussar teachers do. Each of the

chapters in this section draws on their observations and profound insights, so that you will come to a new understanding of how each of these inner qualities plays out in your life. Through this learning, you will be guided to identify where to focus your own practice, since each individual's spiritual curriculum is different.

Learning Mussar often starts with the study of a passage of Talmudic thought that, when penetrated deeply and allowed to penetrate you deeply, yields surprise, insight, and enlightenment. I make modified use of this technique, often citing the sages of the Talmud but drawing on other sources of philosophical insight as well. Don't read these explorations passively and intellectually. You're meant to chew on them, argue with them, compare them to other ideas, try them out on your friends. Let them challenge you and stir you up, because that stimulation is itself a basic ingredient of the transformative potential of Mussar. Find something in every chapter to grab onto in order to stimulate new thought and understanding. You will come to know yourself in new and surprising ways, and you will already have started to change.

This brings us to the third section of the book, which provides the guidance, practices, and exercises that will help you take small but sure steps toward bringing the ideals and virtues that have not yet found a place in your life into your heart as your own living truth. Here you will find simple steps to creating a daily and a weekly routine of Mussar practice.

None of the Mussar methods takes much time, but the regular daily routine gives rise to a sharpened sense of awareness of your life and the factors that shape it, and ultimately to transformation in those areas where change is called for. You will come away equipped with new tools that add possibilities to your repertoire of living, that become fixed in your heart as an integral part of who you are. Followed faithfully, Mussar practice can bring about an inner reworking that is deep and lasting. The Mussar masters attest to this. I have seen it in my own life, as well as in the lives of hundreds of other people.

So to use this book well, read it through from beginning to end. Then, when you are ready to put its teachings to work in your own life, you will return to selected sections as this book grows into a handbook of practice and transformation in your life.