



Shalom and Shleimut: Inner Peace Prepared by Avi Fertig Mussar Kallah 2021

THE VA'AD MEETING

This *va'ad* will focus on *shalom* / peace and *shleimut* / wholeness and the experience of inner peace. Our focus will be on *menuchah ha'nefesh*, which literally means tranquility of the soul, and is often translated as equanimity. Considering the multi-dimensional nuances of this *middah* will be an essential aspect of this *va'ad* meeting. We will explore the challenges to experiencing *menuchah ha'nefesh* and we will encounter other key *middot* and wisdom from the Mussar tradition that open ways of creating and experiencing greater inner peace.

May the study we engage in here contribute to bringing more peace into your lives, inner and outer.

A. Welcome and Centering

Your facilitator will open the meeting by greeting everyone, giving time for introductions and a centering exercise to bring your focus to this sacred space.

Outline of this *va'ad* session

- A. Welcome and Centering
- B. Check in
- C. Invocation
- D. Text Discussion
- E. Taking it to Heart
- F. Take Away
- G. Closing

B. Check in

Consider now

1. On a scale of 1-10, (with 10 being a state of total inner tranquility) how would you assess your level of inner peace right now?
2. What factor/s can you identify as obstacles to experiencing inner peace?

C. Invocation



A visualization based on a verse from the prayer of praise, Hallel (Psalms 116:7):

Shuvi nafshi limenuchaychi

Ki Hashem gamal alaychi

שׁוּבִי, נַפְשִׁי לְמִנוּחַיִכִּי
כִּי ה' גָּמַל עָלַיִכִּי

Return my soul [*nefesh*] to my calmness [*menucha*]
for God provides support upon me.

Rabbi Micha Berger says that this verse suggests tactics for achieving “*menuchat hanefesh*,” calmness or tranquility of the soul. You can notice the word *nefesh* in the first line in the word *nafshi*, נַפְשִׁי “my soul.” And *menucha* מְנוּחָה is the root of the word *limnuchaychi* – לְמִנוּחַיִכִּי

The word *shuvi* – שׁוּבִי; return – suggests that I have been there before. I already know the experience of calmness of soul that is in focus for us here, but I have moved away.

If you pay attention to moments of calm, you can capture the feeling and that awareness is a step toward reproducing it.

D. Text Discussion

Through incisive questions, discussion and the sharing of personal experience, the lessons in the following texts will be opened up, explored and illuminated, for the sake of deeper, fuller understanding. The sources we are bringing to this process are all gems from the Mussar tradition that contain wisdom, even if that wisdom is not apparent at the outset. Engage with your group-mates to explore that wisdom and to take ownership of a deeper understanding. Consider how each source and practice might play a role in your own growth—particularly in how you might cultivate more peace in your inner life. Focus on how the lessons might inform your outlook and animate your behavior. Your facilitator will lead you to engage with as many sources as you have time for in the space of this va’ad.

Source 1: *Menuchat HaNefesh* versus Total Tranquility

A. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (1937-2020) expresses so well the Jewish view of a life of perfect calm:

The Jewish approach to life considers the person who has stopped going – one who has a feeling of completion, of peace, of a great light from above that has brought them to rest – to be someone who has lost their way. Only one whom the light continues to beckon, for whom the light is as distant as ever,, only they can be considered to have received some sort of response. (Based on *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, p. 132)



Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1809-1883) said something similar:

As long as one lives a life of calmness and tranquility in the service of God, it is clear that he/she is remote from true service.

And so, despite its allure, a life of perfect calmness is not considered to be desirable, and many sources assure us, not even possible. Our spiritual practice is not meant to offer an emotional bypass but a way of **maintaining an even keel in the face of emotional turbulence**. You still register the ups and downs of feelings but you stay awake to the experience from an undisturbed place from where you are still able to exercise free will and choice, as we see from the next source:

B. “Rise above the good and the bad, for neither are worthy of distracting your equanimity/*menuchat ha’nefesh*.” (Rabbi Menachem Leffin (1749–1826), *Cheshbon HaNefesh*)

Source 2: Worry

Worry is one way to describe the negative state of mind that stands opposite equanimity. Consider the lesson about the sources of worry expressed in the following quote:

“The past is no more... the future is yet to come... the present is a fleeting moment... why worry?” (Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, 12th century Spain. These lines became a popular song sung in the Novorodok Mussar Yeshiva.¹)

Source 3: Humility, Peace and Trust

A. Commenting on the teaching from Pirkei Avot (1:18), “The world stands/is sustained on three things: Judgment (or Law), Truth and Peace,” the Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, d. 1609) discusses the verse (Job 25:2), a central verse regarding peace and of our prayer liturgy:

“*Oseh shalom b’meromav*,” which translates as “He (God) imposes peace in His upper realms,” the Maharal explains (*Derech Chaim*, 1:18):

The realm of the luminaries (i.e., the planets, sun and the moon) was created in peace where there is no conflict at all... they are at peace because of their interconnectedness, and because each part completes (*mashlim*) the other... Peace (Shalom) exists when each one stands in their place without entering the boundary of the other... as we find in this upper realm [of the luminaries and planets] that each entity stands in their own watch/station (*mishmar*). When each entity is in their watch/station, there is peace.

B. *O Lord, my heart is not proud nor my look haughty; I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me; But I have taught myself to be contented like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul. (Tehillim/Psalms 131: 1 – 2)*

¹ It sounds better in Hebrew, where the verses rhyme: *He’avar ayin...He’atid adayin...Ha’hoveh k’heref ayin...Da’agah mi’nayin*.



לֹא-גָבַהּ לְבִי וְלֹא-רָמוּ עֵינַי וְלֹא-הִלְכֹתִי | בְּגִדְלוֹת וּבִנְפֻלְאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי: אִם-לֹא שְׁוִיתִי |
 וְדוֹמְמֹתַי נִפְשֵׁי כְּגִמְל עָלַי אִמּוֹ כְּגִמְל עָלַי נִפְשֵׁי:

C. The essence of *bitachon* (trust in God) is the *menuchah ha'nefesh* of the person who trusts. The person's heart relies on the One Whom he/she trusts will do what is best and most befitting with regard to the matter. (Rabbeinu Bachya, *Chovot HaLevovot/Duties of the Heart, Gate of Trust*, ch. 1)

Source 4: Order and Focus

A. The *Alter* ("Elder") of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Broide (1824-1898) was a primary student of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the father of the modern-day Mussar movement, and the founder of the Kelm school of Mussar.² He stressed order and patience as the key *middot* to cultivate on the Mussar path.³ He would often say, "Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind."

Regarding *menuchah ha'nefesh* he said:

"There is no [more damaging] disarray (*pizur*, in Hebrew) than the disarray of the soul, and there is no [more beneficial] tranquility (*menucha*, in Hebrew) than the tranquility of the soul (*menuchah ha'nefesh*).

B. The person who puts before them just one goal, that will bring to complete Equanimity. (Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1873-1936, student of the *Alter* of Kelm, as quoted in *Da'at Torah, parashat Vayechi*, p.280)

Source 5: Desire

A. Isaiah 57:20-1:

But the wicked are like the surging sea which cannot find rest, Whose waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace —said my God— For the wicked.

וְהַרְשָׁעִים כַּיָּם נִגְרָשׁ כִּי הַשֶּׁקֶט לֹא יוּכַל וַיִּגְרָשׁוּ מִיָּמֵי רֶפֶשׁ וְטֵיט: אֵין שְׁלוֹם אָמַר אֱלֹהִי
 לְרָשָׁעִים:

B. Two seminal teachings from *Pirkei Avot*:

The more material possessions, the more worry (2:7)

מְרֻבָּה נִכְסִים, מְרֻבָּה דְאָגָה

Who is rich? One who is happy with their portion (4:1).

אִיזְהוּ עָשִׁיר? הַשֶּׁמֶח בְּחֻלְקוֹ

C. "The true source of constant worry is that we have no trust (*bitachon*) of attaining the external things that we desire. This desire for "possession," and "taking," its realization always depends on others and external circumstances. *Bitachon*

² The other two schools were the Slabodka school founded by Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, known as the *Alter* of Slabodka, and the Novorodok school, founded by Rabbi Yosef Yuzel Horvitz, the *Alter* of Novorodok.

³ Sometimes referred to collectively as *Yishuv ha'daat*, a "settled mind."



flourishes when we desire internal things—the desire “to be,” because in that we are not dependent on others. Therefore, one who desires material possessions feels deep within one’s heart that the desire is futile and is not up to him or her. This is the root of worry.” (Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953), *Michtav M’Eliyahu* volume 5, page 90)

Source 6: Integrity

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005) was from the greatest Mussar master of our generation. Consider the following teachings about the connection between truth, integrity and *menuchat ha’nefesh*:

A. The most basic parameter of truth is consistency. This classification does not only refer to a discrepancy between knowledge, awareness, and reality, but also that there not be contradictions within a person’s essential nature. (*Alei Shur* volume 2, page 533)

B. What is the goal of inner spiritual work? *Menuchat HaNefesh*... One merits inner *menucha* only when one is at peace from all sides: At peace with one’s surroundings...with one’s self and with one’s Creator. (*Alei Shur* volume 1, pp. 194-5)

E. Taking It to Heart

Depending on time, you will have 5-10 minutes to journal on the following questions:

1. After studying and reflecting upon these source texts, consider now, what is the primary source of your lacking inner peace?
2. Which *middah* or *middot* might you identify as being out of balance?
3. What one thing might you do to achieve greater balance, allowing you to experience more *menuchat ha’nefesh* and inner peace?

F. Take Away

Your facilitator invites each participant to share one take away from this session.

G. Closing

Your facilitator will lead you through a meditation to close this va’ad session: