

Mussar Kallah 2022: Walking the Path of Truth

Va'ad 1: Truth and Integrity¹

Introduction

This *va'ad* (small group meeting) focuses on defining the *middah* (soul-trait) of truth through a Mussar lens and living with greater integrity in our lives. What follows is a suggested format and content for your meeting but your *va'ad* facilitator will guide the discussion according to what he or she feels is best. There is no expectation that the group cover all the source texts included here and you are encouraged to revisit these materials in your own time.

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

A. Welcome and Centering

Your group leader will welcome you to the meeting and invite you to introduce yourselves to the *va'ad* members.

The actual meeting will begin with a brief centering exercise to bring you into the sacred space of the *va'ad* and away from whatever might have been occupying your attention until now.

B. Check In:

Your *va'ad* leader will lead a discussion based on the following teaching from Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's *Alei Shur*² that informed our earlier study session:

When is it fitting to call something "truth"? Only if something novel is being said, that is not obvious to all, and nothing contradicts the statement from the objective reality... It follows, then, that the desire to know truth must lead to an examination of the deeper aspects of things.³

¹ Prepared by Avi Fertig.

² Volume 2, pp. 520-521.

³ Earlier in the text Rabbi Wolbe writes that if in the middle of the day, someone says that it is day, while the statement is certainly not false, it is also not a statement that is fitting to be called "truth" because it is obvious to all.

C. Invocation

In this next section of the meeting, we will focus ourselves at a higher level, as guided by your *va'ad* leader.

We begin with a verse from Psalm 145 (18):

To Pray in Truth

“God is near to all who call — to all who call to God in truth.”

קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְכָל-קֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְאֱמֶת:

Let's consider some of the ideas raised in this verse, as seen through the lens of Rav Kook in his book *Olat Re'iyah*⁴.

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 might play a role in your own growth – particularly in how you might cultivate more truth 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*.

I. A Mussar Definition of Truth

a. True and False vs. Good and Evil

1. Truth is what leads to good and to the fulfillment of God's will. Falsehood is anything that lends success to the 'officer' of *sheker* [falsehood] — the *yetzer ha'ra* [the evil inclination].⁵

In its simplest sense, R. Dessler is telling us to equate truth with good and falsehood with evil.

⁴ Commentary on the Siddur (Jewish prayer book) by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, vol. I, pp. 226-267.

⁵ *Michtav M'Eliyahu* volume 1, page 94.

b. Factual truth vs. Adapted truth:

2. R. Ilai said in the name of R. Elazar, "It is permissible to change [objective truth] for the sake of peace." R. Natan says, "It is a *mitzvah* [to do so]." (Yevamot 65b)

אמר רבי אילעא משום רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון מותר לו לאדם לשנות בדבר השלום... רבי נתן אומר מצווה

One way to understand this teaching is that peace is a higher value than truth. However, based on Rav Dessler's teaching, another possibility is that when objective truth causes conflict or harm to others it is no longer considered "truth." "Truth" is good, harming others is evil, and so the Talmud doesn't say one can lie, rather the Talmud says, one can (or should) 'change' objective truth.

c. Cause and Effect; The straight path of truth

3. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter defined truth⁶ as something following the path for which it was intended without veering to either side, or in other words, when there is a direct link between cause/source and effect/result.⁷

d. An Illustration of truth in Jewish thought

4. *Chesed shel Emet* – Lovingkindness of Truth

Chesed (lovingkindness) done on behalf of the deceased is "*chesed of Emet*," (true lovingkindness) for one does not expect any recompense. (Rashi to Genesis 47:29)

חֶסֶד שְׂעוּשִׁין עִם הַמֵּתִים הוּא חֶסֶד נֶשְׁל אֱמֶת, שְׂאִינוּ מְצַפֶּה לְתִשְׁלוּם גְּמוּלָה

Integration:

Tying together these definitions and illustrations, we find appearing before us a pathway to living truthfully. Truth is what God wants from me, or what is good and right. To live truthfully means following through with this intention with consistency and integrity.

II. Acting with greater Integrity

There is often some fear that causes a disconnect between what we know and how

⁶ *Ohr Yisrael*, letter 30.

⁷ A source for this idea can be found in *Birchat HaLevana*, the blessing recited on seeing the new moon, where we say that the moon acts with "truth," meaning it faithfully follows its intended path.

we act or react. Beneath the surface layer of the fear you are sure to find a soul-trait that is out of the mean range. For example, someone's fear of "being taken to task" relates to the trait of responsibility, and "to be seen in a negative light" reflects the pursuit of honor. These are the root issues, and they tend to operate beneath the threshold of conscious awareness.

5. The *Orchot Tzaddikim* writes⁸:

One must know that a person's thoughts are influenced by their *middot*. The lazy person will be influenced in their thoughts by laziness, the person [inflicted by] anger, by anger, the arrogant one by arrogance. All the *middot* that we have discussed until now...therefore one who endeavors to be a 'true person of God' must remove all their unbalanced soul-traits so as not to be influenced according to them, and then a person can attain truth.

6. In applying this principle, the classic Mussar text *Cheshbon HaNefesh* identifies three areas of focus that can be helpful in our initial task of uncovering the unbalanced *middot* that may cause us to speak or to act with falsehood. He writes:

A person must first carefully inspect and dig deeply after the cause of their malady (i.e., falsehood) so that they uproot it through practicing the *middot* of humility [*anava*], righteousness [*tzedek*] and silence [*shetika*]. Then one should include the [direct] focus of practicing honesty.⁹

7. The Talmud (Berachot 17a) states, "Rava was accustomed to say: 'The goal of wisdom is *teshuvah* (repentance/returning) and good deeds.'"¹⁰ Rashi explains that whereas other bodies of wisdom focus on intellectual knowledge, to "know" Torah means that the wisdom relates to the whole being; that it forms our worldview and *that it expresses itself in action*. When we do not act upon what we know to be true, when we live in a way that is inconsistent with our values, then in a very real sense, we have not 'acquired' the knowledge.

E. Taking it to Heart

After studying and reflecting upon these source texts, consider now:

⁸ In the "Gate of Falsehood."

⁹ Chapter 12, "Truth."

¹⁰ In Hebrew: מרגלא בפומיה דרבא תכלית חכמה תשובה ומעשים טובים

See also Yevamot 109b: One who says, "There is nothing but Torah [study]" does not even have that." What is the reason? Rav Papa said: "The verse says (Deuteronomy / *Devarim* 5:1): 'You shall learn them and take care to perform them' – whoever is included in 'performing' is included in 'learning'; whoever is not included in 'performing' is not included in 'learning.'"

1. What is the primary source of any falsehood or a lack of integrity in my life?
2. Which *middah* or *middot* might you identify as being out of balance?
3. What one thing might you do to achieve living with greater truth and integrity?

F. Take Away

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

G. Closing

In his chapter on truth, the classic Mussar text *Orchot Tzaddikim* refers to the Mussar practice called *hitbodedut*, which literally means “seclusion” but can also mean “contemplative silence.” We learned how *Cheshbon HaNefesh* suggests silence as a way of discovering the unbalanced *middot* within us. Seclusion or silence is used as a way of removing the distractions of the world, allowing us to get in touch with our souls/inner selves and reconnect to the spiritual side that resides within each of us. Aside from this primary focus, silence allows us to appreciate the power and the gift of speech and reminds us that our words should not be misused or wasted.

This completes the first of the three *va'ad* meetings that are on the schedule for the Kallah.