

LESSON 1.1.1 – *Middah* #1 – Humility – ענוה

READING: *Everyday Holiness*, Chapter 7: Humility
Everyday Holiness, Part III

PRACTICE: Journaling as described in section “C” below

Welcome

We bid you a fond welcome to this first Lesson in *Seeking Everyday Holiness*. We hope you have had a clear and thorough introduction to this program and are now ready to get down to work.

This lesson is much longer than will be typical because we have so much to introduce and explain. Please read it thoroughly because it sets up not only your first *va’ad* meeting but the whole program that follows.

Most of Mussar study and practice focuses on cultivating individual inner traits [*middot* in Hebrew] and we now enter our investigation and practice of our first of these soul-traits, which is **humility** [*anavah* / ענוה in Hebrew].

A. *Middah* #1 – humility / *anavah* / ענוה

READING *Everyday Holiness*, Chapter 7: Humility

Please complete reading Chapter 7 of *Everyday Holiness* (Humility) before your group meets again.

When you read a Mussar text, we encourage you to do three things:

- Read the chapter as slowly and as many times as it takes for you to gain a good understanding of the concepts presented there.
- Give some time to considering how the concepts in the chapter apply to you personally, your life and the people you know.
- Make note of any questions or uncertainties so you can bring them to your next *va’ad* (small group) meeting.

For every chapter of the book that you will be assigned, we will provide some prompt questions that will help you probe and penetrate the text, in order to come away with more comprehension and greater retention of what you are learning. Please bring any questions or issues that arise from the reading to be discussed in the *va’ad* meeting.

Here are the things we ask you to look out for as you read the chapter on humility in *Everyday Holiness*:

1. A Mussar definition of humility is developed as “limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others.” Can you think of examples or illustrations that apply this definition in a variety of contexts? For example, how does it apply to the way people sit on a bench? Eat at a buffet? Participate in a fundraising campaign?

As you answer this question, remember that there is such a thing as too little humility and also too much humility. Can you think of examples at both ends of the range?

2. How do you understand the actions of Zecharias ben Avkulas as “humility”?

3. The Talmudic sage Rava teaches: “Who possesses [haughtiness of spirit] deserves excommunication, and if he does not possess it he deserves excommunication.” What is the lesson you take away from this apparently paradoxical teaching?

4. Near the beginning of the chapter, we encounter a quote from Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda’s *Duties of the Heart*. This is a profoundly important Mussar text written in Spain in the 11th century, nearly a thousand years ago. Rabbi ibn Paquda asks: “On what do the virtues depend?” and he answers: “All virtues and duties are dependent on humility.”

אם הפניעה סמוכה למידות הטובות או המידות הטובות סמוכות לה? ... זה
מתחייב שתהיינה כל המידות הטובות והחובות סמוכות לכניעתו, והיא ראש
ותחילה להן.

He provides both spiritual and earthly reasons for giving the trait of humility this important status.

- i. What are your thoughts on the spiritual reason he gives, which is that humility is the bedrock of virtue because a person will be humble if he or she recognizes that his or her primary duty in this world is to serve God?
- ii. Later on in the same chapter, Rabbi ibn Paquda lists three worldly benefits that come from being humble. Read and consider each of these in turn and see if you can apply them to real people, including yourself:
 - a. The humble person is happy with his portion.... If a person is humble, he attaches no special importance to himself, so

whatever he attains of the world suffices him for his sustenance and other needs.

- b. The humble person is patient when misfortune strikes him and when he suffers reverses in his affairs.
- c. The humble person finds more favor in people's sight, is beloved to them, and can more easily relate to them and conform to accepted patterns of behavior.

B. How is Mussar practiced?

READING *Everyday Holiness* All of Part III

Here near the beginning, we want to introduce the practices that will be an integral part of this course. In this lesson, we will introduce Mussar practice in general. In the next lesson, we will apply it in practice for the first time, to the *middah* of humility.

We previously assigned you to read Part I of the book, and now your reading assignment is to skip over all of Part 2 (except, of course, chapter 7 on Humility) and read Part 3. The reason is that Part 3 focuses on practicing Mussar and in this course we want you to begin to practice right from the beginning. We'll work our way through Part 2 over the next few months.

We are assigning three practices in this course: one for the morning, one for the evening, and one to do during the day. At this point, all we want is for you to familiarize yourself with what's involved in Mussar practice. Except for the exercise assigned below, we do not want or expect you to start the practice until after it is reviewed more thoroughly at your next *va'ad* meeting.

Chapter 28 of *Everyday Holiness* contains a description of a practice called "Accounting of the Soul" which is a literal translation of the Hebrew, *cheshbon ha'nefesh*. This practice involves two of the activities we are assigning. One is to recite a morning reminder phrase. The other is to keep a journal.

a. Reminder phrase

For each trait that we will be studying in this course, we will assign a phrase (and sometimes an alternative as well) that sums up the essence of that *middah* [soul-trait]. These phrases may be drawn from the Torah, rabbinic texts, Mussar books or other Jewish wisdom sources. The main point about these phrases is that they accurately capture the essence of that particular quality, and with that goal in mind, in some cases we have composed the phrases ourselves.

Once your phrase has been assigned, without delay write it on a small card or a post-it note and place it where you are sure to find it every morning. Maybe you're bound to see it if you put it next to your coffee-pot or on the dashboard of your car. Fix it on the mirror or over the kitchen sink.

As examples of phrases, for the first of the *middot* in this course, *anavah* (humility), the phrase we will use is: “**No more than my space, no less than my place**” (relating to a definition of *anavah* that you read about in the chapter on that topic in “*Everyday Holiness*”). For *kavod* (honor), which comes later, the phrase is:

“The human soul is the candle of God”
נֵר הַיְהוָה נִשְׁמַת אָדָם:

(as found in the Book of Proverbs, 20:27).

The practice calls for you to repeat the phrase several times aloud every morning with focused attention. By repeating the phrase aloud, you begin your day with a vivid reminder of the inner trait that you are going to have on your agenda for that day. Repeating the phrase silently in your mind is not nearly so effective as saying it aloud.

The phrase can be chanted, or can also be recited aloud several times without a melody. Recite the phrase in a way that you are comfortable with as long as it has the desired result of bringing to conscious awareness the essence of the *middah* that is your focus for that day, as stated in the phrase.

b. Mussar journaling

Keeping a journal of your experiences with the subjects we will study is a very important method of Mussar practice. It provides you with a way to reflect on your experience so you can extract the lessons that are there for you. And it makes you more aware of your experiences, which enhances your ability to make choices and so direct the course of your growth.

A blank journal of any kind can be used for this practice, but we have also provided your group leader access to looseleaf diary pages that we have prepared just for this purpose. If you would like to try these journal pages,

please ask your group leader to print or forward a document called “Accounting of the Soul Diary Template” that contains special-purpose pages you can use.

The description of Accounting of the Soul practice in *Everyday Holiness* refers to creating your own list of 13 *middot* (or soul-traits) to focus on in your practice. In this course, we will be focusing on the nine traits that we are assigning lesson by lesson, which will provide you with the only list of traits you need at this time.

c. *Kabbalot*

The term *kabbalot* literally means “received” and refers to specific practical exercises that a Mussar practitioner takes upon himself or herself as part of the process of fostering inner growth. In general, these exercises are intended to have an impact on a particular *middah* [soul-trait] that the person is working on in that period.

Exercises take our engagement with *middot* out of the theoretical and into the practical. It has been well-known for centuries that the greatest Mussar teacher is our own experience, and so we take on *kabbalot* with the goal of teaching ourselves from our own experience.

For *kabbalot* to be effective, they must be attainable. The ones we will assign will be a challenge, but not too much, because that risks failure, which could send spiritual life into reverse. But they won’t be too easy, either, as that would mean that there would be no stretch involved. The idea is to bring about change in the soul-trait by taking on small exercises that are easier to implement, and stretching in the direction of desired change.

When you have been assigned a *kabbalah*, write it out in your journal. That will give you a written record to refer to if you do a subsequent round of practice focused on the same soul-trait. At that point you might choose to step up the intensity of the exercise, which might not offer as much stretch as it did when first taken on.

At the end of every day, as part of your journaling practice, reflect on and record how you did on your *kabbalot* for that trait that day. If your performance was great or terrible, don’t waste energy in celebration or self-condemnation. Just record the facts and save your energy for the performance of your *kabbalot* the next day.

C. EXERCISE Journaling

This exercise is to be completed before your group next meets when it will be discussed. You'll need to have your notebook or to have printed some of the looseleaf pages of the journal template.

Spend no more than 15 minutes recording in your Accounting of the Soul diary your reflections on:

1. any traits that you can identify in yourself that spurred you to take this course. For example, was there an incident that awoke you to the need to pursue a spiritual path at this time in your life? Which inner traits were implicated in that incident, like truth, or trust, or envy? Or has there been a persistent and recurring issue in your life, with respect to relationships, or money, or work? Can you identify traits of yours that have a role in that situation?
2. any traits in you that discouraged you from taking the step to register for this course. Every step of spiritual ascent is met with some degree of inner resistance. That's the way life is. But the *form* of the resistance as well as its *degree* vary, from person to person and situation to situation. Can you identify any inner trait that took the role of being the resistance for you? Were you doubtful, or stingy around the money, or worried, or lazy? These are just examples of soul-traits that can put the brakes on good action. Which are operating in you?

And as a final reflection, write some notes in your journal on the following question:

Among the inner traits that discouraged you from registering for this course, do one or more also show up in other areas of your life where you might want to take steps to make improvements? In other words, can you see in this one case (that is, the inner obstacles to taking this course) a reflection of something that is more generally a feature of your personal spiritual curriculum?

These are your assignments to complete before your *va'ad* meets again. Everything will be reviewed in the *va'ad* meeting but only briefly as the main focus of that meeting is the subject of humility, the crown jewel of the soul.

D. Outline for *Va'ad* meeting on Humility

1. Welcome

This is the first meeting where you and your *va'ad*-mates will focus on a specific inner trait. You will have nine such meetings during the course, one for each *middah* being studied and practiced.

As has been explained, “*va'ad*” is the term that has been used throughout history to refer to a Mussar group that meets for learning, practice and mutual support.

All *va'ad* meetings will follow the same format, with only minor variations.

It is a good idea to have paper and pen or a tablet with you to make notes, and for this particular *va'ad* meeting, you'll need paper and pen or a tablet to do an in-class exercise. Be sure to bring writing equipment with you to the meeting.

2. Invocation

We lead busy, multi-tasking lives, filled with numerous activities. That means that we need to make an effective transition from whatever we were doing before the meeting to being fully present emotionally and intellectually for what we will see, hear, think and say in the meeting. We can only engage in a new topic once we have stepped away from what previously claimed our attention.

Therefore every *va'ad* meeting begins with a sacred moment that serves as an invocation of presence. A few moments of silence will do nicely but sometimes your group leader will lead another practice, like singing, or a wordless *niggun* [melody] or a brief guided image. Since this is a course in Jewish spirituality, only Jewish sources or practices are used for this purpose.

3. Check-in

After the Invocation, we will start each session with a check-in, which is a way to connect with each other and become more fully present in our *va'ad*. The check-in is not meant to be lengthy; it is a quick warm up, so please keep your response to one or two sentences.

4. Review of the practice

In the period between *va'ad* meetings, you will be assigned practices related to the *middah* in focus at that time. You'll get your first such practice at or right after the *va'ad* meeting on humility and there will be time allocated at the beginning of every *va'ad* meeting to discuss the practices you have been doing, to hear about your experiences and to answer your questions.

In the *va'ad* meeting for humility you will not yet have begun the humility-related practices, so what will be discussed instead is the assignment you were given to complete before this meeting, when you were asked to identify experiences that encouraged you to take this course, as well as inner traits that caused you to resist enrolling. Share with the group what motivated you and the specific source of any resistance you may have felt.

5. Review of the reading

Through incisive questions, discussion and the sharing of personal experience, the lessons in the reading will be opened up, explored and illuminated, for the sake of deeper, fuller understanding.

6. Taking it to Heart

If Mussar were just about intellectual learning, the session would end right here. While Mussar requires intellectual learning, it is also about delivering lessons to the heart. So we go another step to take what you have learned and turn into a deeper lesson

7. Your takeaway

Everyone is invited to say a few words about a key lesson, or insight, or direction that they took from the *va'ad* meeting.

8. Introduction to Self-Study

What you will do in the way of Mussar study and practice in the week between *va'ad* meetings will be introduced at this point.

Closing

We close the *va'ad* meeting with some sort of contemplative exercise that is meant to punctuate our learning with an experience that will help enmesh everything we have covered in your inner life.

E. Conclusion

We have now provided you with everything you need to know and do to get ready for your upcoming *va'ad* meeting, Please now proceed to do the reading and exercise assigned above.