

Introducing Mussar

A template for a 60-minute introduction to Mussar

Preface:

This outline lays out a suggested format for an information session at which you will introduce Mussar. It is particularly aimed at introducing The Mussar Institute program, ***Gates of Everyday Holiness***, though the principles and ideas put forward here apply to any context in which you might want to introduce Mussar learning and practice. There are suggested times for each section, but feel free to do what best fits your needs.

Everything that follows is based on experience, suggesting elements we believe you will find useful. You are invited to modify this presentation according to your preference or the necessities of the situation. It can be adapted for use by a member of clergy or a lay member of the congregation.

This presentation will provide you with information you need to introduce the subject of Mussar as well as to provide a brief direct experience of Mussar study and practice. We hope in this first exposure the members of your congregation will recognize the benefits of Mussar for themselves individually and as an opportunity to enhance the spiritual life of the overall community.

It is important to underline that in introducing people to Mussar through an information session such as this, enrolling them in a program is not the first priority. The first priority is always their spiritual well-being. The point of the program, and the point of Mussar, is to assist people in their spiritual lives. The information session you will offer has as its ultimate purpose the very same goal, even if inviting people into a course is a step along that way.

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Invocation

5 minutes

Every small group meeting in the course begins with an invocation, and so we suggest you begin the information session with an invocation. This is a method that helps us to set aside the events of the day in order to create sacred space to explore Mussar with each other. Feel free to use a prayer or meditation of your own choosing. We offer the following suggestion for use as an Invocation for this introductory session:

In the Book of Proverbs (20:27), we find the verse: *Ner HaShem nishmat adam* — the soul of a human being is the candle of God.

That idea and image is echoed in a poem by Moses ibn Ezra (11th-12th centuries) which starts out:

*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.*

Contemplate the words and images of this poem for a few moments.

2. Welcome and Introduction

5 minutes

The purpose of the meeting is to provide all in attendance with information about Mussar and ***Gates of Everyday Holiness***, the program you are proposing they consider for themselves. The goal is to make them well informed about what is being made available to them, and to give them a chance to ask questions. Be sure everyone has pen and paper, or provide it for them.

Gates of Everyday Holiness: A Community Mussar Program

It is suggested that you ask people to hold their questions until you complete the main part of your presentation.

We recommend you begin with a brief story of your own experiences with Mussar, or if you are new to Mussar, your motivation in bringing it to the members of your congregation. By sharing some of your own story, you provide a model to which people can relate in a personal way. This is a good time to explain you will be learning along with them, and share how this is a personal practice for you as well.

3. What is Mussar?

5 minutes

We are providing you with information about Mussar, which you may want to supplement with your own reading and ideas.

History of Mussar

We generally understand “Mussar” to refer to the teachings and methods that were part of the Mussar Movement that was started within the Jewish community of Lithuania by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter around 1850. That movement drew on and incorporated Mussar texts and practices that are much older, dating back to the writings of Saadia Gaon in the century and being rooted in Torah.

The word “*mussar*” appears in Proverbs/Mishlei (1:8) where we read: “Hear, my son, the *mussar avicha* (instructions of your father) and *torat imecha* (the Torah of your mother).” It is also found in Proverbs/Mishlei (15:32): “He who rejects *mussar* despises his life, but he who hearkens to reproof acquires sense.”

In the biblical context and in the modern spiritual understanding of the word “mussar” means “discipline.” In modern Hebrew and in the usual Israeli usage, “mussar” is the word for “ethics.” The meaning bound up in the term means much more than ethics, but as with all modern Hebrew, the spiritual value was stripped away in creating a modern, secular national language.

Mussar

What exactly is Mussar? That term names a spiritual perspective and also a discipline of practices that can significantly change the way a person perceives the world and acts in it. Mussar also names a popular movement that developed primarily in Lithuania in the second half of the nineteenth century.

But Mussar is most accurately described as a way of life that leads to realizing our highest spiritual potential, including an everyday experience infused with happiness, trust, and love. The origins of Mussar can be traced back to tenth-century Babylonia, and until the nineteenth century, Mussar was solely an introspective practice undertaken by an individual seeker. In the mid-1800s, however, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter perceived that the modern world presented unprecedented spiritual challenges, and so he called on people to learn and practice Mussar as a means to strengthen the final and most important bulwark for the defense of spiritual life: the solitary human heart.

The teachings of Mussar are as applicable to our lives today as they have been to generations gone by. While the circumstances of our current lives are very different from those of our ancestors, the passage of time has not altered human nature. As a result, the Mussar teachers’ insights into the makeup and dynamics of your own

inner life hold as true today as they did for people living in those earlier ages. Our lives have changed in so many ways through the centuries, yet at our deepest core as human beings, we've really not changed at all.

Mussar's purpose is to help people understand the ways of the soul and to guide them in overcoming the obstacles that keep them from coming into inner wholeness (*shlemut*), holiness (*kedushah*) and closeness to God. Mussar is suitable for and attainable by all people, regardless of age, gender, or level of knowledge of Judaism. The only criteria for participation in Mussar are that the person should have had some experience of the human condition and should have a desire to grow spiritually.

The core teaching of Mussar is that our deepest essence is inherently pure and holy, but this inner radiance is obscured by extremes of emotion, desire, and bad habits which veil that inner light. Our task in life is to transform the “veils” and so uncover the brilliant light of the soul. The Mussar masters developed a range of teachings and practices—some of which are contemplative, some of which focus on how we relate to other people in daily life, some concern God—to help us heal and refine ourselves. A current Mussar student put it well, “Each week I feel like I'm entering and spending time cleaning out the accumulated dust and grime covering my soul and mind.”

Mussar is a body of knowledge and a perspective on life. It is also a discipline because Mussar knowledge is not meant to be inert stuff, but to be activated through action.

Life is a Curriculum

Consistently through time, the Mussar masters have taught that 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.

Your curriculum shows up most clearly in issues that challenge you, time and time again: a string of soured or broken relationships, financial dreams that are never realized, fulfillment that is forever elusive. Embedded within this personal history there is a curriculum, and the sooner you become familiar with your curriculum and get to work on 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.

Every life has its challenges and you are not a stranger to the ones that seem to be a recurrent feature in your life. Through the experiences you have dealing with those challenges, you grow as a person. No one has a choice about that. It seems

to be part of the plan for human life that it causes us to grow. Look back over the last five years. Haven't you grown? Where you do have a choice, however, is 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 grow in a conscious, directed way. That important choice is in your hands.

That primary source for all Jewish thought and practice, the Torah, acknowledges this very choice, whether to grow by conscious intent or by blindly stumbling into life experience. In book of Deuteronomy (10:16) we are told: "You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart." That image occurs only one other time in the Torah (Deuteronomy 30:6), in the variant: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart." Circumcision is a metaphor for spiritual initiation— removing the obstacles to having an open, sensitive, initiated inner life. In the first verse, we are offered the option of initiating ourselves. The second verse tells us that God will do it. The second verse begins with the Hebrew letter *vav*, which can be translated "or." In other words, you can initiate yourself, or God will initiate you. The Torah gives no third option.

Too often people stumble after false answers to the questions posed by their curriculum: "If only I were rich." "Nip and tuck by the plastic surgeon." "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, indeed, cause us to grow, with certainty. It seems a pity, though, that entire lives are spent fumbling blindly, in personal suffering and at great cost to the people around us and to the world, when each of us has another choice: take steps to initiate your own heart.

That is what we are here to do in *Gates of Everyday Holiness*, we share teachings and practices from the way of Mussar.

4. Practice: Accounting of the Soul

10 minutes

The course will adopt the focus the Mussar teachers have emphasized, which is to encourage you to examine the role that specific inner traits play in the curriculum of your life. This is far from their only spiritual concern, but they recognize that everything depends on this inner spiritual foundation. Each trait is a building block for a life of wholeness and holiness. Any trait that is not operating in an optimum way in effect occludes the light of the soul from shining into your life, and through you, into the world.

So we need to understand each trait and then to assess the state of that quality within our own lives. That understanding will, in turn, be put to practical use because it is a Mussar principle that it is practice, more than thought, that brings about personal change.

The inner traits, taken as a group, are called in Hebrew *middot* (plural; the singular is *middah*). While almost always translated into English as “trait of character,” the Hebrew word *middah* literally means “measure.” Each of us is endowed at birth with every one of the human traits, and what sets one person apart from another is not whether they do or don’t experience anger or humility or generosity or worry or laziness or any other of the many inner traits—because we all do experience all these traits—but rather the degree, or measure, of the traits that live in their souls.

There are 3 practices we will learn in this course: reciting a phrase, journaling and practicing an action related to the *middah* we are focusing on. These will be described in further depth in the course.

We get a taste of practice by doing a little journaling. Take a few moments and journal about Patience, *savlanut*. It will help to focus the exercise to note that in the book, *Everyday Holiness*, Alan Morinis says, “The Hebrew word for patience is *savlanut*, which can also mean “tolerance.” The same root gives rise to words that mean, “suffer” and “endure.” He goes on to say that patience means enduring and tolerating, and the experience may even bring us elements of suffering, so one aspect of patience is bearing suffering.

This may not be not our usual way of thinking of patience. When we practice Mussar we begin to see through a different lens, ask questions, and cultivate new awareness about ourselves, the way we speak and act.

Take a few moments to consider for yourself where in your life you tend to be challenged to be patient. Consider your life in its various dimensions—home, family, work, travel, community, recreation, etc.—and see if you can identify the one situation in which you are most prone to impatience, and how it requires you to bear suffering. Now get out your pen and paper and write about it.

5. Taking it To Heart

10 minutes

Rather than a full discussion at this point, we suggest you lead them through another element of the program, “Taking it to Heart.” Mussar guides us to take what is in the head and move it to the heart. Ask if there are a few people who want to share what they learned during the journaling practice. We remind you this is not a time for discussion or comment, merely a time for everyone to practice listening without judgment, to begin to experience Mussar as an exploration and deepening of awareness.

6. *Gates of Everyday Holiness* Course details

10 minutes

As a reminder, your synagogue or organization sets the fee and collects registration for your participants.

We suggest you prepare flyers to give out with all the details of the course, including dates, times, place and registration fees. Let them know as part of the program they will receive a copy of the book, *Everyday Holiness*, by Alan Morinis, or send them to Amazon.com to purchase the book themselves.

Generally the course will last 20 weeks, meeting every other week, however you may create a schedule that works best for your community. The *middot* covered in ***Gates of Everyday Holiness*** are humility, patience, order, equanimity, honor, truth, moderation, responsibility and trust.

Explain to the participants how they will be receiving their assignments. They will have reading to do before each meeting, and a self-study practice assignment on the *middah* that was discussed for that meeting. Experience has shown that these meetings create powerful spiritual community, and reinforce commitment and deepen participants' learning.

7. Question and Answers

10 minutes

Leave at least 10 minutes for question and answer. If someone asks a question that you do not feel able or prepared to answer, do not hesitate to say so. You can offer to seek out the answer and to get back to the person who asked the question or to the whole group.

8. Conclusion – Next steps for Course Registration

5 minutes

Be sure you let them know what they need to do to register for the program at your congregation. Invite anyone who wants to contact you with a personal question or issue to get in touch through whichever medium is best to reach you, whether by telephone or email. Provide your phone number and email for this purpose.