



Mussar as a Spiritual Discipline

Rabbi David Jaffe

Adrienne Kohn Spiritual Growth Day

Adat Shalom

March 19, 2023

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's Theory of Growth and Change

From Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Aley Shur*, vol. 2 pgs. 165-168, "Thought, Feeling and Hitpa'anut"

Translated by David Jaffe

There is a great difference between the wisdom of the Torah and the wisdom of general culture: Torah is completely focused on practical application, to help people reach their full potential as whole, integral human beings. This is not the goal of general culture: It mostly values the flash of a brilliant idea, beautiful creations and things that improve the quality of life. Personal development and integrity is not its goal. The philosopher does not necessarily seek to personally live out her ideas. Some great psychologists behave in ways that you may think they never heard of psychology. The poet is not obligated to live with the spiritual refinement that comes through in his art.

The holy Torah has no place for this purely intellectual approach. A person with significant gaps between what they know and how they behave is not trusted as a teacher, as the Talmud says (Yuma 72b): "Any scholar who lacks integrity is not a scholar." (literally – "whose inside it not in alignment with his outside.")...Rabbi Yisrael Salanter writes:

The intellect functions to uncover the hidden-most secrets of wisdom¹. It stimulates man's knowledge and counsel (Proverbs 1:4) to seek and inquire, and to clarify matters that are in doubt. The emotions serve to open the sealed chambers of the heart and to pour waters of understanding upon it; he begins to understand that which he already knows intellectually but has not entered into the inner sanctum of his heart. Consequently, the study of improving one's character and purifying one's negative traits is different than that of all other areas of Torah study and wisdom. Concerning Torah study, knowledge and the knowledgeable person are two separate entities. Man's mere mastery of Torah knowledge suffices for him to acquire perfection and to conduct himself according to his clear and accessible Torah knowledge. However, such is not the case with character rectification and the purification of negative emotional forces. The mere acquisition of knowledge does not help a person to conduct himself in an upright fashion. Rather, the principles he has learned must be inculcated within his heart – bound and joined to him so that they and he are united as one.

The special method of implanting the wisdom of mussar within his heart is called *hispailus* [i.e., the conscious awakening of the heart through fervent recital of Mussar concepts]. The power of *hispailus* bequeaths a blessing to [change the nature of] people. Even after he ceases from actively employing this exercise, the blessing is neither diminished nor lost; rather, it leaves behind a subtle imprint that continues to inspire his spirit. By profuse engagement in *hispailus* (particularly at properly organized times, each person according to his or her situation and circumstances), the fruits of their efforts will increase and be intensified, and ultimately their temperament will be transformed for the better.

...regarding middot and purifying inner forces, what we know needs to become completely integrated with who we are. Only then will the knowledge succeed in bearing fruit in transforming our middot for the better. Behold, all Torah study needs to be conducted, "with

¹ This and the indented quotation on the next page from Rabbi Yisrael Salanter are from Ohr Yisrael, Letter 30 and the translation is adapted from Rabbi Tzvi Miller's edition of Ohr Yisrael.

awe and trembling and sweating,” just like at Mount Sinai. Especially study of Mussar, whose goal is the unification of knowledge and the person, according to Rav Yisrael needs to be conducted, “with lips aflame, with strong emotion and a stormy spirit.” (Ohr Yisrael, letter 2)...

Someone who is immersed in a “cultured” or “intellectual” environment may have a hard time with this. A modern person is embarrassed to arouse emotion. In civilized society a person is considered primitive who displays emotion in public. Even relatives swallow their emotions at a funeral if they are “cultured.” Behold, Rav Yisrael demanded emotion for Mussar study.... Of course, the first step is always to attain a clear, analytic understanding of a text...by after achieving this understanding, when you review the source, one needs to arouse emotion with song and a full voice....

Three levels of Divine Service

...we derive that there are three levels of Divine service. The first one – the gateway and the beginning – is sensitivity (Hergesh). This is engendered by studying the Rabbis dictums and our Sage’s Mussar teachings. A person must repeat them over and over until they are finally moved and sense a lacking in their soul. They then advance to the second level: the conquering of the evil inclination. They then ascend to the third level: the transformation of the evil inclination, so that they will rejoice and delight in their Divine service. (Ohr Yisrael, letter 30)

...The word “Regesh” (emotion/feeling – related to Hergesh/sensitivity) has a deeper meaning. When we generally speak of feeling good or bad we are talking about a transient mood that passes. What is the meaning of “Regesh” in the Torah? ... The kosher slaughterer, when checking the knife needs “L’hargish/To feel” any tiny blemish along the blade that will disqualify it for use...

This type of “Regesh/feeling” comes from paying close attention to any blemish and having that arouse enough emotion to motivate Teshuva. In Mussar study this type of “Regesh/Feeling” brings one to “Kvishat HaYetzer/Conquering of the Yetzer.” The impression left on the soul from the Hispailus is so strong that a person is able to override the yetzer when it comes to a test.

But, conquering the Yetzer is not the end point for the Mussar student. Much learning will awaken a strong desire to draw close to spirituality. This desire will become so strong that the practitioner will taste and feel more and more of the delight in Torah, prayer and mitzvot. This joy and delight in spiritual practice is itself the transformation of the Yetzer: The Yetzer itself is transformed for goodness and deeply yearns for spirituality....

Most of the mistakes and transgressions we do fall into the category of, “like they are permitted,” whether this is theft or lashon harah, etc....This phenomenon of deceiving ourselves that things are permitted is called by the Rabbis “numb of heart.”

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught that transgressions numbs the heart of a person, as it says in the Torah: Lo Titma’u bam v’Nitmetem bam/בם ונטמאתם בם – don’t read the word as “Nitmetem/spiritually impure,” rather read it as “Nitamtem/numb.” (Yoma 39a)

A lack of sensitivity, which is a numbness, is actually spiritual impurity. Holiness is spiritual sensitivity and impurity is a lack of this sensitivity....

מֹת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן

Death and life are in the power of the tongue
-Proverbs 18:21

Head: What do the words mean and why are these particular words used?

Heart: Think of specific times you've been harmed by or caused harm with speech and when speech has been lifegiving for you or for people you know.

Integration:

Use your voice or body to make this verse "come alive"

OR

What is one specific way you could apply this teaching in your life today?

Inner and Outer Change – The Wheel

Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz (1848-1919, Poland) was the founder of Novaradak school of Mussar. A disciple of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the modern Mussar movement, Rav Yosef Yozel created a system that included nearly 120 yeshivot by the eve of the First World War. Famous for his intense trust in God, Rav Yosef Yozel encouraged his students to engage in public service. The excerpt below is from the final section of his major work, *Madregat Ha'adam/The Stature of Humans*. In this section Rav Yosef Yozel argues that one who wants to effectively work on themselves must engage in public affairs.

The Talmud tells a story about Rav Preida, who needed to repeat a lesson 400 times before his student understood. One day, Rav Preida needed to repeat the lesson 800 times. Rav Preida received a great heavenly reward for his patience. Rav Yosef Yozel retells this story and imagines a student asking how Rav Preida could have sacrificed so much of his time on this one pupil and neglected his own growth. He responds that public service is, indeed, the best way to truly grow spiritually because service pushes us out of our comfort zone and shows us which traits need attention. He writes:

It is important for us to know that the most difficult aspect of Divine service is the employment of character traits in their proper place and time, an activity which is highly subject to error and fraught with stumbling blocks. This is true, however, only when one relies exclusively upon his own judgment and attempts to arrive at the truth by his own reasoning – in which case he will fail to acquire it. However, when one becomes a community servant [...] the proper character reactions are dictated by the demands of the situation.

What is the problem with one's own judgment and reasoning? According to Rav Yosef Yozel, we can get lost in our own minds. If we are trying to grow in solitude we will fool ourselves and never really be challenged. It is in taking action in a communal context that we really get to stretch ourselves and draw on all of our inner characteristics.

It is seen, then, that the only true index to the proper functioning of character is community service; for in that area the situation itself calls for the implementation of certain traits, or their contraries, without contradiction. For in one instance the circumstances may demand boldness, and in another humility; in one instance, anger, and in another, mercy; [...] in one instance, the teaching of the new, and in another, the preservation of the old [...] all according to the needs of the situation. One may see this form of soul development as analogous to a wheel from which no spoke protrudes. If one of the spokes did protrude beyond the rim of the wheel, it could not turn, for the outermost spoke would impede its movement. In the same way, one who is guided by his reasoning alone is always impeded by his extreme traits and has no way of achieving a proper orientation.

Exercise:

What are two-three traits (spokes of the wheel) that are being called into action for you to show up as needed in your life right now?

Which of these traits need to expand, contract or stay steady?

Sample Middot – Soul Traits

(Adapted from *Everyday Holiness*, Dr. Alan Morinis)

Humility: an accurate recognition of self, neither too grand nor too diminished

Faith: belief in a higher power

Anger: heated emotion stirred by a real or supposed injury or insult

Alacrity: acting without delay

Zeal/passion: fervor for a cause or service

Generosity: giving freely, without meanness or selfishness

Honor: high respect; elevated reputation

Trust: having confidence in others; lacking suspicion

Silence: quiet; restrained speech

Love: affectionate attachment and fondness of heart

Truth: accurate speech

Courage: bravery; boldness

Equanimity: serenity; peacefulness; tranquility

Patience: ability to endure delay, trouble, pain or hardship

Order: everything in its proper place

Responsibility: having control over and accountability for appropriate events

Flexibility: adaptability; ability to change to suit circumstances

Shtika and Shmirat HaLashon/Silence and Thoughtful Speech Practices

Torah Learning – *Guard Your Tongue*, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan

Focus Phrase

Suggested phrases:

מֹות וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן

Death and life are in the power of the tongue

-Proverbs 18:21

סִג לַחֲכָמָה - שְׁתִּיקָה

Silence is a fence for wisdom

-Pirkei Avot 3:13

Kabbalat/Small challenges

Set a fixed time every day, for approximately 20 minutes, to focus on speech. During this time, if any thought arises within us to say something negative about someone, immediately push oneself to say something positive about this person, in order to learn “Lashon Tov.” A communal meal is a good time to try this practice.

Dedicate, or rededicate yourself to a contemplative practice every day during our work on this middah. Choose a reasonable amount of time that will fit into your schedule.

Soul Accounting

Keep a daily record of insights and experiences you have with this Shtika-Shmirat HaLashon practice. You can respond to the following prompt if useful:

- What was it like to hear Lashon Harah today (verbally or in print)?
- How would your life change if you really knew “Death and life are in the power of the tongue?”
- How does a certain amount of silent time impact your day?

Partner check-in

Set up a 30 minute period of time to meet with your partner as least once between meeting.