

Mussar Practice Group
Congregation Neve Shalom
Week Five: Section Three of *Every Day Holiness*

Opening Chant:

בְּכֹל־דְרָכֶיךָ דַעְהוּ 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

Diving into Mussar Practice:

Some working definitions:

1. **Middot:** Traits or Characteristics
2. **Tests:** Those experiences which evoke our *middot*. Often we recognize these tests when we feel inner resistance to doing what we aspire to (perhaps this is the *yetzer ha-ra*), or when, after the fact, we recognize that we failed to act according to our highest ideals.
3. **Practice:** Exploring our *middot* in an ordered and structured way, preparing for **Mussar Work**.
4. **Mussar Work:** Facing the tests, recognizing the *middot* that are evoked, and acting in the ways to which we aspire.

Three Stages of Mussar Work:

1. Sensitivity: noticing the tests, being aware of what we feel in that moment before we think and then actively naming it.
2. Self Restraint: Controlling our behavior after we experience the test.
3. Transformation: Reaching a point in our work where we experience and feel the same circumstance differently, but this time we act differently and more in alignment with our ideals.

Lab Practical: The Story of King David

II Samuel 11:1-21

At the turn of the year in the season when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him, and they devastated Ammon and besieged Rabbah; David remained in Jerusalem. Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and the king sent someone to make inquiries about the woman.

He reported, "She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite." David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her – She had just purified herself after her period – and she went back home. The woman conceived, and she sent word to David, "I am pregnant." Thereupon David sent a message to Joab, "Send Uriah the Hittite to me." And Joab sent Uriah to David.

When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab and the troops were fairing and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and bathe your feet." When Uriah left the royal palace, a present from the king followed him. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the royal palace, along with the other officers of his lord, and did not go down to his house, he said to Uriah, "You just came from a journey; why didn't you go down to your house?" Uriah answered David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succot, and my master Joab and Your Majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this!" David said to Uriah, "Stay here today also and tomorrow I will send you off. " So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. The next day, David summoned him and he ate and went out to sleep in the same place with his lord's officers; he did not go down to his home.

In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab which he sent with Uriah. He wrote in the letter as follows: Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed." So when Joab was besieging the city, he stationed Uriah at the point where he knew there were able warriors. The men of the city sallied out and attacked Joab, and some of David's officers among the troops fell; Uriah the Hittite was among those who died.

Question: Pretend for a moment that you are King David:

1. What are the tests in this story?
2. Which are the *middot* which are evoked?

Middot	
Humility	
Patience	
Gratitude	
Compassion	
Order	
Equanimity	
Honor	
Simplicity	
Enthusiasm	
Silence	
Generosity	
Truth	
Moderation	
Loving Kindness	

3. When might you have wished to exhibit some restraint?
4. What might the Mussar Work have looked like?
5. What would transformation look like?

Techniques:

1. Focus on one trait each week.
2. Journal: Set aside a fixed time each day and write down the “tests:” the moments when you either exercised that trait or when, perhaps, you should have done so.
3. Chant phrases/biblical verses: Think of a biblical verse or another phrase that you can repeat several times. We’ll suggest some together.
4. Study in Hevruta