

The Great Jewish Books Course

Reb Yisrael Salanter and the Mussar Movement

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A. What is "Mussar" (מוסר)

- a. First time it appears in Tanach is in Devarim 11:2 :

וידעתם היום כי לא את בניכם אשר לא ידעו ואשר לא ראו את-מוסר ה' אלהיכם את גדלו את ידו החזקה וזרעו הנטויה

You should know today that it is not your children who did not know and who did not see the **chastisement of Hashem**, your G-d, His Greatness, His outstretched arm...But your own eyes..."

- b. And many times in Mishlei (Proverbs):

לקחת מוסר השכל (א:ב) שמע בני מוסר אביך (א:ח)

"To accept wise discipline" (1:2) "Hear, my child, the discipline of your father" (1:8)

- c. What it meant to Reb Yisrael was the Experience of acquiring a Fear of Heaven, a fear of judgement, a constant trembling before the prospect of Heavenly scrutiny. This requires a constant process of introspection and awareness, of growth and sensitivity to the other, of character development and understanding of what true goodness and selflessness is.
- d. Like all successful Movements in Torah Judaism, there can't be something "new" only an emphasis on something that had been neglected or previously secondary (Chassidus, Zionism, vs. Reform and Conservative)

B. Historical Context

- a. Jewish life in 1800s in Eastern Europe was a misery
- b. Horrific poverty and unemployment, child mortality, literacy and scholarship for the elite, pogrom and government sponsored persecution, and worst of all, Cantonist decree of 1827
- 4 conscriptions per every 1000, aged 12-25 - for 25 year service
 - Disaster on every communal, personal and spiritual level
- c. Chassidus Movement
- Kabbalistic, attached to a Rebbe, holiness in everything, fervor and joy
- d. Haskalah Movement (Maskilim, 1770s-1880s)
- Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelsohn, rational enlightened thought, arts science, modern dress and culture, new education
 - Levied many attacks on traditional establishment - corrupt, backward, small minded shop keepers (not educated), ghetto, archaic
 - Existential threat and hostile, bitter battles (Vilna hesped his own son)
- e. Reform Movement (in the west)

C. Reb Yisrael's Mussar Movement

- a. "Not to reform Judaism, but to reform Jews"
 - i. Non-Chassidus chassidus, revitalize the Jewish people, focused on the individual and his growth and "self-actualization"
 - ii. Pre-Psychology, was a formal program of self introspection and understanding, spoke about subconscious drives and desires and controlling them
 - b. Mussar would be the Bridge between theory and practice
 - i. Everyone wants to be a good person, eulogized for righteousness, but putting it into practice is elusive. Mussar is the discipline that will train a person to become who he really wants to.
 - ii. Requires work: As long as the Candle still burns there is work to be done!
- D. Reb Yisrael Salanter (Yisrael Lipkin, 1809-1883)
- a. Born to Rabbinic family and was an established Talmudic genius (source notes)
 - b. His rebbe was R' Zundel of Salant (who was a student of R' Chaim of Vuluzhin), who was a pious saintly Jew and introduced R' Yisrael to mussar study and charged him with adhering to it
 - c. Published almost nothing: Iggeres Hamussar, and some articles in a journal called Tenuva
 - i. His student R' Yitzchak Blazer published a biography and about 30 letters in Ohr Yisrael
 - d. Mission: Maskilim and their arguments are correct -we need to create Jews so pure and good and representative of descendants of Avraham, people would want to make a bracha on them – even in today's modern world
 - i. Live with Passion. Meticulous in mitzvot observance, particularly interpersonal mitzvot, say good morning with a smile, sensitivity, careful with other people's money, dress neatly, self introspection, be nice considerate people, minimize anger and desire, increase patience.
 - ii. Mantra: someone else's *gashmiyus* (this worldly needs) are your *ruchniyus* (spiritual needs)
 - e. He personally embodied all of this
 - i. Stories: kol nidrei, fixing shutters, matzah, fresh bread, erev YK face is still public, shoemaker's wedding
- E. Methods and tools
- a. Brought back the original mussar sefarim
 - b. *Hisbodedus* (seclusion); *beis hamussar*; the mussar seder, the *schmooze* (sermon), *pinkus* (personal ledger), *hislahavus* (fervor), tefillah with renewal
 - c. Major goals: fight "*mitzvot nashim mi'limoda*" and create *Yirat shamayim*
 - i. This is the challenge of modernity

R' Yisrael's sayings and teachings

One's character traits are his only true possessions

It is more difficult to fix one negative character trait than it is to review all of the Talmud

There is no needier person than one who is dependent on kavod (honour)

A person's ability to see in the distance can be obstructed by a single coin

Don't recommend bitachon (faith) when it comes to another person's needs

When you wrap yourself with your tallis, make sure not slap someone else with your strings

It is worthwhile to study a lifetime of mussar to refrain from a single word of lashon hara

When told a shochet had been disqualified because of suspicions regarding "flaws" in his slaughtering knife, R' Yisrael commented, "who knows how many flaws were in the knife used to slaughter the shochet"

F. Legacy – Unsuccessful yet eternally successful

- a. As a mass movement it did not take hold, but in the yeshivas it did.
 - i. And there were detractors who were opposed to whole movement
- b. Birthed entire Yeshiva system
 - i. Kelm
 - ii. Navordok – lowliness of mankind
 - iii. Slobodka – greatness of mankind
- c. First Generation Students include R' Yitzchak Blazer, R' Naftali Amsterdam, R' Eliezer Gordin (Telshe), R' Jacob Joseph (RJJ),
- d. Second generation: R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel (Slobodka),
- e. Third Generation: R' Yeruchum Levovitz (Mir), R' Ahron Kotler (Lakewood), R' Yaakov Kamenetzky (Torah V'Daas), R' Yaakov Y. Ruderman (Ner Yisrael), R' Yitzchak Hutner (Chaim Berlin), R' Dovid Leibowitz (Chofetz Chaim)