

**Mussar Practice Group
Congregation Neve Shalom
Introduction**

בְּכֹל־דְרָכֶיךָ דַעֲהוּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ

B'chol d'rachecha da'eyhu, ki l'olam chasdo

In everything that you do, know God, because God's mercy is everlasting.

- After
Proverbs 3:6

Text One: From the Introduction of Mesillat Yesharim: The Path of the Just by Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato (Ramchal) (1707-1746)

I have not written this book to teach the reader anything new. Rather it is my aim to direct his attention to certain well known and general accepted truths, for the very fact that they are well known and generally accepted is the cause of their being overlooked. Hence, this book, if it is to be of any benefit, has to be read more than once. A single reading may give the impression that it does not enlarge one's stock of ideas. Therefore, to derive any benefit from the book, it should be read and reread time and again. Only then will it lead us to reckon with those truths which we naturally forget, and to take seriously the performance of those duties which we usually try to avoid. . . .

Although saintliness is latent in the character of every normal person, yet without cultivation it is sure to remain dormant. Bear in mind that such qualities of character as saintliness, fear and love of God, and purity of heart are not so innate as to enable men to dispense with the effort needed to develop them. These traits are not so natural as being asleep or awake, being hungry or thirsty, or experiencing any other physical want. They can be developed only by means of special effort. Though there are many obstacles to the cultivation of these traits, these are various ways of overcoming these obstacles.

Questions:

1. What is your first reaction to the Ramchal's introduction in which he tells you that he is not going to tell you anything you don't already know?
2. Why spend time with the obvious?
3. What might be gained from reading the same obvious text over and over?
4. If saintliness is a part of each of us, what kind of work might we need to do to cultivate it?

From *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Rabbi Ira Stone:

The central Jewish story about the miracle of human consciousness is that of the Garden of Eden. In this story, “proto-humans” became real human beings when they exercise power of moral decision-making. Adam and Eve were permitted to eat from every tree in the Garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. If they had eaten from the latter, they would have achieved immortality. When they did, in fact, violate God’s command and eat from the former, they achieved the power of moral choice. It is no accident that the story immediately follows the story of creation. Creation is not complete until people have acquired the knowledge of right and wrong and the ability to choose between them: moral conscience is an integral part of what it means to have been created as human beings. (Page 44)

Questions:

1. According to Rabbi Stone’s reading of the story of Adam and Eve, what is the difference between being a “proto-human” and a human?
2. What part does knowledge have in this transformation?
3. What do we need in addition to knowledge?
4. What kind of work does this suggest that we need to do?

From *Everyday Holiness: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis

The starting point from understanding Mussar is the verse in the Torah that tells us: “You shall be holy.” The Torah here reveals in no uncertain terms what a human being’s job description is. In essence, we are here on earth for no other purpose than to grow and blossom spiritually – to become holy. Our potential and therefore our goal is to become as spiritually refined and elevated as is possible. . . . (page 11)

In Hebrew, the collective word for all of the traits of the *nefesh*-soul [the elements of our souls that are the most visible and accessible to us and to outside observers] is *middot*. While that plural term is almost always translated into the useful English notion of “traits of character,” the Hebrew word (singular *middah*) literally means “measures.” We can find in this root a Mussar insight. *The message is that each of us endowed at birth with every one of the full range of the human traits, and that what sets one person apart from another is not whether we have certain traits while someone else has different ones, but rather the degree, or measure, of the traits that live in each of our souls.* The angriest person, for example, has an excess of the anger trait, but Mussar insists that there must be at least some degree of calm within that raging soul. So must there also be a touch of anger in even the calmest individual. . . . [Emphasis added] (page 19)

The purpose of Mussar is to help you identify your spiritual curriculum, and then to give you the tools that will help you consciously and effectively engage with the inner work that lies before you. Mussar is summarized in the phrase *tikkun middot ha'nefesh*—improving or remedying the traits of the soul—and it takes some focused effort over a period of time to bring about this rectification. Put simply, practice is how you work on and master your spiritual curriculum.

Mussar aims to help you close the gap between your ideals and the life you actually lead. (Page 249)

Questions:

1. Let's think for a moment about what it means to "be holy." We'll take a minute or two to explore what it feels like to experience "holiness."
2. How can we get from here, where we are, to there, where we would like to be?
3. Let's think about different middot or traits and what they have to do with the process. (Looking at different lists of middot.)

Last Text: From Rabbi Israel Salanter:

When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried, but the world did not change. So I concentrated on changing my town, but my town did not change. Then I turned to my family, but my family did not change. Then I realized: first I must change myself.

Question:

1. So, ultimately, why do this?