

## Lesson 1.2 – Humility self-study

READING: *Everyday Holiness*, Chapter 7: Humility

PRACTICE: Begin your Mussar practice with a phrase, journaling and *kabbalah* that focus on Humility.

Welcome

Now that you have read and considered Chapter 7 of *Everyday Holiness* (on Humility) and had your *va'ad* meeting on this quality, you have learned a great deal about the Jewish view of the ideal relationship we are meant to maintain with our egos. But Mussar involves so much more than book-learning (as important as that is). There is one additional step, which involves transferring that information out of the head to take root in your heart. This step is so central to the Mussar approach that Rabbi Elya Lopian, a great Mussar teacher of the last century, actually defined Mussar as, “Making the heart understand what the mind knows.”

We are spending two sessions on each *middah*—the first for your reading and *va'ad* meeting and the second when we will provide you with materials, exercises and practices to guide you in a direct, experiential encounter with our subject, that it may enter your heart and lead you in the direction of change.

What we are talking about here is Mussar **practice**, which has developed through the centuries to become an effective method to activate and internalize the good ideas we have studied. These practices were mentioned in your group Orientation session and were described in the previous lesson. Now it is time to apply those methods specifically to the subject at hand, which is humility.

### AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON SCHEDULING:

We want you to be clear on the scheduling of assignments, so there is no confusion.

You are now in the middle of the focus on humility. Your *va'ad* has met and discussed this subject, and with this present assignment, you are now to begin your self-study and practice on this trait.

The next assignment you will receive will tell you to read the chapter in *Everyday Holiness* on the next *middah* on the curriculum, which is patience. Even as you do that patience reading, you are to KEEP PRACTICING HUMILITY, right up until you have your *va'ad* on patience AND you receive the self-study

and practice assignment for patience. Only then do you switch from practicing humility to practicing patience.

This overlapping pattern will be maintained throughout the course.

### Self-study and practice

Whenever we assign self-study and practice, we will assign three practices. These are:

- A morning phrase to recite
- An evening journaling assignment
- A *kabbalah* (exercise) to perform during the day

Following are your three practices that have as their purpose cultivating humility:

### **1) Accounting of the Soul (*Cheshbon ha'nefesh*) morning phrase for humility / *anavah***

Recall that the morning practice is to recite a reminder phrase that captures the essence of the quality. For humility, the phrase we suggest is:

- No more than my space, no less than my place.

You will recognize that this phrase captures the Jewish definition of humility that was expressed in the course text.

Write or print your phrase on a little card or a post-it note, and place it where you are sure to see it in the morning.

Every day that you are working on this *middah*, recite this phrase. Do it early in your day, so that you are reminded that you are practicing humility.

You can speak, chant, or repeat the phrase in order to affirm the ideal you are seeking with that soul-trait.

## 2) Accounting of the Soul (*Cheshbon ha'nefesh*) journaling for humility / *anavah*

Every evening, you have the practice of making brief notes in your Mussar journal about anything you can recall from your day that reflects the presence in you of pride, arrogance, humility, self-deprecation or the like. The term “accounting of the soul” is a direct translation of the Hebrew phrase “*cheshbon ha'nefesh*,” which can be used to describe any kind of inner stock-taking. Rabbi Y.B. Soloveitchik pointed out that after each day of creation, God looked back at the day and evaluated it: “And God saw that it was good.” Since one of the guiding principles of Mussar practice is to “walk in God’s way,” in other words, to try to emulate the Divine, so we too should be looking back at our actions and evaluating them. We do that by means of keeping a journal.

When done with consistency, journaling is a simple but effective transformative process. Your review and notes provide clear knowledge of the forces and contours of your own inner landscape. That interior world of personality, thought, wisdom and emotions, along with its eternal essence, is what we know as “soul,” and a rigorous process of soul-accounting delivers up penetrating insight and ultimately change.

Focus on only one *middah* at a time, and record what you can see in your life in that particular area. It isn't so much a matter of cataloguing events that happened to you as it is *recording the choices and decisions you made and the actions you took*. Nor are you looking for deep analysis and intellectual acuity.

You need to equip yourself with a blank notebook. All that is necessary is that it has blank pages. Big or small, elegant or plain, lined or not is up to you. It is done in the evening at bedtime. Every night, just before you go to sleep, reflect back over your day to see what you can identify that in any way reveals the presence of the single quality you are working on at that time. Record all thoughts and experiences that relate to that particular quality.

Your notes should be brief, just an outline of the facts that reveal something of your characteristics. Focus especially on the role you played in events. Don't worry if what you write wouldn't pass as literature. No one but you ever need see this notebook. More important than the amount you write or the floweriness of the prose is the honesty you bring to your introspection. Shine a bright light on your day, and see what there is to see about the quality that is your focus for the week, and write down just what you need to record to clarify the facts of your motives, actions and reactions.

You do not want to beat up on yourself for your slip-ups nor heap praises on yourself for your victories. What you're after is just a factual and accurate picture of the play of your inner life as it shapes your thoughts, words and deeds in action. The details contain the underlying patterns that recur in your life, and by

examining them, you get nothing less than a read-out on the contents of your unconscious, as they express themselves in the particulars of your life. Patterns start to emerge, and you become aware of them.

Missing a day is no sin, but it will surely detract from the growth in awareness that we are seeking. Even if the note you write one night is very brief, it is far better to write that than nothing, because when you write nothing, you break the chain you are creating.

As you journal for the trait of humility, ask yourself if there was a moment in your day when you thought of yourself as better than someone else (what we might call haughty thoughts)? Or did you speak conceited words? Did you come forward sufficiently to represent your own convictions and interests? Did you experience someone else's soul-trait of humility (or lack thereof)?

What do you see?

Like an accountant reviewing a company's books, the "accounting of the soul" practice gives you all the tools you need to "audit" your inner life. The conscious mind now gains access to features of the unconscious, and becomes aware of the soul-traits that mold our everyday existence, including thoughts, feelings and actions. That's how *cheshbon ha'nefesh* works. It brings to light deep patterns that might otherwise remain hidden from us.

Because we don't make a practice of writing on Shabbat, please make your notes on Friday earlier, before sunset.

### 3) *Kabbalot* for humility

The final practices for this period are the humility exercises we are assigning, which the Mussar teachers call *kabbalot* (singular: *kabbalah*). Here is where the assignment gets personal because different exercises are appropriate to different people, depending on where they tend to fall on the continuum between arrogance as one extreme of ego and self-denigration as its opposite.

This continuum can be shown on a graph, as on page 50 of *Everyday Holiness*:

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self-debasement    humility    pride    arrogance

Your first assignment for this period is to place yourself on this graph. Don't worry about being precise. Just reflect on whether you have a tendency to occupy too much space in relation to others, or not enough space and so on. You should look for your general pattern and not be concerned about specific situations that aren't really typical of you.

Placing yourself on this graph is essential to taking on the *kabbalot* that follow because we are assigning three different sets of exercises: one set for people tending toward arrogance (occupying too much space), self-denigration (occupying too little space), and those in between.

a. *kabbalot* for arrogance

Choose one or more of the following suggestions as things you will do every day, as often as circumstances arise:

- Sit at the back of the room, not the front.
- Wear unremarkable clothing that does not attract attention.
- Speak softly.
- Wait for others to speak before you do.

b. *kabbalot* for self-debasement

Choose one or more of the following suggestions as things you will do every day, as often as circumstances arise:

- Sit at the front of the room, not the back.
- Wear more dramatic clothing that does not shy away from attracting attention.
- Speak loudly and with conviction.
- Look for opportunities to be the first one to raise your hand or speak.

c. *kabbalot* for humble people with self-esteem

- Sit, speak and conduct yourself in ways that are not instinctive to you. Try a stretch to be more prominent in your space and also something that stretches you to be less prominent. Observe what you can learn from your experience, what the Mussar teachers call *hitlamdut*, teaching yourself.

### **A final word on beginning practice**

As you get settled into your practice, be prepared that there may be a few bumps, as is often the case with new things. Once these processes are operating well, they will serve you for the balance of the course, so let's do what we can to sort out whatever problems may arise. Our suggestion is that you adopt the attitude that you are investing in a set of tools that will be very useful to you down the road.

The elements of Mussar practice will become very familiar to you once you have done the practice for the first few *middot*. Even if they are strange at the beginning, if you stay with it, they will become routine and easy to apply to each *middah* as you move through this course.

Please bring any questions you have about the practice to the next group meeting.

If you have any questions about your self-study assignment and practice elements today and need assistance before the next meeting, please contact your local group leader.