

Orientation session

Welcome

READING	<i>Everyday Holiness</i> All of Part I
ASSIGNMENT	Come to your first <i>va'ad</i> meeting prepared to answer questions and discuss this reading. Bring your own questions as well.

Note to facilitator: In advance of the *va'ad* meeting, make enough copies of the handout at the end of this document to give one to each person at the point noted in the outline.

We now begin to explore Mussar and the natural place to start is with a description and understanding of just what it is that we call the Mussar tradition in Judaism. Before we get to that, though, a few words on getting organized for this course.

You should already have received your copy of the course text, *Everyday Holiness: the Jewish spiritual path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis. If you have not yet been given it, please speak with your local course administrator.

The course alternates small group [*va'ad*] meetings with a session of personal study and practice. You will receive a reading assignment in advance of every *va'ad* meeting and it is very important that you complete that reading before your group meets so you come to the session well prepared to discuss and engage—and sometimes even wrestle—with what's on the agenda for that period. The better prepared you are, the more you will bring to your group, and the more you yourself will get from the process.

Every meeting will follow the same format, which is:

1. Welcome
2. Invocation
 - An inspiring or focusing practice that also establishes a separation between the mundane activities before the meeting and the spiritual atmosphere we aim for in the meetings.
3. Check-in
 - An opportunity to say a few words about where you are at and how the process is going for you.

4. Review of previous practice
Sharing how the Mussar practice between meetings has been going.
5. Review of the reading
A guided discussion to probe the chapter that was assigned for that period, and often some additional sources reflecting on the same focus.
6. Taking it to heart
Mussar is more than intellectual learning. Through practices like contemplations and visualizations, we take what we have learned and impress it on our hearts.
7. Your take-away
Your chance to summarize the main lesson you are taking away from our inquiry.
8. Closing
A guided practice to bring the meeting to an appropriate conclusion.

You should already know where and when your first *va'ad* meeting is scheduled to take place. If you have not received information on the date, time and location, please contact your local course administrator without delay.

To kick off the course, your group will meet for two sessions in a row—the first being an Orientation session and then next to start the curriculum with the first trait we will explore, which is humility, or *anavah* in Hebrew. *Va'ad* meetings will then alternate with personal study and practice.

So let's begin. As we said, the first and obvious topic to delve into is Mussar itself. What is this Jewish tradition and discipline we are going to explore? How can there be a tradition like this that is 1,100 years old that so few contemporary members of the Jewish world have even heard of?

To start to answer these questions, read Part I of *Everyday Holiness*.

Your small group will soon meet for the first time. If you are not clear on where and when the meeting is scheduled to take place, please contact your local program administrator without delay. If you are unsure who that is, please email info@mussarinstitute.org to get that person's name. Be sure to include the name of the city where your group is meeting so we can be sure to connect you to the right group administrator.

We wish you an journey of inquiry, learning, discovery and growth.

Outline for the Facilitator of the Orientation Session

We want to help you to feel well-prepared and confident as the group meets for the first time in this *Seeking Everyday Holiness* program, and with that in mind, we are providing you with the following guidance, in the hope that it will be useful to you and lead to a successful opening session.

As will be true in all the following session documents, the text in boxes with a light green background is only coming to you as group leader. The participants will only have received the message that precedes this Outline.

Lines in **red** are direct instructions to you.

Lines in **bold** are things you need to say explicitly to the group, as directions.

The outline for this meeting follows the format for all subsequent meetings, with a few variations just because this is an introductory meeting, with the particular needs that entails.

The participants were given the outline of a typical *va'ad* meeting, as above.

In the Orientation, we can't do #3 (Review of previous practice) or #4 (Review of the reading) because no reading or practice has happened as yet. Similarly, #5 (Taking it to Heart) is linked to the particular subject that is being explored, which we have not yet begun. As you will see below, we have not eliminated those topics from the meeting agenda, but rather have provided you with material to discuss under those headings.

1. Welcome

10 minutes

Every *va'ad* meeting begins with you as facilitator and leader welcoming the participants to the meeting. As this is the first meeting of the group, it is especially important that the meeting begin with some words of welcome and introduction.

Begin by introducing yourself and then invite every group member to introduce himself or herself. In addition to giving his or her name, **ask people: "What drew you to want to participate in this program?"**

When everyone has said a few words, proceed to the Invocation.

2. Invocation

Say aloud:

Every *va'ad* meeting begins with what we call an “Invocation.” This will be an inspiring or focusing practice that also establishes a separation between the mundane activities before the meeting and the spiritual atmosphere we aim for in the meetings.

For our first invocation practice, we’ll go right back to the Torah for a source that reminds us of something very important about ourselves that is too often overlooked in the modern world, which is that the soul and spirit within us are of divine origin.

Listen to the story of our creation, as the Book of Genesis reveals: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being” (Genesis / Bereishit 2:7). Through the divine breath, we came into being, and in our being, we are *nefesh-chaya*, a living soul.

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם
לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה

Pause for a moment to give people a chance to contemplate these thoughts, then call them to proceed to the check-in.

3. Check-in

15 minutes

Explain to the group:

When we reach the point in the group meeting for the section of the agenda called “Check-in,” everyone is given an opportunity to say a few words about where you are at and how the process is going for you.

Only one person is to speak at a time, for no more than two minutes. Anyone who wants to “pass” and not say anything by way of check-in is free to do so.

This is the point to introduce the issue of Confidentiality:

It is essential that all participants treat every statement made by a program participant, whether in a meeting or outside, as privileged and confidential. This commitment is essential in order that all participants feel safe to share their personal lives with the others in the group, knowing that nothing that is said in the context of this program will be repeated to others, for any purpose.

Does anyone have any questions about this confidentiality policy?

Now, to continue with the check-in, I'll invite anyone who would like to say a few words to share with us in about two minutes where you are in your life right now, whether in a transition or in a stable place, and what it is you hope to gain from participating in this program.

4. Review of previous practice

15 minutes

At this point in a typical *va'ad* meeting, everyone will be invited to comment on how the Mussar practice that is assigned between meetings has been going for them personally.

Just by way of brief introduction, there are THREE practices that will be assigned for each of the study periods when you and the group will focus on one particular inner trait or another. These practices will be explained in much more detail in the future and in your reading, but in bare outline they are:

A PHRASE – For each of the inner traits [*middot*] that we will delve into in this course, you will be assigned a phrase that captures the essence of that trait. You are to recite the phrase to yourself every morning of every day that you are working on that trait, as a reminder of what it is you are to be giving special attention to that day.

JOURNALING – Every evening that you are focusing on a trait, you are to record in a journal any sort of experience you had with that middah. The point is not to evaluate nor analyze the experience but rather to record it accurately. Journaling is meant to become a habit through which you review the day past and bring to consciousness what there is to know about how that middah plays out in your life, as revealed in your daily experiences.

A KABBALAH – The final of the three practices is an exercise you will be assigned to do during the day, between the morning phrase and the evening journal. These exercises (called in Hebrew *kabbalot*—singular *kabbalah*) are meant to stretch you a bit in regard to the *middah* of that period. The Mussar masters believed that it is experience that causes us to change, not good ideas, and so *kabbalot* offer direct experiences that have the potential to be transformative, even if in very small ways.

Invite questions about practice, but keep the discussion brief as there will be more instructions in the future.

5. Review of the reading

35 minutes

Here is where you are to explain the process of what goes on during the discussion of the reading:

Every meeting, the facilitator leads the group through guided questions that are provided to help probe the assigned chapter from *Everyday Holiness*. Sometimes, some additional sources are given to the facilitator to bring to the group as well. The facilitator guides the discussion and the group helps the facilitator ensure that the discussion is profound, productive and personal.

The group was assigned to read all of Part I of *Everyday Holiness*. Before leading the group in a discussion of the reading, it is important to make sure everyone is familiar with and understands the groundrules of a Mussar discussion, which are:

HAND OUT – Make enough copies of the handout at the end of this document to give one to each person. **HAND OUT NOW**. Then lead them through a discussion of each point:

Confidentiality: This requirement was mentioned previously and needs to be reiterated to drive home that it is essential that what is said in a Mussar group or between participants in a Mussar group is never repeated.

Safety: The soul is timid and will not give voice except if it feels safe. Committing to confidentiality is essential. Other ways of being in the group that create safety include listening attentively to everyone (with no side conversations), being respectful of differences, never mocking, and avoiding judgment in speech and body language.

Give Everyone Their Time. Respect the right of each person to speak, if they choose. No member should dominate the conversation and no one is obliged to speak. The meeting should be focused on learning and inquiry, not social chitchat.

Don't be critical of someone else or offer unsolicited advice. Let each person speak for him or herself and let them ask for what they need from you.

Don't generalize. What is true for you may not be true for someone else. Avoid speaking about others or in generalities (like, "When people do XYZ..." or "We tend to ..."). On the Mussar path, each person has to find his or her own personal focus, insight and direction.

Speak from your own experience. Try to reflect on how the teachings show up in your own life. Put yourself into your thought and speech, and let others do the same. Speak with “I” statements.

Avoid therapy or advice. People may describe problematic situations in their lives and the Mussar-based response is not to offer analysis or advice, but rather to probe with the person to help them identify which *middah* or *middot* in the situation are revealing themselves as having the potential to change.

The learning focus. The overall purpose of a Mussar conversation is to assist one another to come to personal realizations about the application or relevance of a *middah* to one’s own life. Emotion, intellect, and physicality all have a role, AND they can all be brought back to questions of how a *middah* is playing a role in one’s life.

Now, to review the reading that has been assigned (Part I of *Everyday Holiness*) and to put into action the groundrules that have just been explained and discussed, present these four questions to the group to be discussed one by one:

Questions on Part I, *Everyday Holiness*:

1. The reading begins with the statement: “Every one of us is assigned to master something in our lives.” What is this about? At this point in your life, do you see any traits as figuring on your own personal spiritual curriculum?
2. “What is Mussar?” What do you now understand to fall under the definition of “Mussar”? What are your initial impressions of this Jewish spiritual path?
3. How do you understand the *yetzer ha’ra*? How does this adversarial force show up in your own life?
4. In what ways can you see that the Mussar form of self-development can enhance, not contradict, a commitment to other people, community and social justice?

6. Taking it to heart

5 minutes

Mussar is more than intellectual learning. In every group meeting, once the topic has been well explored in discussion, the group will engage in a practice like contemplation or visualization. It is a premise of Mussar that ideas don’t change us, experiences do, so once the subject is well understood, we take what we have learned and impress it on our hearts.

As a “taking it to heart” practice, lead the group in the Mussar practices of contemplation. Instruct the group to contemplate the meaning of each of the following concepts as you read them aloud, and to consider how each of them might take a place in your life, or even challenge ideas you otherwise hold:

- a. The Torah directs me to develop holiness in my life.
- b. I am a holy soul.
- c. The sages advise that I make spiritual pursuits the overarching and all-encompassing goal of my life.
- d. I dedicate myself to be of service and to hold the needs of the other in my heart, even as I work on myself.

7. Your take-away

10 minutes

Each person is invited to summarize the main lesson he or she is taking away from this inquiry into Mussar in general and participation in the process, both personally and as a *va'ad* member. In future sessions, the take-away will focus on the *middah* of the period.

Do that now. Invite each group member to state aloud what he or she found to be the most important thing he or she heard in this meeting that it would be good to bear in mind going forward in the course.

8. Closing

5 minutes

Every *va'ad* meeting will end with a guided practice to bring the meeting to an appropriate conclusion.

Part I of *Everyday Holiness* ends with the story of an individual who found in Mussar the tools he needed “to free himself from the dictates of his primitive, grudge-bearing nature and to entrust the governance of his life to his higher self, the soul, which seeks both *sh'lemut* (wholeness) and *shalom* (peace).”

Based on this reflection on how our inner lives are structured, let's contemplate for a few moments the realities of the lower self and the higher self that we all embody.

Close your eyes in order to better contemplate the subjects we will now turn to examine in our minds: both the lower self and the higher self that live within us.

First, experience yourself living from your “lower self,” the you who is judgmental, envious, agitated, selfish, or whatever form that smaller, self-interested being takes. Feel how fragmented and isolating it is to live from your lower self.

[pause]

Now consider the other you, the you that is generous, forgiving, kind, compassionate and loving. Feel what it is like to have those inner traits be your guiding lights. Experience yourself living from that higher self.

[pause]

As you sit with the feeling of living from your higher self, experience how peaceful you feel inwardly, and how complete.

[pause]

And from that solid place rooted in your higher self, embrace and accept that you have that smaller person within you. There is no need to reject the lower self. See within that the higher self is meant to be the master of the lower, to turn all its powers and capacities to the same ends of wholeness and peace.

[pause]

Invite everyone to open their eyes.

Does anyone have anything to say about that practice we just did?

Now, go on to inform everyone of the next group meeting, time and place.

Remind people of the schedule: This meeting is followed by another that focuses on the first *middah* on the curriculum, which is humility.

Then the schedule alternates with a period of personal study and practice coming between *va'ad* meetings.

Repeat the description of how they will get the program materials and any other “housekeeping” matters.

Finally, thank everyone for bringing their willing hearts to the meeting, and inform them that you are looking forward to seeing them again soon.

SEEKING EVERYDAY HOLINESS

HANDOUT

GROUND RULES FOR A MUSSAR VA'AD MEETING

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