

SHAVUOT AND MIDDOT: MUSSAR AS REVELATION

Adat Shalom, Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5782, June 2022

What is Mussar?!

**Passed-Down Insight. Advice. Rebuke. Torah. Discipline. Practice.
Jewish Virtue-Based Ethics. Ancient Wisdom, Resurfaced. Psychology, J-Style.
And Much More...**

“Mussar is the Jewish idea that we should take our moral development as seriously and as rigorously as we take our intellectual development. The idea is that we should be constantly awake to the needs of other people, and striving to meet them at all times, while taking care of ourselves. This has revolutionized the way that I pursue my rabbinate, and the way I pursue relationships in the rest of my life.” (R. Marley Weiner, RRC 2017)

“**The Torah came to create a mensch**” (R. Yisrael Salanter)

“Mussar: ... a Jewish path of character development and spiritual growth leading to awareness, wisdom, and transformation” (TMI).

Rabbi Elya Lopian (1876-1970) described Mussar as
“teaching the heart what the mind already understands”

Bahya ibn Pakuda (11th C Spain, *Hovot HaLevavot*): “the science of the inner life... [since] the very basis for an act... depends on the intention and inner life of the heart”

Rabbi Lori Shapiro (2020): “Mussar bids us to do our personal work first and, against trend, ties it to a religious moral system of interconnectedness.”

Alan Morinis: The goal of Mussar practice is not to take on pre-ordained characteristics, but to become the most **refined, perfected, elevated version** of the unique person **you already are**. To do that, we must first come to know and embrace **our soul curriculum**, which means tackling each one of our personal *middot*, traits, that hang as thick veils blocking the holy inner light from entering our lives.

Ahavah v'Rachamim Chesed v'Shalom

אהבה ורחמים חסד ושלום

Love. And Mercy. Loving-Kindness. And Peace.

For Example: Emet / אֱמֶת / Truth, and Anti-Racism

אֱמֶת v. שֶׁקֶר

“Avtalyon teaches, Do not mistake words for truth lest you become exiled in cleverness where every well is poison, and all who drink from them will die, and thus diminish the Name of Heaven.”

Pirkei Avot 1:11, translation by Rami Shapiro – Ethics of the Sages

“We choose our truth by the scope of our vision.”

Lawrence Kushner, The Book of Words



Truth springs from the ground – Midrash Breisheet Rabbah 8:5

R. Shimon said: When God was about to create the first human, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, 'Let Adam be created.' Others said, 'Let NOT Adam be created.' That is why it is written: 'Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace clashed' (Ps 85:11).

חַסְדֵּי וְאֱמֶת נִפְגְּשׁוּ וְצֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נִשְׁקָו

Mercy said, 'Let Adam be created, because the human will do merciful deeds.'

Truth said, 'Let Adam not be created, for the human will be full of falsehood.'

Righteousness said, 'Let Adam be created, for the human will do righteous deeds.'

Peace said, 'Let Adam not be created, for the human will never cease quarrelling.'

What did the Holy One do? God took truth, and threw it to the ground.

The angels said, 'Sovereign of the universe, why do You do thus to Your own seal, truth? Let truth arise from the ground.'

Thus it is written (Ps 85:12), 'Let truth spring up from the earth'

אֱמֶת מֵאֶרֶץ תִּצְמַח

Reflection questions (from R. David Jaffe & Yehuda Webster):

Think of a time you deceived yourself or others. In what way was fear a factor in why you veered from the truth? What middot on your soul curriculum does that fear reveal?

What does, "Let truth spring from the ground" mean to you? How do you experience this teaching in your racial justice and/or community organizing work?

How do you experience the relationship between truth, peace and justice and how does racial justice, particularly, factor into this formula? (Pirkei Avot 1:18)?

Rabbi David Jaffe and Yehuda Webster

Mussar and Anti-Racism Avodah / Kabbalah (Practice, Assignment)

4 quadrants – Care for Self; Care for Fellows; Care for Opponent; Connection to God/Divinity.

Care for Fellows (particularly Black/African heritage People):

- Based on the idea that truth "stands" and falsehood falls over, read about some of the now debunked theories about racial hierarchy from the past 300 years - contemplate what contemporary thinking about racial hierarchy will fall as well.
- In conversations with Black/African Heritage colleagues or friends, listen for their truth, noticing and gently pushing aside any racist bias that arises for you. If you are not in a personal relationship with Black/African Heritage people, practice this while listening to a podcast or video.
- Speak up when you hear racist lies about Black/African Heritage people and other POC and disrupt the lie with truth
- In the spirit of, "truth springs from the ground," amplify the voices of grassroots Black/African Heritage people that may not be heard by people in your circles.

Reflection/Heshbon HaNefesh

- How did truth or falsehood show up in a racialized context today? In any context?
- How do you use or manipulate truth in a campaign?
- What oppressive messages about you or others you encountered today are not true?
- How did you notice truth springing from the ground?

Mussar Journey – Tikkun Leil Shavuot 5782 / 2022

This page from Martha Hare, Makom co-chair; the rest, assembled by Rabbi Fred.

Our thanks also to Fran Zamore, Larry Goldsmith, and many others...

Growing a Soul:

- Ruach is the primordial stuff/energy that radiates through all reality, which some of us call God. Ruach is in everything and everybody.
- Neshamah is the form Ruach energy takes within each human; Neshamot are points of consciousness, shining ever brightly.
- Nefesh is both one's body and one's sense of individuality. The Nefesh is the portal through which the energy of Ruach flows. Through the Nefesh boundary, the Neshamah can either shine expansively as *Tov* [goodness], or be restricted as *Ra* [evil but read as self-absorption]. (In Center for Contemporary Mussar [CCM] 2020. *Cultivating Your Soul*, 2nd Edition, Page 17)

Basis of *Kibbush*: Identifying and restraining negative tendencies, or tendency towards self-absorption

Rabbi Phineas [Pinchas] ben Yair's *Baraita* – Talmud Avodah Zarah 20b

“The knowledge of Torah leads to watchfulness, watchfulness leads to zeal, zeal to cleanness, cleanness to abstinence, abstinence to purity, purity to piety, piety to humility, humility to fear of sin, the fear of sin to holiness, holiness to the Divine Spirit...”

מכאן א"ר פנחס בן יאיר תורה מביאה לידי זהירות זהירות מביאה לידי זריזות זריזות מביאה לידי נקיות נקיות מביאה לידי פרישות פרישות מביאה לידי טהרה טהרה מביאה לידי חסידות חסידות מביאה לידי ענוה ענוה מביאה לידי יראת חטא יראת חטא מביאה לידי קדושה קדושה מביאה לידי רוח הקודש רוח הקודש מביאה לידי תחיית המתים וחסידות גדולה מכולן שנאמר (תהלים פט, כ) אז דברת בחזון לחסידיך

Quoted as the organizing structure of Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto's 1740 *Mesillat Yesharim: The path of the upright*. See Ira Stone's 2010 JPS commentary; translation by Mordecai M Kaplan.

Basis of *Tikkun*: enhancing tendencies for personal, inter-relational & social transformation

Tomer Devorah (Moshe Cordovero, 16th C) as basis for practice of *imitatio Dei*

“Who is like You, who pardons iniquity and forgives the transgressions of the remnant of God's heritage? God does not maintain anger forever, for God delights in kindness; God will again show us compassion...” (c.f. *Micah* 7:18-19) (In Stone, Ira and Beulah Trey (2019) *In Search of the Holy Life: Rediscovering the Kabbalistic roots of Mussar*. iUniverse p. 2.)

Talmud: Can We “Walk After God”?!

Sotah 14a – Imitatio Dei

וְאָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא מַאי דְכָתִיב אַחֲרֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ
וְכִי אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְאָדָם לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרֵי שְׂכִינָה וְהֵלֵא פֶּבֶר נֶאֱמַר כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֵשׁ אוֹכֵלָה הוּא

And Rabbi Ḥama, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “After the Lord your God shall you walk, and you shall fear / be in awe of God, and keep God's commandments...” (Deut 13:5)? But is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn't it already been stated: “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Deut 4:24) – and one cannot approach fire?!

אֵלָּא לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרֵי מְדוּתָיו שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מָה הוּא מְלַבֵּישׁ עֲרוּמִים דְּכָתִיב וַיַּעַשׂ ה' אֱלֹהִים
לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיִּלְבָּשֵׁם אֵף אִתָּהּ הַלְּבָשׁ עֲרוּמִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בִּיקָר חוֹלִים דְּכָתִיב וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה'
בְּאֵלֶיךָ מִמְּרָא אֵף אִתָּהּ בִּיקָר חוֹלִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נִחַם אֲבֵלִים דְּכָתִיב וַיְהִי אַחֲרַי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבָרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת
צָעֲקָךְ בְּנֵיךָ אֵף אִתָּהּ נִחַם אֲבֵלִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא קָבַר מֵתִים דְּכָתִיב וַיִּקְבֹּר אוֹתוֹ בְּגִי אֵף אִתָּהּ קָבֹר מֵתִים

He explains: Rather, it means that one should follow the attributes [middot] of the Holy Blessed One, [R. Hama's 4 examples:] Just as God clothes the naked, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Gen 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy Blessed One visits the sick, as it is written (about Abraham following his circumcision): “And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre” (Gen 18:1), so too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy Blessed One consoles mourners, as it is written: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son” (Gen 25:11), so too, should you console mourners. Just as the Holy Blessed One buried the dead, as it is written: “And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab” (Deut 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead...

Torah as a Spiritual Garment: The Mussar of Learning

Rabbi Ira F. Stone, 2012, CCM Mussar Leadership Program

Mussar is the general term used to describe the central spiritual discipline in Jewish tradition: the integration of *middot*, character traits or more generally, ethics, into all other aspects of Jewish expression. Understood this way Mussar transcends distinctions between movements, geography, and philosophy as it outlines the core characteristics of Jewish living.

The goal of spiritual life is the transformation of human personality such that the central virtue of the Torah, *v'ahavta l'rayecha kamocha*, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” can be enacted. How to achieve this transformation became **the central question of Jewish spirituality.** Even among the greatest of Jewish mystics, unification with the Divine was understood to be dependent upon the rectification of *middot*.

In this context the role of Torah and specifically **the rabbinic value of learning Torah**, and by extension **learning in general**, requires some clarification. Of what value is learning in the cultivation of character? Does one's learning Torah lead to acts of goodness that are indicative of this personality transformation? Can someone without Torah learning achieve ethical transformation? These questions assume, naturally, that Torah is instrumental, that it has – as a goal – the performance of specific acts and that

learning is subservient to this instrumentality. We learn in order to do, and it is the doing that counts. Yet, within rabbinic tradition there is also the idea of *torah l'sh'ma*, that is, learning for its own sake. This is a concept particularly upheld within the Mussar tradition. Thus our questions are deepened: What is the relationship between learning Torah and spiritual transformation when that learning is not instrumental but rather an **end** in itself?

The answer to these questions emerges out of a particular understanding of Torah, and hence of learning, within the Mussar world. **Torah is not** conceived of as a text, but rather as a spiritual garment. **The goal of spirituality is to refine the soul in order for this garment to affix itself to one's soul.**

Mitzvot, then, are the specific cultural expressions of “wearing” this spiritual garment and *halakhot* become the historical form these cultural expressions take at any one time. But prior to the conceptualization of *mitzvot*, Torah must “affix” itself to one's soul. The actions that prepare the soul to bear Torah are contained within the *middot*, the **character traits** such as humility, kindness, righteousness, patience, and equanimity. The *middot* **precede** *mitzvot* and make Torah in this fundamental sense possible.

Learning Torah is a complex process, a spiritual discipline that begins by learning *middot* – learning to emulate the life-skills, if you will, of a spiritual master. The Torah itself places God in this position of spiritual master to be emulated when God denies Moses' request to “see His face,” and insists that all we can “see” of God are God's acts, God's *middot*: forbearance, kindness, and compassion. **The “seeing” of the face of God denied to Moses is transposed into “seeing” the obligation to serve God on the face of another person.** [cf. Emmanuel Levinas]

Learning begins with emulation but requires **introspection** and conscientious steps toward **self-transformation**. In the course of this process, as Torah more and more adheres to our souls, the **specific content of Torah** – the *mitzvot* and the halakhic and aggadic discourses – becomes the field upon which our Torah-bearing souls express themselves in concrete acts. Some of those acts **comprise** the *middot*/values that have been central in our transformation (that is, acts that incorporate the values themselves, such as leaving the corners of the fields unharvested for the poor), while other acts are **interruptive** (serving as reminders of the original values that aided in our becoming carriers of Torah, such as *kashrut* or *tefillin*).

The specific mode of Torah study that Jewish tradition highlights – an **interactive** mode in which learning always proceeds **in dialogue with another person** – epitomizes the coming together of the various levels of Torah and Torah study that we've mentioned. In the very act of study we are always standing before another whose real presence filters the potential meaning of the text. The act of study in this *chevruta* (face-to-face) model requires **prior attention to middot**. Moreover, the text we are studying contains a history of such encounters. The **faces of the others** who have labored in study over the very same texts **transforms** the text itself into an “other” of whom we must be solicitous. It is this **solicitousness of the other** that distinguishes *torah l'sh'ma* from other modes of learning. **Learning as solicitousness of the other** places it at the **heart of the Jewish spiritual journey**.

“Acquiring Torah” is a code word for transformation of self -- a welling up of inspiration; a passionate and joyful infusion that effects **change in every aspect of our daily lives**. (Alan Morinis & R. Avi Fertig)

Shavuot & Middot: Mussar as Revelation

Rav Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur I (1966), p. 134

נושא העבודה הפרטית: ההתאחדות וההשתלבות עם התורה. כדי להגיע אל מטרה זו – ההכרח לדעת ולתקן עצמנו. זהו תוכן שער זה: מערכת ידיעת עצמנו, מערכה שני' (ההדרכה לתקון עצמנו), ומערכת דעת תורתנו, ההדרכה להתאחדות עם התורה.

The topic of Avodah HaPratit, our personal/individual spiritual work: [it's] becoming one, and becoming in sync, with the Torah. In order to arrive at this goal – it's necessary to know and to fix ourselves. That is the content of this 'Gate' [concept/chapter 3]: a subsection on knowledge of oneself; a second subsection (on guidance for fixing / improving ourselves); and a subsection on [deep connected] knowledge of our Torah, which is the guidance toward becoming one *with* the Torah.

קבענו את ההכרח בתקון עצמנו כתנאי והקדמה להתאחדות עם התורה, על-פי מאמרי רבנו חיים ויטאל ורבנו אור ישראל זללה"ה. – נוכחנו, כי למעלות התורה אי אפשר להגיע בלי מהלך אישי הן בזהירות מחטא (הגר"א במשלי ומהר"ל באבות) והן בקיום מצוות (חז"ל על "צדק לבשתי" כו' וגמ' ב"ק נט).

We've established that it [a personalized / mussar path] is necessary, in fixing ourselves, as a condition and a first step toward becoming one with the Torah – according to the sayings of Reb Chaim Vital, and our Rabbi Or Yisrael. We proved, that for the elevated levels of Torah, one can't reach them without a personal individual path. This is true in watchfulness to *avoid* sin (see the Gr"a on Mishlei, & the Maharal on Avot); and also in *upholding* the mitzvot (see Hazal on wearing your righteousness like a garment, etc, Talmud Bava Kama 59).

I.E. – an individualized path is needed to connect with Torah, both on the negative and the positive side. *References* – Hayim Vital (16th C): good middot are necessary in preparation for absorbing the concepts of Torah; they are "the chair, the foundation, and the root of the higher soul, which is the place where the mitzvot are." Yisrael Salanter (19th C): one can't approach Torah if they have personal bias; must release self from it, via tikkun ha'middot; only then can one fulfill the mitzvot properly, or truly connect with Torah. The Gr"a (Vilna Gaon, 18th C), to Prov. 14:2: "Each person must go in the path they need to go in, for the middot of one person are not the same as the middot of another." The Maharal (Judah Loew of Prague, 16th C), to Avot 3:11: it's not enough to have 'fear of sin' in general; you have to have fear of *your* sin [rooted in what's off in *your* middot, different for you than for another]; the text is not possessive on the person, but on the fear.

Rabbi Avi Fertig, 6/1/22 (when asked about this key passage for tonight's tikkun!): yes! just know, it took weeks to get here; it might not resonate as immediately as you would hope ... but yeah, this is the most essential thing ... There's a challenge, a tension: Rav Wolbe, at the end, says it's not 100% *me'atzmo* -- of course the Torah and the ability to understand it are God-given -- but still, it's gotta be 'my way.' Without this, you're not really approaching anything in a real way; you're not living it. Don't parrot; don't take it just as you received it; let it live, and be strong, and flow – a *ma'ayan mitgaber*.



The Eighteen Middot

The following 18 *middot* and their definitions come from Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov, in his 1808 *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh* ("Accounting of the Soul"). Many more *middot* apply in Mussar, as well. Each of us, conditioned by both nature and nurture, has our unique mix of stronger and weaker *middot*. We grow, and effect change, at our נקודות הבחירה – our "Choice-Points" (R. Dessler, Michtav m'Eliyahu I:113).

1. Orderliness | *Seder* – All your actions and possessions should be orderly – each and every one in a set place and at a set time. Let your thoughts always be free to deal with that which lies ahead of you.
2. Deliberation | *Metinut* – Let your heart not be precipitate nor your mouth be hasty. Rather, pause several times while speaking or acting so as to deliberate and calm yourself.
3. Patience | *Savlanut* – When something bad happens to you and you did not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.
4. Right Action | *Tzedek* – What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.
5. Equanimity | *Menuchat ha-nefesh* – Rise above events that are inconsequential – both bad and good – for they are not worth disturbing your composure.
6. Moderation | *Histapkut* – aka Balance | *Izun; Shvil Ha'zahav* – Before taking food into your mouth, consider what benefit it has for your personal health or the fulfillment of a precept.
7. Silence - Considered Speech | *Shtika* – Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect: "What benefit will my speech bring me or others?"
8. Frugality | *Kimmutz* – Be careful with your money. Do not spend even a penny needlessly.
9. Decisiveness | *Charitzut* – All of your acts should be preceded by deliberation; when you have reached a decision, act without hesitating.
10. Diligence/Zeal | *Zerizut* – Always find something to do – for yourself or for a friend, and don't allow a moment of your life to be wasted.
11. Trust | *Bitachon* – If worry comes to your heart, take it as a warning from God who loves you. Examine your deeds and take counsel with those whose advice you seek. Once you've fulfilled God's will, trust Gd, and your serenity will return.
12. Cleanliness | *Nekiyut* – Let not stain or ugliness be found in your possessions or in your home, and surely not on your body or clothes. (Traditionally, this is also 'cleanliness from sin'.)

13. Humility | *Anavah* – Always seek to learn wisdom from everyone, to recognize your failings and correct them. In doing so you will learn to stop thinking about your virtues and you will take your mind off your friend's faults.
14. Truthfulness | *Emet* – Do not allow anything to pass your lips that you are not certain is completely true.
15. Calmness | *Nichuta* – The words of the wise are stated gently. In being good, do not be called evil.
16. Modesty | *Tzniut* – Distance yourself from all that is ugly and unseemly, from lust and from anything which leads people to be suspicious of you, and you will find favor in the eyes of God and humanity.
17. Separation | *Prishut* – Strengthen yourself so that you can stop lewd thoughts. Draw close to your spouse only when your mind is free, occupied only with thoughts of fulfilling your conjugal duties or procreating.
18. Generosity | *Nedivut* – Accustom yourself to finding satisfaction in acting kindly towards others and in seeing the meanness of being stingy.

MORE MAJOR MIDDOT:

Honor: כבוד – *Kavod*

Awe/Fear: יראה – *Yirah*

Gratitude: הכרת הטוב – *Hakarat Ha'Tov*

Compassion: רחמים – *Rachamim*

Loving Kindness: חסד – *Chesed*

Responsibility: אחריות – *Achrayut*

Resources For More Mussar

NGO's, With Great Website Resources

Center for Contemporary Mussar: www.contemporarymussar.org (Rabbi Ira Stone et al)

Deep Activist Mussar: www.INSIDEOUTWISDOMANDACTION.org (Rabbi David Jaffe et al)

The Mussar Institute: www.mussarinstitute.org (Alan Morinis et al)

Institute for Jewish Spirituality: www.jewishspirituality.org

Books and Video

Video: Tiffany Shlain, 2015, [The Making of a Mensch](#) (11 minutes)

Book: Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, 2007

Book: R. David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out*, 2016



And Stay Tuned for More, Right Here, at **Adat Shalom!** Chag Sameach!