

**Mussar Practice Group**  
**Congregation Neve Shalom**  
**Week Two: A Little Background**

**Mussar Literature:**

Proverbs 1:2:

לְדַעַת חִכְמָה וּמוֹסָר לְהַבִּין אִמְרֵי בִינָה :

For learning wisdom and *discipline*; for understanding words of discernment.

- Mishna, Pirke Avot (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)
- *Chovot HaLevavot*, by Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda (11th century)
- *Mesillat Yesharim*, and *Derech Hashem*, by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1738)
- *Orchot Tzaddikim* (*The Ways of the Righteous*), by an anonymous author
- *Tomer Devorah* (*The Palm Tree of Deborah*) by Rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (Mid 16<sup>th</sup> Century)
- *Shaarei Teshuvah* (*The Gates of Repentance*) by Rabbi Yonah Gerondi
- *Hilchot Deot* by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) (12<sup>th</sup> Century)
- *The Eight Chapters* by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) (12<sup>th</sup> Century)
- *Cheshbon HaNefesh* (*Accounting of the Soul*) by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov (based in part on Benjamin Franklin's idea of the thirteen virtues) (1812)

Why did the Mussar Movement not emerge until the middle of the Nineteenth Century?

**Nineteenth Century Lithuanian Context:**

The players:

1. The Traditional Yeshivah World
2. The Hasidim: Downplaying traditional study and intellectualism.
3. The Maskilim, members of the Jewish Enlightenment: Introducing secular learning and sensibilities.

Rabbi Israel Salanter

1. Recognizes that one may be a “scoundrel within the bounds of the Torah” (Nahmanides)
2. And that the same scholars who would never ever transgress the mitzvot concerning kashrut because they were so deeply ingrained did not have the same level of training for the “ethical” *mitzvot*.
3. Sought to respond to this deficiency.

Becomes the head of a Yeshivah in Vilna and while there:

1. Systematizes the study of Mussar literature
2. Reads a small number of relative short works in a very focused and deliberate way
  - a. Mesilat Yesharim
  - b. Tikkun Midot HaNefesh
  - c. Heshbon HaNefish
3. Meets in small groups
4. Accompanies learning with chanting.
5. Builds a new practice with old textual tradition
6. Predicts Freud – talking cure, very introspective, verbally reviewing principles and evaluating own and each others' behavior.
7. From *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Rabbi Ira Stone: Salanter's method was based on an implicit understanding of the forces "unconsciously" at work on human beings; just as startling as Freud's theory was, Salanter's method also required, like Freud, a type of therapeutic talking. This was to include first a talking to oneself, and then the dynamics of what can only be called group analysis. Salanter called for students to sequester themselves for a period of time every day, and to use this time to review (aloud and passionately) the values found in the Mussar texts. Students were to utilize a behavioral checklist with which to measure their progress or lack thereof. In addition, Salanter created Mussar groups in which individuals would gently point out ethical failures among the members and then, just as gently, help them find the strength to change such behaviors. The most important method of correction was called *hitpa'alut*. This means "self-work" and refers to a process by which the student would search through traditional texts for statements that addressed the particular character trait being worked on. The student was urged to memorize such statements and to have them at hand when confronting situations where the character trait was in play. . . . To put it simply, Salanter believed that the process of transforming ourselves into ethical, responsible beings was too difficult and too important to leave to happenstance. It required active effort.

The Mussar tradition grows so that, after a struggle, all of the Yeshivot in Lithuania eventually adopt Mussar – for 30 minutes each day. The hope is that it will make the ethical mitzvot second nature as well.

1. Question: is this self centered or "other-centered?"
2. What is the interplay of Judaism and Mussar? Do you have to be Jewish to study or benefit from Mussar?

Two main schools from the third generations of Mussar-niks:

1. The Slabodka School places the emphasis on the dignity and sublime value of human beings created in the image of God. The dedicated Torah scholar can attain to a rank higher than the angels.
2. Navaradok, on the other hand, stresses the need for the scholar to overcome his worldly desires and to have no ambition other than to be a true servant of God and a student of His Torah. As an exercise in spiritual independence, the Navaradoks used to carry out bizarre practices, demonstrating, for instance, their contempt for worldly opinion by exposing themselves to ridicule.
3. The difference between the two schools has been put in this way. In Slabodka they taught: man is so great, how can he sin? In Navaradok they taught: man is so small, how dare he sin? - Rabbi Louis Jacobs

**Uniqueness of Mussar Path:**

1. Compare to traditional Jewish traditions of study.
2. Compare to Hasidut

**Techniques, Elements of the Practice:**

1. Repetition of a key phrase or *psuk* (a biblical verse.)
2. Meditation:
3. Journaling
4. Exercise
5. Text Study, either in large groups or in Hevruta