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ארח לחיים שומר מוסר | The Way of Life is Observing Mussar

The Value of Mussar Beyond the Obligation of Halacha

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Acknowledgements

"I have learned that credentials on the wall do not make you a decent human being"

My grandmother Charlotte Schwartz

To my family -- my parents in particular -- fiancé and friends, whose unconditional love has molded me over the course of my life. Each of you has taught me about the qualities of the heart which no book could have conveyed more deeply.

"אינו דומה הלומד מפי עצמו ללומד מפי הרב"

"That which a person studies on their own cannot match that which they learn from a teacher"

Sefer HaMiddot, Learning, 35

To my teacher Rabbi Jan Katzew, I compose this work with gratitude for without your guidance, this undertaking would lack sufficient depth and an outpouring of the heart. Thank you for your mentorship in teaching and in life.

"בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם"

"Ben Zoma says: Who is the wise one? One who learns from all of humanity"

Pirkei Avot 4:1

To my interviewees, thank you for teaching me, for trusting me with your thoughts and experiences, and for helping me spread the word of Mussar.

Abstract

Between the 11th and 18th centuries, individual scholars developed the study and practice of Mussar as a field of Jewish thought and spiritual growth. Many of these authors were unaware they were contributing to a burgeoning canon of Mussar literature. Mussar emerged as a movement and a pedagogy in the 19th century when Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant codified Mussar literature and popularized the study and practice of Mussar. Traditional Mussar sages wrote about Middot, or measures of human character traits. These sages viewed Middot as being inextricably bound to Mitzvot, the legal examples of good behavior cataloged and mandated in the Torah, Talmud and other sources of halachic authority.

In this dissertation, I argue traditional Mussar scholars have opined, both explicitly or implicitly, that performing Mitzvot alone is insufficient for living a Jewish moral life. Their teachings counsel that one must also manage Middot in order to achieve spiritual attainment through ethical growth. Moreover, I maintain traditional Mussar sages considered Mussar study and practice to be primary to fulfilling Mitzvot.

After I examine the works of foundational Mussar scholars, I review sections of Rabbi Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism* to explicate the role of feminism in Jewish ethics. I then delineate ways in which Mussar study and practice can benefit progressive Jews, specifically Reform Jews, who do not identify as being halachically-bound. I support these convictions with observations I have derived from interviews I have conducted with contemporary progressive Jews who explain how Mussar study and practice has enhanced their lives.

Through this thesis, I illustrate my expansive perspective on the utility of embracing Mussar as a way of life. I have cultivated this vision by considering the ways in which traditional Mussar study and practice can and should continue to evolve as this vital field of learning is introduced to a more diverse group of practitioners. Using this practical framework for integrating the duties of the heart and hand will enable progressive Jews, many of whom do not consider themselves bound by the strictures of halacha, to harness the most accessible tools for pursuing the self-mastery our Jewish tradition bequeaths.

אחת | Chapter One

You shall be holy, for I Adonai Your God am holy,[1] קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם

As she carried me up the stairs to the bathroom, I could have sworn she was shepherding me to my death. Chest tight? Check. Shortness of breath? Check. Clenched fingers that look like Jim Carrey's "claw" in the film *Liar, Liar*? Check. Tingling sensations in the hands and feet? Check. Sure, my friend's mother Dr. Bardack knew I was suffering from a panic attack. Me? I figured my five years on the planet were coming to an abrupt end. The rushing water surging through the tub's faucet disrupted the crescendo of *what if*... questions plaguing my brain. Dr. Bardack reassured me that soaking would relax my stiff muscles. I thought, *who knew something as simple as water could cure a heart attack*? A traumatic onset of fear morphed into the discovery of what became my most ataractic fix - the bathtub.

Originally an isolated event, panic attacks became increasingly commonplace in my life. Despite intellectually understanding the symptoms of panic, each incident felt, emotionally and physically, like the onset of my demise. The second attack occurred in my ninth grade Biology class. Mr. Neering was speaking about terminal cancer when my classmate turned to me and asked, "Why is your face so red?" Suddenly my body felt like a furnace as I became aware of my flushed cheeks. Unintentionally holding my breath, I felt paralyzed, unable to gasp for air. The chair fell behind me as I shot upright and barreled toward the classroom window, as if the reprieve of a breeze on my cheeks was the only way I would recognize that my lungs were capable of taking in oxygen.

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[1] Leviticus 19:2, *The Contemporary Torah JPS*, 2006.

During that ninth grade year, I endured panic attacks on a weekly, if not daily, basis. As the frequency of these sneak attacks increased, I began to think of them as intrusions from an uninvited yet familiar visitor who portended danger with palpable corporal symptoms, but whose menace thankfully proved to be more fictitious than real. Each of my teachers learned to expect my long absences during class when I held the harbinger at bay by walking around the school's perimeter reminding myself to breathe. I often implored my parents to let me stay home from school out of fear the panic would be too painful, and the resolution too embarrassing. And typically, the reckoning *was* embarrassing. During one of my daily trips traversing the school's hallways, I again sought solace by running to a window, wrestling to lift the sill as if I was drowning underwater with fleeting seconds to reach the surface. Eventually, I collapsed in a heap and a passerby called the nurse. The nurse placed me in a wheelchair and ushered me to her office where I waited for my mother to pick me up early from school. I was caught. My emotional infirmity spawned a physical sequelae, revealing my truth to others.

As a fellow sufferer of anxiety, my mother always related to my experiences. She appreciated the emotional and physical toll I endured even when I struggled to articulate the details of my anxious episodes. My father, on the other hand, had never experienced the symptoms of a panic attack, but always recognized the anguish I evinced. One day he connected with me in a new language we could share in managing adversity, the language of Mussar.

One morning as I sat in the chair across from my father in our home office, he came around the desk, walked over to the bookshelf and grabbed Alan Morinis' *Everyday Holiness.* Let me be clear, I was not a big reader in ninth grade, so giving me a book seemed

like a shot in the dark at the time. My father's description of the book, though, sold me on its virtue. My dad explained that Mussar is a venerable Jewish spiritual practice which helps people find balance in their innate character-traits. For example, if someone is highly reactive and susceptible to anger, Mussar techniques like studying, meditating, journaling and intoning mantras can promote awareness of their tendency toward anger and enable them to *balance* the anger so it serves them in a positive way. The key he emphasized is that anger is *serving rather than subverting* the person. "The goal is not to expunge aspects of ourselves, but instead, to balance them," he explained. Although my father did not suggest Mussar could alleviate feelings associated with an anxiety disorder, he was hopeful I could expel the anxiety that seemed to control me by changing my perspective on inclinations I assumed to be immutable.

In this balancing act, he clarified, "One must realize they are already *whole*, that everything inside them is a vital piece of their uniquely human mosaic rather than something to banish." This is not to say humans are perfect. We each have much to change and improve in ourselves as we grow and evolve. But in his own words, my dad strived to say, *you already possess every quality you need to be your best self. Although anxiety causes you pain, so long as it is balanced, it can actually benefit you, rather than being a source of self-hatred or a blight to eradicate.* From that moment on, I was hooked. I held dear the notion that Mussar could help me learn to appreciate the thing I hated most about my life: my anxiety.

Perhaps I was so desperate to alleviate my discomfort that I read Morinis' book cover to cover. But regardless of *why* I read the book, the important point is that I took this first step. Now the book sits lovingly on my shelf -- full of dog ears, wrinkled pages from my tears, and a soft cover from the many times my fingers have run across it. Author Alan

Morinis is a learned lay person who claims Mussar changed his way of being in the world. Morinis attempts to offer a modern explanation of Mussar as a study and practice and strives to make this knowledge accessible to men, women, clergy, lay people, Jews and non-Jews alike.[2]

Morinis taught me every human being has a spiritual "curriculum,"[3] meaning, a particular challenge that repeatedly confronts us or something we are meant to "master"[4] during our lifetimes. Similar to my therapist telling me I will live with anxiety forever but can learn to manage it, Morinis' description of Mussar informed me the more familiar I become with my spiritual curriculum, the sooner I can identify and manage problematic patterns of habit. For instance, I struggle to find balance in the trait of humility. In class, I can monopolize our collective speaking time and yet, in my own mind, I concurrently entertain feelings of worthlessness. By journaling about humility and analyzing the ways in which this quality functions in my life, I can better catch myself speaking inordinately, or check when my thoughts spiral into a debasing of self-critique. Unlike many other modern books that expound on the tenets of Mussar, Morinis provides a practical road map for *practicing* Mussar. He identifies numerous character traits, provides quotes for reflection and synthesizes the essence of each trait based on his interpretations of traditional Mussar literature (a title retroactively applied to the canon of Mussar texts).

After embarking on my self-examination with Morinis' suggested Mussar practices, I was convinced others would also cherish Mussar study and practice. My mind was

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[2] Morinis' book, like other modern Mussar works, does not explicitly include gender-inclusive language such as non-binary pronouns. Mussar is evolving and even so, as our sociological awareness evolves, Mussar needs to do the same, requiring further development.

[3] Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness,* (Boston, MA: Trumpeter Books, 2007), 2.

[4] Ibid.

specifically oriented toward my peers: millennials. I have observed that young people are increasingly defining themselves as "spiritual, but not religious," and looking to outlets such as Buddhist and/or secular meditation and mindfulness in search of fulfillment. Despite Mussar's religious orientation and antecedents, I believed young culturally-identifying Jews without a Buddhist heritage would find excitement knowing healing practices like meditation, journaling and chanting are accessible in their ancestors' history.

When I started rabbinical school, I moved from the realm of practicing Mussar on my own to also facilitating Mussar groups (vaadim). I was trained by the Mussar Institute to become a Mussar facilitator. From this training, I learned how to study Mussar texts with my *own* lens rather than through the gauze of someone else's translation. Perhaps most importantly, I began clarifying for myself why it is valuable to practice Mussar. We live in a world informed by the science of Psychology, infused with a plethora of experts who can guide the populace through understanding their individual psychological conditions. So, why mix the prospect of therapeutic healing with religion? Why return to words of faith from the past when we have access to an abundance of secular tools for pursuing self-mastery in the present?

In my introspection, I found therapy was not enough for me and intuited that perhaps others felt the same way. My therapy lacked a spiritual component. I yearned to include God in my internal conversations. Because of this desire, I knew religion could aid the process of self-awareness in thought and behavior, but I did not yet have the terminology to describe *why* such alchemy was possible. I returned to Morinis' book. There, he discloses the traditional reason for studying Mussar: so that we humans can be holy, as we read in Leviticus 19:2. In this attestation, Morinis identifies one of the main sources of the universal

attraction for religion: people want to understand why they were put on this earth. In other words, we long to know what is our purpose and how is our behavior intertwined with this purpose? Are we supposed to be like God? If so, what does that even look like?

This stream of inquiry aroused my next question: if Mussar literature is intended to help people learn how to act ethically in the world, what is the purpose of Mitzvot, Jewish law? Why have both? Does each derive from a difference of command or audience? Being a Reform Jew, I am told by my movement's platform that I have the freedom to release myself from the *obligations* of certain Jewish laws,[5] but I wrestle with this fiat. Who am I to decide that Jewish law which has been practiced for centuries, no longer governs me? It is true that much of Jewish law feels irrelevant or even detrimental to elevating my spiritual self, but I do not want to cease practicing Jewish laws just because they feel inconvenient.

As a consequence, I have used the practice and study of Mussar to supplement my exploration and exercise of halacha. I know the Jewish tradition, and even the Mussar sages themselves, would not agree with a complete replacement. I therefore have decided to compose this thesis which will explore the relationship between Mitzvot, the foundation for halacha[6] (our system of Jewish law), and Middot, the gradations of character traits on which Mussar is based. I endeavor to argue that performing Mitzvot alone is insufficient for living a Jewish moral life and managing Middot is necessary for achieving spiritual attainment

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[5] "The Columbus Platform," *CCAR Net,* 1937, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/. Although the Reform Columbus platform releases Reform Jews from the *obligation* of fulfilling halacha, the original Reform thinkers did not intend to end all halachic practice. Further, I will explain later that modern American Reform Jewish leaders encourage their constituents to learn about halacha so they can perform the laws they deem meaningful and find contemporary methods of performing antiquated laws that feel irrelevant.

[6] The term halacha has a lower case "h" in order to demonstrate that I do not believe there is one authoritative body of halacha, but rather a set of laws whose nuances have been debated since their inception.

through ethical growth (since I am not sure if ethical *perfection* is possible in the world we inhabit). Moreover, I hope to convince readers it is possible, even desirable, that non-halachically-bound Jews study and practice Mussar for spiritual elevation which can be done by balancing character traits through techniques of self-reflection.

In order to make my case, I will examine what authors of Mussar literature have written about the relationship between Mitzvot and Middot. I will reveal that Mussar authors before me have insinuated my position that study and practice of Mussar should be *primary* to Mitzvot. In doing so, I will clarify these sages' historical contexts to explain how each of them reached their conclusions. I will also add modern female voices to my analysis in order to fill the apparent gender gap.[7] I will then espouse why I think non-halachically-bound Jews can benefit from studying and practicing Mussar, encouraging them to take ownership in their own expressions of Mussar. In order to support these claims, I will survey various interviews I have led with progressive clergy members and lay people, analyzing how Mussar has influenced their lives. By the end of this thesis, I will have demonstrated my own perspective on Mussar and the breadth of its applicability to contemporary progressive Jews, many of whom do not consider themselves bound by the strictures of halacha.

[7] I focus on female voices because I feel this is a realm in which I have experience due to my status as a woman. As a healthy White woman who is cis-gendered and heterosexual, I did not feel equipped to showcase as deeply Mussar's relationship to disability, race, gender identity and sexual orientation. As I wrote in a previous footnote, Mussar, like the rest of the world, has much room to evolve by including more disparate voices and experiences.

שתיים | Chapter Two

Know Before Whom You Stand,[8] דע לפני מי אתה עומד

The Hebrew word "מוסר" (Mussar) first appears in the Book of Deuteronomy and is a prominent motif in the Book of Proverbs. Through its uses in the Torah, the term מוסר can be translated in a number of ways, including but not limited to *lesson, correction, rebuke, discipline* and *study*. Early Mussar literature stressed discipline in thought and more importantly, in action, as its practitioners aimed to "correct" their negative character traits.

Mussar remained unformed as a field of Jewish study and practice until Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda (est. 1050-1120) made a compelling case for its inclusion in the curricula of Jewish life and learning. While there is little known about Bahya's biography, his acclaimed *Duties of the Heart,* written towards the end of the 11th century, is most notable for its classification of Mitzvot into two distinct categories: Mitzvot of the limbs and Mitzvot of the heart. In doing so, Bahya identified ethics (Mitzvot of the heart) as the foundation for all acts of Divine service within the entire body of Mitzvot. Between the 11th and 18th centuries, individual scholars continued developing the study and practice of Mussar as a field of Jewish thought.[9] Many of these authors were unaware that they were contributing to

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[8] Otzar Midrashim, Midrashim of Eliezer*, Book of the Ways of Life,* Trans. Sefaria Community, 20. I chose to use the phrase's original masculine pronouns to maintain the biblical text and to illustrate that the biblical text defers to masculine language. As a female rabbinical student who will also reflect upon female scholarship, I recognize the tension with using the masculine form אתה and masculine verb עומד.

[9] Major works before the 19th century that retroactively have been categorized as Mussar literature include but are not limited to: *Duties of the Heart*, written by Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda in the 11th century; *Gates of Repentance*, written by Rabbi Yonah Gerundi in the 13th century; *Sefer HaYashar* which typically is attributed to Rabbeinu Tam the Tosafist who purportedly composed the work in the early 14th century; *Orchot Tzaddikim* (*The Ways of the Righteous*), composed in the 16th century by an anonymous author who wrote the book in Yiddish; *Tomer Devorah* (*The Palm Tree of Deborah*), written in the 16th century by Safedian Kabbalist Moses Cordovero; and *Mesillat Yesharim* written by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in the 18th century.

what we now call “Mussar literature” because Mussar did not emerge as a proper movement or pedagogy until the 19th century when Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant popularized the practice and study of Mussar in Lithuania, Russia, Germany and France.

In this chapter, I will analyze, in chronological order, the works of Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda (est. 1050-1120), Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (1707-1746), Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant (1809-1883), Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953) and Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005). As part of this assessment, I will canvass their opinions about the relationship between Mitzvot and Middot. I have selected these figures due to their foundational contributions to Mussar literature and their widespread acclaim in the field of Mussar. This section of my dissertation is offered to honor the sages who pioneered Mussar thought and practice. Paying tribute to these archetypes also enables me to explain the understanding of Mussar I have developed through studying the literary infrastructure created by my predecessors whose works are now credited as having initiated the canon of Mussar.

However, this list of sages is not exhaustive. These figures and their works are, rather, suggestive of my interest in linking Mitzvot and Middot. Extolling these authors is also an opportunity to demonstrate that all opinions are shaped by the people who form them, as well as the contexts in which such proponents live. For this same reason, my opinions about Mussar and the opinions of contemporary progressive Jews necessarily will be divergent from Jewish thinkers who precede us.

Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda [“Bahya”]

Bahya Ibn Paquda was a Rabbi, Dayyan (a judge of a rabbinical court), Theologian and Jewish Philosopher who lived during the 11th-12th centuries in Medieval Spain. There, he coexisted with Muslims, particularly Sufis, many of whom influenced Bahya’s beliefs

about God and human behavior. As Bahya surveyed halachic compilations and books written by post-Talmudic Masters including Rabbi Jonah Ibn Janach[10] and Rabbi Chefetz ben Yatzliach,[11] as well as works authored by Philosophers such as Saadia Gaon[12] and Al-Mukammis,[13] Bahya identified a lacuna in Jewish thought, a topic in Jewish literature to which none of his predecessors had devoted adequate study. He referred to this gap as "חוכמת חובות הלבבות,"[14] wisdom of the duties of the heart, i.e., ethical Mitzvot concerned with internal character traits.

Bahya questioned if his belief in the existence of this chasm of knowledge was correct, and whether he was the appropriate person to fill in the deficits of missing information. After an internal deliberation, Bahya concluded he must in fact raise awareness about this predicament while inviting others to correct him if they believed he had written something erroneous. Bahya's welcomed receptivity for feedback exemplifies an element essential to the exponents of Mussar over the course of history: each prominent proponent of Mussar study and practice has seen themselves not as providing *the* definitive Mussar work,

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[10] Rabbi Jonah Ibn Janach was a Jewish Rabbi, Physician and Hebrew Grammarian who lived in Muslim, Spain. Until his work, grammar did not exist as a subject of its own. Consequently, Rabbi Janach's work was essential for Bahya and every subsequent Jewish thinker.

[11] Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda references the compilation of halachic explanations written by Rabbi Chefetz ben Yatzliach. Bahya clearly was influenced by this material and Rabbi Yatzliach's contribution to halachic literature.

[12] Saadia Gaon was a prominent Rabbi, Jewish Philosopher, and exegete who lived in Egypt and later in Palestine. He wrote his work in Judeo-Arabic. Saadia particularly is notable for his literature on Hebrew linguistics, halacha, and Jewish Philosophy. Saadia wrote a book entitled *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* which some contemporary Mussar scholars identify as the beginning of Mussar literature. Regardless of its primacy, Saadia's work was foundational for Bahya's thinking in the realm of Jewish ethics.

[13] David Ibn Merwan al-Mukkamas al Rakki was a Philosopher. He was the author of the earliest known Jewish philosophical work of the middle ages. As a result, Al-Mukkamas impacted Bahya who also was a Philosopher.

[14] Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda, *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1*,* trans. Daniel Haberman, (Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers, 1996), 10-11.

but rather, as offering commentary subject to update with more precise and suitable information. This penchant for collegiality requires a healthy degree of humility. Mussar authors wrote to start *and to continue* the conversation of the heart instead of finalizing the dialogue.

Bahya assembled his findings into a book entitled *Al Hidayah Ila Faraid al-Qulub: The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart.* Decades after the publication of Bahya's book which he wrote in Judeo-Arabic, Judah Ibn Tibbon, who lived in Provence during the 12th and 13th centuries, translated Bahya's work into a Hebrew version entitled *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart*. It is likely Ibn Tibbon undertook this translation in an effort to correct readers' false conclusions that Bahya identified as a Muslim because his ideas were in such alignment with Sufi Islam. Ibn Tibbon's translation inevitably bespeaks its own interpretations of Bahya's work, as any translation undergoes change when it is rendered in a different language.

In *Duties of the Heart,* Bahya made a then-novel distinction between Mitzvot that require physical effort (duties of the limbs) and Mitzvot that focus on the inner life (duties of the heart). Bahya aimed to prove that duties of the heart are "יסודי כל המצוות," the foundation for all of the Mitzvot.[15] Bahya argued that if one fails to provide adequate attention to the duties of the heart, the duties of the limbs are impossible to achieve because "without heart and soul, the service of [God] is incomplete."[16]

For Bahya, Middot are not separate from Mitzvot. Rather, Bahya posited that Middot constitute a category of Mitzvot. He wrote,

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[15] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 10-11.

[16] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 13.

"חכמת התורה מתחלקת לשני חלקים. האחד מהם, לדעת חובות האברים, והיא חכמה הגראית, והשני, לדעת חובות הלבבות, והם המצפונים, והיא החכמה הצפונה,"[17]

"The wisdom of the Torah can be divided into two parts: knowledge of the, 'duties of the limbs,' i.e., wisdom that is manifested externally; and knowledge of the 'duties of the heart,' i.e., duties which belong to the hidden, private realm of the heart."[18] Bahya supported this claim by illustrating that Philosophy, Torah and Rabbinic Tradition all lead to the same capital "T" of Truth; a Truth derived from the binary nature of Mitzvot which includes duties of the limbs and duties of the heart.

Since Bahya was first and foremost a Philosopher, he appealed to reason before Torah, clearly seeking to establish his philosophical foundation. Bahya asserted that humans are composed of body and soul and accordingly, must serve God through *both* body and soul. Bahya elucidated that one serves God with his[19] soul by cultivating Middot (or as Bahya described them, duties of the heart) such as יראת יהוה, fear/awe of God; ענוה, humility; אהבת יהוה, love of God; and ביטחון, trust of God. Bahya bolstered this claim by citing verses of Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers which mention Middot, in order to prove how God's Torah commands the Jewish people to study and exercise duties of the heart such as fear and love.[20]

And finally, Bahya noted that in the Rabbinic tradition, sages have called attention to duties of the heart by recording quotes such as, "The Merciful One wants the Heart."[21] Bahya

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[17] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 6.

[18] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 7.

[19] I use the pronoun "his" here and throughout my section on Bahya to stay true to Bahya's intended audience and his use of Hebrew grammar.

[20] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 15; Deuteronomy 5:18, 10:12-19, 15:17; Leviticus 19:17-18; and Numbers 15:39.

[21] Sanhedrin 106b:14, *The William Davidson Talmud* (Koren-Steinsaltz).

quoted Numbers 35:11 which states that someone who kills a person accidentally is not liable for the death penalty because, say the rabbis, the person's heart and intention are misaligned with his activity. Bahya used this example to establish his belief that, "since the very basis for an act...depends on the intention and inner life of the heart, the knowledge of the duties of the heart should come before the knowledge of the duties of the limbs."[22] In this statement, Bahya declared the intention, or kavanah, to fulfill a Mitzvah is vital; the act of fulfilling a Mitzvah alone fails to serve God wholly. Rather, one's actions must be informed by his intentions. This concept identifies a crucial aspect of Mussar study and practice: Mussar study and practice are intentional and purposeful. They are predicated upon an alignment of mind and hand, head and heart. An action alone, even if it is a Mitzvah, can become a virtue or a vice depending on the Middah or Middot that animate it.

When Bahya was writing, there existed texts about ethics such as Pirkei Avot, the Book of Prophets and Saadia Gaon's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions.* However, there was no concrete Mussar movement. Perhaps this absence encouraged Bahya, a halachically-bound man, to define Middot as being embedded within the system of Mitzvot. Alternatively, since Bahya was trying to encourage Jews to remain Jews amidst a Muslim backdrop, he may not have aspired to create an entirely new set of principles. Rather, he may have endeavored to explicate that the essence of Judaism is a philosophical approach to how one performs the Mitzvot. Nevertheless, Bahya prioritized knowledge of the duties of the heart (as in, Middot) above that of the limbs. As evidence, he wrote in his introduction to *Duties of the Heart*, "It is clear to me that the duties of the limbs would not be complete

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[22] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 17.

without the accompanying will of heart and soul to do them, without the heart's strong desire to carry them out."[23]

Therefore, Bahya appears to agree that duties of the limbs, or external Mitzvot, are necessary but insufficient for ethical growth and for the whole service of God. Bahya affirmed this by writing an entire book devoted to the subject as a response to his disappointment and shock that no one had done so before him. According to his introduction, once Bahya, "became convinced...of the need for the duties of the heart and of the obligation that we have to fulfill them; after observing they had been neglected and that no book had been singularly devoted to them; after realizing what a predicament the people of this [his] generation were in, due to their inability to respond to these duties,"[24] he was "moved to investigate the knowledge of the inner life."[25]

Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto ["Ramchal"]

Ramchal, like Bahya, was a Rabbi and Jewish Philosopher. He was also a Mystic, specifically a Kabbalist. Ramchal was born and raised in Italy. After receiving threats of excommunication, he moved to Amsterdam and ultimately died in the land of Israel. Ramchal faced threats of expulsion from Italy because he broadcasted his conviction that a messenger of God had spoken to him, thereby identifying himself as a messianic figure. This declaration came only decades after the notorious Shabbatai Zvi wrongly convinced others that Zvi himself was the messiah. Zvi's false revelation wreaked havoc on people who believed him and in many cases, sold all of their belongings and abandoned their vocations

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[23] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 13.

[24] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 31.

[25] Ibid.

while waiting for the world to end. Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why the Jewish people feared another round of messianic pretension from Ramchal.

Although Ramchal did not travel directly to Amsterdam from Italy, he settled there because Amsterdam arguably was the most liberal, tolerant city in Europe. Consequently, Amsterdam was most likely to be hospitable to Ramchal's unconventional, even radical and revolutionary ideas. Innovation became a pattern for Mussar sages who tended to pursue liberal communities in order to experiment physically, intellectually and spiritually.

Ramchal wrote *Mesillat Yesharim* (*the Straight Path*, or *Path of the Just*) which is now labeled as one of the most notable pieces of Mussar literature. Similar to Bahya, Ramchal scribed this influential book in effort to articulate features of Divine service and to encourage the study of ethics.[26] Unlike Bahya who understood his work was introductory for many Jews, Ramchal conjectured his writing consisted of information that Torah scholars, i.e. his audience, already knew. In his introduction to *Mesillat Yesharim,* Ramchal proffered:

"להזכירם את הידוע להם כבר ומפרסם אצלם פרסום גדול. כי לא תמצא ברב דברי אלא דברים שרב בני האדם יודעים אותם ולא מסתפקים בהם כלל,"[27]

"To remind them of what is already known and quite familiar to them for you will find in most of what I say, only what most people know, and do not doubt in the least."[28]

Ramchal deemed it necessary to "remind" his audience of this self-evident truth because of his consternation that people in his time were not behaving in accordance with this knowledge. Ramchal perhaps apologetically opined that because this information was so obvious and well known, it often was overlooked and forgotten. Ramchal completed the first

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[26] Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim in Two Versions: Dialogue and Thematic,* trans. Avraham Shoshana, (Euclid, OH: Ofeq Institute Inc., 2007), 300.

[27] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 291.

[28] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 292.

paragraph of his introduction by insisting his book was beneficial because it reminded readers of the information they, "by nature, forget."[29] Ramchal attempted to encourage his readers to "take to heart the duty one [now] ignores"[30] as a result of man's forgetfulness. To overcome this tendency toward ethical amnesia, Ramchal asserted that Mussar is a study requiring constant review and practice.

Once Ramchal surmised his book consisted of widespread knowledge he hoped his audience would recall upon reading, Ramchal spoke to the necessary relationship between action and intention required for the whole service of God. He wrote, "the Eternal searches all hearts and discerns every purpose of thoughts."[31] This discussion segued to Ramchal's opinions about the connection between Mitzvot and Middot.

According to Ramchal, "the fundamental purpose of man's existence in this world is solely to keep the *mitzvot,* serve God, and withstand trial."[32] Ramchal maintained a deep commitment to the Mitzvot and revealed his mystical beliefs when he wrote that fulfilling Mitzvot is a vital stepping stone to gaining reward in the world-to-come. Unfortunately, according to Ramchal, God placed humanity on earth with many alluring material desires which can distract people from this goal of ascendency.[33] Ramchal thus defined the world on earth as a *fierce battle*, "מלחמה חזקה,"[34] but avowed that if man[35] can overcome these worldly

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[29] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 291.

[30] Ibid.

[31] I Chronicles 28:9, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

[32] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 307.

[33] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 302.

[34] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 303.

[35] Like with Bahya, I refer to "man" here and elsewhere in this section in place of inclusive terms such as "humanity" to stay true to Ramchal's intended audience and to his use of Hebrew grammar.

desires and "שולט בעצמו,"[36] *control himself*, he can truly cleave to God. For Ramchal, performing Mitzvot is not done simply to sustain harmonious relations in society, but also, to spiritually elevate the human being.

To exalt oneself in Ramchal's estimation, one's service requires not only a commitment to the Mitzvot, but also to the Middot. The Middot, Ramchal suggested, bring man's attention to God so that everything a person does is "for but one purpose: to draw near to God…and break down the barriers that separate man from his Maker - namely all matters material…."[37] In other words, like Bahya, Ramchal affirmed the whole service of God demands study of Middot because doing so aligns one's intentions with his actions. *Mesillat Yesharim* contains a footnote linking Ramchal's work to that of Bahya's. The footnote teaches that when Ramchal wrote, "תמימות העבודה" as in "wholehearted service of God," he was referencing the type of inspired service Bahya wrote about in *Duties of the Heart.* Ramchal advocated a Divine service in which, "deeds alone do not suffice for the service of God; surely proper intention of the heart and correct thought are also necessary."[38]

Crucial to understanding Ramchal's *Mesillat Yesharim* is the social context in which he was writing. In the mid-late 1700s Ramchal was battling secularism, an ideology that grants people the right to follow any religion in their own fashion or more often, none at all. During the 18th century, the lure of the Enlightenment opened the door for many Jewish individuals to learn about non-religious subjects and become susceptible to assimilating into dominant society. At the same time, Jews in some countries were being naturalized as

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[36] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 303.

[37] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 308.

[38] Footnote in *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 293-294; *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1*,* Introduction.

citizens of their respective nations such as in France following the French Revolution. The opportunity for diaspora Jews to gain the rooted security of citizenship further encouraged them to participate in secular society outside of their Jewish *kehilot* (communities).

It is possible, therefore, the pull toward Enlightenment emboldened Ramchal to imply the study of Middot is intended to constantly refine the focus of one's acts of Mitzvot which Ramchal believed were the ultimate goals of a Jewish man's life on earth. Perhaps because secularization threatened the *kehilot*'s retention of Jewish students and practitioners, Ramchal needed to remind his community about the importance of Mitzvot and the ways in which the outside world could seduce men into believing otherwise. Hence Ramchal discerned the value of Middot not simply as devices for maintaining cordiality among men, but as standards for keeping students committed to their Jewish lives and to the service of God. This supports my argument that Ramchal, like Bahya, prioritized Middot over Mitzvot. In his introduction to *Mesillat Yesharim,* Ramchal wrote, "without these qualities [Middot], it is not at all pleasing but rather despised and detested."[39] Ramchal confirmed that performing Mitzvot without the accompaniment of Middot is not only insufficient, it is actively abhorrent.

Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant ["Salanter"]

Israeli Scholar Immanuel Etkes composed an account of Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant's life, tracing Salanter's influence on the evolution of Mussar. This legacy involved Salanter's attempts to increase Mussar study and to spread knowledge of Mussar literature as he defined it. Salanter's various efforts eventually led to the establishment of the contemporary Mussar movement. For the purpose of this thesis, I will include relevant

[39] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 294.

information for analyzing Salanter's beliefs about the relationship between Mitzvot and Middot. Since Salanter codified Mussar literature and coalesced a movement around its study and practice, he is integral to understanding how Mitzvot and Middot can be interpreted and how they are complementary.

Salanter studied in Salant which Etkes deems the center of Torah study during the 19th century. Consequently, Salanter became identified with the city and often was referred to as "Salanter" rather than Rabbi Lipkin. In Salant, Salanter was highly influenced by Rabbi Zundel of Salant. According to Rabbi Naphtali of Amsterdam, "from him [Zundel] alone did he [Salanter] receive wisdom and this great learning which is the study of Mussar, to study and to repeat Rabbinic dicta and Mussar works many times, with great consideration."[40] In all likelihood, Salanter did not seek out Rabbi Zundel solely for his learnedness in Mussar. However, it is certain Rabbi Zundel's Mussar teaching was a source of admiration for Salanter. When Salanter moved to the highly Jewish populated city of Vilna in 1840, he was further affected by the presence of Maskilim, Jewish Enlightenment thinkers, and the poor economic conditions facing Jewish people in the area.

Shortly after his arrival in Vilna, Salanter "began to engage in efforts that may be seen as laying the foundation for the Mussar movement."[41] Salanter assisted in the printing of Mussar works, preached about Mussar, and established an exclusive circle of disciples who would later become the "nucleus of leadership that would work to disseminate his ideas among a broader public."[42] In Vilna, Salanter founded a Mussar house which was a *beit*

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[40] Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth,* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 70.

[41] Etkes, 85.

[42] Etkes, 89.

midrash devoted to studying only what Salanter understood to be works of Mussar. These tomes included *Duties of the Heart* and *Mesillat Yesharim*.

Salanter was part of the Mitnaggedic community. For years before Salanter gained prominence, the Mitnaggedim had been skeptical of movements like Hasidut and Jewish Enlightenment because these trends threatened the traditional hierarchy of Jewish education in yeshivot, particularly, the prominence of Talmud study. Consequently, many Mitnaggedim challenged Salanter's Mussar House, regarding it a distraction from Talmud and halachic study.

According to Etkes, Salanter was influenced by the Vilna Gaon and Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. Like these sages, Salanter maintained that Torah and Talmud study were vital to Jewish learning and living. In fact, Salanter was a renowned Torah and Talmud scholar. In popularizing the study of Mussar, Salanter "did not intend to reject or diminish the value of Torah study."[43] Nevertheless, Salanter's attention to ethical behavior found expression in his demand for fixed times of Mussar study and the "unavoidable result of that was a certain erosion in the status of Torah study."[44]

As reported by Etkes, Salanter's theological perspective aligned with the classical thought of the Mishnah and the Talmud: God is transcendent and personal, rewarder and punisher, and reveals God's self to humankind in the Torah and through commandments.[45] Consequently, Salanter held "the essence of Divine service thus consists in response and obedience to the mitzvot…."[46]

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[43] Etkes, 122.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Etkes, 93.

[46] Ibid.

Salanter is most notable for fashioning the modern Mussar canon, thereby aggregating and categorizing literature penned before the commencement of his rabbinate as works of Mussar. In addition to this novelty, Salanter introduced another innovative perspective on Mussar. Salanter believed one's relationship with Middot is based on human Psychology rather than on Theology, the lens through which many adherents before him established their theories about Middot. Salanter was convinced human beings experience a gap between cognitive knowledge and psychological motivation. Therefore, Salanter demurred that the reality of God and the validity of halacha were incapable of motivating human beings to practice halacha and to engage in ethical behavior. Rather, Salanter believed human beings are provoked by emotional drives.[47]

For this reason, Etkes purports that Salanter admonished, "Mussar has no positive value outside of the framework of observance of the mitzvot. Rather, its entire purpose is to create a connection between the normative demands of the Halacha and the individual's psychological capacity to carry them out in real life."[48] Although I would argue against this claim by asserting Mussar *does* have value outside the framework of halacha, it is indisputable that Salanter regarded the study and practice of Middot as a means of actualizing the system of halacha, i.e. Mitzvot.

Etkes acknowledges that Salanter aimed to propagate his teachings of Mussar to the broader public. Salanter himself once said, "Mussar study is not like other kinds of study. There is no other study which imposes its obligation upon all the people: women are exempt from Torah study; there is considerable latitude to exempt [from Torah study] those who endure suffering or who are lacking in intellect or who are in acute distress....this study...is an

[47] Etkes, 96.

[48] Etkes, 97.

obligation that embraces every person without exception."[49] Therefore, Salanter revised Jewish tradition by including women and non-Torah scholars in his Mussar outreach efforts. One might argue that women's involvement in Mussar was welcome before Salanter if their participation solely pertained to their limited halachic requirements. However, Salanter indisputably introduced women to scriptural texts and a form of Jewish education which in all likelihood most Jewish women previously had never enjoyed.

Salanter, like most Jewish thinkers, studied and taught Jewish tradition as *he* saw fit, taking liberties with respect to what other rabbis argued he *should* be doing. Salanter democratized Mussar study by intentionally broadening the scope of its students to include men and women who were not תלמידי החמים, *Talmud and Torah scholars*! Salanter also established Mussar study houses which detracted time from studying Talmud and Torah. Salanter was by no means a Reform Jew, nor was he a Maskil (a believer of Enlightenment). He did, however, wish to expand the yeshiva and hasidic worlds. Pursuing these goals as a Mitnagged, was radical in Salanter's lifetime.

As I mentioned previously, Etkes writes that Salanter was, like other Mitnaggedim, opposed to the Maskilim, Jews who embraced Enlightenment thinking. Yet Salanter was influenced by modern Psychology, i.e. a modern Science that affected the ways in which he understood and practiced Judaism. For instance, Salanter deemed Middot vital due to their effect on emotions and thus on their ability to motivate one to perform Mitzvot. Salanter recognized that Middot could complement Mitzvot, and that Psychology and Theology could strengthen each other. I underscore this, not to imply that Salanter wanted to lead Jews astray from tradition or from Mitzvot, but to emphasize the halachically-bound Salanter conceived

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[49] Etkes, 109-110.

of Middot and their relationship to modern science. Although he was committed to halacha, Salanter was not confined to a box that restricted him from engaging in free thought and innovation.

Lastly, although Etkes states Salanter never intended to move away from the traditional *beit midrash* in which Talmud and halacha were its foci, Etkes reveals that Salanter noticed a disconnect between Torah scholars' study and their behavior. Salanter observed such scholars were not practicing in real life the wisdom imbued in the works they were studying. This disassociation caused a lack of יראת יהוה, *fear/awe of God* which is crucial for ethical behavior and the whole service of God. While Salanter accepted the premise that observing Mitzvot is essential to leading a worthy and holy Jewish life, his establishment of Mussar as a movement suggests the motivation and manner in which Mitzvot are performed are integral to the Mitzvot themselves. For Salanter, Mussar is a supplement to halacha, thereby making Middot a corollary supplement to Mitzvot, but not a replacement for them.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler was an Orthodox Rabbi, Talmud Scholar and Philosopher who was born in Russia and lived during the 20th century. Although the rabbis in this thesis who preceded Rabbi Dessler did not explicitly define themselves as Orthodox Jews, all of these sages are linked by their statuses as contributors to Mussar literature and their conviction that they were *obligated* to perform Mitzvot. Rabbi Dessler was introduced to Mussar at an early age because his father Rabbi Reuven Dov Dessler and his uncle Rabbi Gedalia were disciples of the Mussar teacher Rabbi Simcha Zissel Sieff, one of the foremost students of Salanter.[50]

[50] Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, trans. Aryeh Carmell, (Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers, 2004), 9.

Rabbi Dessler studied Mussar at Rabbi Zissel's Mussar-oriented yeshiva in Kelm. According to Rabbi Dessler, "in Kelm, character-training was in the very air you breathed."[51]

Rabbi Dessler is in-part popular to Mussar practitioners for his acclaimed *מכתב מאליהו*: *Letter From Eliyahu* which is a compilation of essays and letters that offer various insights Rabbi Dessler garnered over the course of his lifetime. Unsurprisingly, many of Rabbi Dessler's insights about Mussar correlate with Salanter's teachings. For example, Rabbi Dessler agreed with Salanter's belief that students must learn in order to *do* and to live,[52] and further, with Salanter's conviction that human beings are motivated by emotions rather than by reason. Rabbi Dessler maintained thought is incomplete without action and moral reasoning is incomplete without moral behavior. Thus, Rabbi Dessler maintained if one does not *practice* Mussar techniques, "your intellect is worthless and its conclusions negligible."[53]

Rabbi Dessler believed the imagination of one's experiences and the emotions felt by the inner realm instigated action. Thus, in order for Mussar to effect human action, one must transform his knowledge into an experience by imagining a desired change in action as vividly as possible.[54] Rabbi Dessler articulated how one can achieve this imagination. One

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[51] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 11. This statement is written by Aryeh Carmell in the introduction of his English translation of Rabbi Dessler's *מכתב מאליהו*. When Carmell writes "character training," he is referring to the study and practice of Middot (character traits) with an aim for adherents to cultivate positive character traits and thereby transform their character as a whole. In Kelm, this character training was present in the minutiae of everyday life. For example, Rabbi Dessler used to stay with a relative who served him the same dish day after day for years so that Rabbi Dessler could learn to appreciate food, deriving taste in everything he ate. Rabbi Dessler and his classmates were also instructed to clean the yeshiva's floors and light its lamps -- acts intended to form "better students according to merit." These physical tasks were intended to inspire a higher degree of appreciation for both study and the effort required to maintain a clean and enjoyable study house.

[52] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 182.

[53] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 175.

[54] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 34.

approach he proposed is termed a "break down," in which one dissects a concept into its constituent parts. For instance, if one wishes to cultivate happiness, he can "break down" the hours of happiness experienced by one person, then, "by many people, by the whole town, by many towns, many countries, the whole world and finally all the people who ever lived or will live in the world."[55]

Rabbi Dessler departed from Salanter in explaining the so-called stumbling blocks that prevent human beings from acting according to their highest morals or balanced Middot. Salanter defined the יצר רע, *one's evil or distracting will,* as the "appetite," referring to the desires and emotions which prevent human beings from acting according to their higher moral selves. In contrast, Rabbi Dessler defined this inhibiting factor as a bias which requires cleansing.[56] This bias is not necessarily conscious in the way the appetite can manifest. While the appetite represents a human's desire to quench the thirst of pleasure, bias represents an inclination, a tendency toward or habit related to something that constructs the lens through which we approach study, people and behavior. No person, Rabbi Dessler argued, has a straight view of anything. Bias is not evil, he expounded, but rather is the recognition that each human is a product of his experiences. Experiences blind peoples' pure and clear intellect which Rabbi Dessler asserted, creates character flaws.

Therefore, a person can only cleanse the inherent bias by, "constant work on improving his character,"[57] as in self-discipline. Rabbi Dessler was convinced that improving one's character through the study and practice of Middot aimed at cultivating purity of the heart is necessary for effecting action such as fulfilling the Mitzvot. For instance, if one is

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[55] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 34.

[56] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 170.

[57] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. I, 170.

judging a legal case and one of the parties involved gives the judge a material item, the judge is likely to develop a bias in favor of the gift giver. Yet, if the judge can discipline himself enough to either refuse the gift or to disassociate his feelings toward the receiving of a gift, then perhaps the judge can be capable of reaching reasonable and fair conclusions in the pertinent case. Rabbi Dessler wrote, "if one has sustained mitzvot for a long time without inner work, it is still missing the mark because for mitzvot to be living, there must be struggle."[58] This observation refers to the difficult internal work one must do in order to cleanse one's biases and balance one's Middot.

Rabbi Dessler deemed this internal work to be so crucial because he believed one's יצר*, biases* can "misuse these mitzvot by making the physical pleasure our only goal, thus using the mitzvah to "cover up" the evil. Thus it succeeds in turning holiness into defilement; the defilement exists because of the mitzvah which condones it."[59] Rabbi Dessler perceived that an acolyte practicing Mitzvot can still be, in Rabbi Dessler's terms, *unholy.*

For Rabbi Dessler, like Bahya and Ramchal, the kavanah or intention behind performing a Mitzvah is the key to fulfilling the Mitzvah's demand which ultimately, is a demand to be holy. In Rabbi Dessler's purview, the Mitzvah requires a holy inner disposition in the same manner that balancing one's Middah demands. Rabbi Dessler considered it easier to forget this internal requirement with the system of Mitzvot than with that of Mussar, through the lens of Middot.

While I believe Salanter insinuated Middot are primary to Mitzvot, Rabbi Dessler expressly adopted this view. When analogizing the balancing of Middot and the performing of Mitzvot to building the Temple, Rabbi Dessler envisioned, "the building of the outer

[58] מכתב מאליהו*: Strive for Truth*, Vol. II, 45-46.

[59] מכתב מאליהו*: Strive for Truth*, Vol II, 48.

Temple must depend on the building of the inner Temple which is the sanctity of the heart."[60] In other words, it is necessary to cleanse one's biases and elevate one's actions to align with inward motives rather than with exterior distractions. Further, on the inner level, Rabbi Dessler imagined, "the ark must come first; the 'point of inwardness' must precede its outward garments." [61] By describing Middot as internal garments and Mitzvot as outward garments, Rabbi Dessler prioritizes Middot as being primary to performing Mitzvot. This is not to say, of course, that one system can exist without the other. However, by recognizing this dichotomy Rabbi Dessler underscores the value of Mussar and its role in Jewish life as being primary to Mitzvot.

Perhaps Rabbi Dessler's perspective was influenced by his traumatic experiences during World War II, when he became estranged from his entire family and endured "great mental anguish."[62] For those of us like me who did not live during the Holocaust, we cannot fathom the state of Rabbi Dessler's heart and soul during that period of his life. Consequently, my preceding statements are not offered as a judgment on Rabbi Dessler's character, but rather, as a reflection on the reality of how the struggle to survive during war and a process of dehumanization can affect one's behavior. It becomes difficult, arguably nearly impossible, to exhibit compassion, love, kindness and goodness when one's world is commandeered by evil and predominated by the antithesis of those dispositions.

During the Holocaust, traditionally observing shabbat, kashrut, and other Mitzvot were largely abrogated. Therefore, Rabbi Dessler likely witnessed even so-called good, God-fearing, halachically-bound Jews who strove to perform as many Mitzvot as possible

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[60] מכתב מאליהו: *Strive for Truth*, Vol. II, 54.

[61] מכתב מאליהו: *Strive for Truth*, Vol II, 61.

[62] מכתב מאליהו: *Strive for Truth*,Vol. I, 14.

also engage in unspeakable acts in a desperate effort to survive. Perhaps then, Rabbi Dessler like Bahya, Ramchal and Salanter deduced that Mitzvot are necessary, but insufficient in isolation to serve God wholly. Rabbi Dessler revealed this conclusion by acknowledging that Mitzvot alone may not prevent unethical behavior whereas Middot are completely focused on the holiness of our intentions.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

Also plagued by World War II, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe was a Haredi Rabbi (thus, halachically-bound) and a משגיח רוחני, *Spiritual Director,* who lived during the 20th and 21st centuries. Rabbi Wolbe is best known for his work *עלי שור: Gates of Guidance I & II* which is now considered a classical Mussar text. As Rabbi Wolbe composed *עלי שור*, he was entrenched in yeshiva life. Consequently, Rabbi Wolbe's words are directed toward Haredi yeshiva students. In some ways, Rabbi Wolbe's career mirrors that of Salanter since Rabbi Wolbe, like Salanter, demonstrated his expertise and lifelong passion in the Mussar discipline. When Rabbi Wolbe had the opportunity to establish his own *mossad* or institution of learning, Rabbi Wolbe did not institute a yeshiva traditionally centered on halachic study. Instead, he created a yeshiva denominated *Yeshivat Givat Shaul* devoted solely to Mussar study and practice.

Rabbi Wolbe understood God as an eternal present. Consequently, Rabbi Wolbe stressed that the commandments delivered at Mt. Sinai were also issued to every generation thereafter. Essential to his thinking was the notion that religiosity is universal.[63] Not universal

[63] In Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's *עלי שור: Gates of Guidance* Vol. I, "ההכרח לקיום המצוות," p. נב, he beseeched his readers to rid themselves of the stereotypical and negative connotations that accompany the label "דתי," as in religious Jews or what we now call Orthodox. Rabbi Wolbe clarified that every single person pours attention, as a means of nurturing their souls, into secular topics such as justice, equality, and gratitude, all while neglecting the shared core source of these values: God. Thus, Rabbi Wolbe argued, "כל אדם הנה 'דתי'" every Jew is "religious" because every Jew has a cause to which they

in the way we typically use the term today -- to imply a religious doctrine in which every person has the same relationship with God. Rather, universal based on the recognition that Jews, regardless of their denominational affiliations, are each "religious" because the Jewish people were given the perpetual gift of Mitzvot by God.

Fulfilling the Mitzvot, said Rabbi Wolbe, is how Jews express their yearning for and appreciation of God.[64] Anyone who chooses what appear to be secular values such as freedom, equality or justice, Rabbi Wolbe affirmed, is worshiping mere substitutes or perceived alternatives for the ultimate, transcendent value of God. Nevertheless, Rabbi Wolbe appreciated that some people flex the muscle of performing Mitzvot while others let this muscle atrophy. Rabbi Wolbe advised against such entropy because he believed it is the Jewish obligation to accept the yoke delivered at Sinai. He, like Ramchal, observed that fulfilling Mitzvot is not an automatic behavior. People must remind themselves through the study of both Mitzvot and Middot, to perform reverential acts which extend beyond instinctual, bodily needs.

In order to practice Mitzvot, Rabbi Wolbe believed one need not activate his rational mind to prove Mitzvot are worth fulfilling. Instead, one should pursue Middot, namely, fear/awe of God and of the Mitzvot since they are God's commandments.[65] Thus, Rabbi Wolbe viewed performing the Mitzvot as being an expression of one's relationship and disposition with God.

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attach themselves and each cause, Rabbi Wolbe contended, is connected to God. Further, Rabbi Wolbe asserted that fulfilling Mitzvot is not about religiosity. Rather, fulfilling Mitzvot is necessary to honor the revelation that took place at Sinai which the Jewish people must never forget. As long as the Jewish people remember what took place at Mt. Sinai, and acknowledge what each individual saw irrespective of their generation, Rabbi Wolbe believed they shall not forget nor let the obligation to fulfill commandments evade them or fade from their memory.

[64] Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *עלי שור* Vol. I, "ההכרח לקיום המצוות," p. נא.

[65] Proverbs 13:13, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

Rabbi Wolbe explained that *every* Mitzvah is like a sanctuary and the Jewish people are commanded to have awe/fear of that sanctuary. Rabbi Wolbe further reflected on Rabbi Moses ben Maimon's (Maimonides) commentary on Tractate Yevamot in which Maimonides wrote one is not meant to fear the Temple itself, but rather, to fear the one who warns us about the Temple, i.e. God. Rabbi Wolbe employed this metaphor to elucidate that one's awe of the Mitzvot translates into being in awe of God, and vice versa. Therefore, Rabbi Wolbe perceived Middot and Mitzvot as being interrelated. He emphasized the focus should not be on doing the Mitzvot, since this is a given due to the revelation at Sinai. Instead, Rabbi Wolbe stressed the primacy of *how* one does the Mitzvot which requires awareness and cultivation of Middot.

In order to demonstrate the importance of studying and practicing Middot, Rabbi Wolbe quoted Bahya when he referenced the *V'ahavta*, writing, "ואהבת את יהוה אלהיך," *you shall love Adonai, Your God.* Rabbi Wolbe noted this command is one of the heart. He utilized this statement to underscore the proposition that what is required of us inwardly and internally gets expressed outwardly. Rabbi Wolbe took Bahya's distinction between Mitzvot of the limbs and Mitzvot of the heart, and animated this dialectic through the framework of the modern Mussar movement. In other words, Rabbi Wolbe valued Mussar as a practice and study separate from performing Mitzvot, but understood Middot as being inextricably bound to the Mitzvot rather than as being the foundation of a separate system.

<u>Concluding Thoughts on the Evolution of Mussar Thought</u>

Each of these thinkers professed that fulfilling the Mitzvot is necessary, but standing alone is insufficient for the service of God. Each of these sages understood Mussar as a system meant to be studied and practiced in conjunction with the fulfillment of Mitzvot. In

my view, however, each valued the study and practice of Middot as the primary stepping stone toward the fulfillment of Mitzvot.

Bahya aimed to explain how duties of the heart are "יסודי כל המצוות," the foundation for all of the Mitzvot.[66] Bahya asserted if one does not provide enough attention to the duties of the heart, the duties of the limbs are impossible to achieve because "without heart and soul, the service of [God] is incomplete."[67] Bahya acknowledged that while Mitzvot of the limbs are fundamental, he maintained they cannot be accomplished without first studying and practicing the duties of the heart, i.e., the Middot.

According to Ramchal, without the study and practice of Middot, "it is not at all pleasing but rather despised and detested," to fulfill Mitzvot. Ramchal seemingly categorized Mitzvot as addressing the question of *what* one must do to serve God, and recognized Middot as being responsive to the question of *how* one must do Mitzvot. Without the *how*, the *what* is subject to perversion, doing something which is not virtuous, but ironically is distasteful and offensive. Therefore, Ramchal deemed Mitzvot to be mandatory only in conjunction with prioritizing the study and practice of Middot.

Immanuel Etkes writes that according to Salanter's conception of Mussar as occupying the realm of Psychology, thereby serving as a resource for inspiring motivation to behave in certain ways, "Mussar has no positive value outside of the framework of observance of mitzvot."[68] Rather, Salanter perceived Mussar's sole purpose as galvanizing the fulfillment of Mitzvot. I contend, conversely, if studying and practicing Middot are

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[66] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 10.

[67] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. I, 13.

[68] Etkes, 97.

essential to inspiring someone to perform the Mitzvot, then Middot are primary to the Mitzvot because the Mitzvot cannot be fulfilled without adherence and allegiance to Middot.

Salanter was convinced that before one can bring Mitzvot into reality by performing them, one must first study and most importantly, practice, the Middot. Salanter saw practicing Middot as a means of enacting the Mitzvot beyond merely having an awareness of these aspirational behaviors. Although I believe Salanter would not decouple what he understood as the interdependent entities of Middot and Mitzvot, I am persuaded that Salanter believed studying and practicing Middot is the primary and paramount vehicle for serving God wholly. This preeminence is evidenced by Salanter's radical establishment of Mussar houses despite his peers' caution against introducing Mussar to yeshiva students who should, according to conventional halachic-bound wisdom, devote all of their time to Talmud study.

According to Rabbi Dessler, "the building of the outer Temple must depend on the building of the inner Temple which is the sanctity of the heart." This clarion call insinuates that the study and practice of Middot must take precedence as a means of preparation for the fulfillment of Mitzvot. Rabbi Wolbe, like Ramchal, understood Mussar as emphasizing the *how* to serve God wholly, and Mitzvot as the prescriptive of *what* to do to manifest this outcome.

These scholars' emphasis on ethical refinement is shared by visionaries who presaged them and by their contemporaries. For example, Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1543-1620) once wrote, "the reason there is no direct Torah command to perfect our character is because the observance of the entire Torah is contingent upon it…A good character is the primary prerequisite to fulfilling the 613 mitzvot…therefore manifesting a faulty character is much

more serious than transgressing a command…."[69] One of Salanter's predecessors, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), argued "man was created so that he may eliminate his negative character traits."[70] Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian once reported, "God commanded Israel to structure themselves according to a Divine blueprint. But to accomplish this, they must perfect their character traits, for good character is the foundation of the human structure."[71]

I have the utmost respect for these august sages who have preceded me. I would never feign any degree of equivalent, or near equivalent, scholarship as they possess. I do, however, believe it is necessary to recognize the scholars I have mentioned, along with other foundational Mussar masters, were all halachically-bound men. Consequently, the historical development of both halacha and Mussar have been entrusted to the aegis of halachically-bound males. A Reform Jewish female who is studying to become a rabbi in the 21st century (a path unthinkable for all of the students and teachers of Mussar I have cited), I have a different orientation to the potential for Mussar to be a resource outside the realm of halacha and for people who do not identify themselves as cis-gendered men.

I named this chapter "*Know Before Whom You Stand*, דע לפני מי אתה עומד"[72] as a tribute to the wisdom which predates me and the shoulders on which I have the privilege of standing. But unlike the solely male pronouns this phrase would suggest, many female, non-binary and trans Jewish scholars have written about the patriarchal nature of Jewish study and life. Rabbi Rachel Adler, a Rabbi and Professor of Modern Jewish Thought, Judaism and gender at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, is

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[69] Nachmanides, *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages*, Trans. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer. (Rahway, NJ: Mesorah Publications, ltd.), 1989, xiii.

[70] Ibid.

[71] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* xiv.

[72] Otzar Midrashim, Midrashim of Eliezer*, Book of the Ways of Life,* Trans. Sefaria Community, 20.

illustrative. Rabbi Adler wrote a book entitled *Engendering Judaism* which is a particularly useful resource for appreciating the importance of gender's role in Jewish study and ethics. Although Rabbi Adler is not a Mussar scholar, her scholarship in the intersection of ethics and gender can be applied to the discussion of Mussar pivotal to my thesis, a system of ethics that has been shaped by the genders and historical contexts of its contributors.

Rabbi Rachel Adler

In the introduction of her book, Rabbi Adler pronounces that engendering Judaism is not only important for women, but for every Jewish person. She writes,

> "relegating gender issues to women alone…presumes that while women are represented in Jewish tradition they are separate from it…if, as progressive Judaisms argue, social and historical factors affect Judaism, then it is hardly tenable to argue that gender is the only variable to which this rule does not apply. The impact of gender on Judaism, then, is not a women's issue; it is an issue for everyone who seeks to understand Judaism."[73]

Consequently, Rabbi Adler seeks to elucidate how gender affects all Jewish texts. Most importantly for the conversation of ethics, Rabbi Adler prescribes how the Jewish people proactively should be in constant conversation regarding ways in which we "reexamine the values and priorities enunciated in Jewish tradition in the light of current needs, injuries, or aspirations demanding to be addressed."[74] Many of these considerations revolve around gender, and in my view, other identity markers such as race and sexual orientation. I have demonstrated the importance of context by observing the Mussar sages' historical circumstances and the ways in which these environments affected their writing. I will use this principle to illustrate how gender consciously or unconsciously affects traditional Mussar literature and the manners in which modern people interact with this work.

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[73] Rabbi Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism,* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 2005), xiv.

[74] Adler, xv.

Rabbi Adler discusses topics influenced by gender and presumably by other aspects of human identity. These subjects include Theology and halacha, each of which have subcategories that reflect behavioral expectations, limiting societal roles and non-inclusive language. I endeavor to explore Rabbi Adler's work and to apply some of her messages to the ways in which Theology and halacha affect Mussar. Through this exposition I seek to recognize and identify ways in which gender affects not only these matters, but also Mussar literature, study and practice which are founded on ideas and conclusions about sages' theological and halachic stances.

As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, the first greats of Mussar literature all considered the system of Mussar to be inextricably bound with the system of halacha. Each sage understood Mussar study and practice as a means to fulfilling Mitzvot wholly. I maintain each of these sages implicitly or explicitly suggested through their published works that studying and practicing Middot are primary to the Mitzvot. The very notion that Middot and Mitzvot are interdependent confirms that Mussar literature has been shaped by Mitzvot. Knowing that halacha, as Rabbi Adler writes, "privileges men and disadvantages women,"[75] suggests that Mussar literature contains an implicit bias in favor of cis-gendered men. Therefore, even though the modern Mussar movement has encouraged the participation of women since its inception, female engagement with Mussar has been constrained by the patriarchal texts which comprise Mussar literature.

As a Reform female rabbinical student, I agree with Rabbi Adler when she writes, "an equality predicated on ignoring differences that constitute distinctive selves both conceals and legitimates injustice."[76] This insight is especially important in the world of Mussar which

[75] Adler, xxiv.

[76] Adler, 25.

propounds ethical and moral thought and behavior. I do not seek to confront the influence of gender on the process of determining or interpreting halacha because this topic is not my specialty. I wish to underscore the role halacha has played in shaping Mussar and to advance my conclusion that studying and practicing Middot can and *should* exist outside the realm of halacha if only to fully embrace genders other than that of cis-gendered men.

Consider for example, the law of an agunah, "a chained woman,"[77] bound to her absent husband who for some reason traveled and never returned to his family. Even the abandonment of her husband is insufficient for a woman to initiate a divorce as a matter of halacha. This law conscripts the chained woman to the confines of an unidirectional marriage, rendering her an unequal party who lacks the freedom to create her path or to influence her children's choices. This legal ruling determines some of the ways in which women relate to the Middot of honor, humility, and silence. Jewish women look to our tradition to find their honor and to learn how to treat others with honor. How is one to accomplish this when the tradition shackles its female adherents, thus depreciating the honor they should be accorded by their humanity alone?

The Mussar Institute recommends a wonderful affirmation for humility which is, "No more than my place, no less than my space."[78] In Mussar literature, humility demands people leave room for others, but also recognize room for themselves. The law of an agunah leaves an inadequate amount of room for women, falsely suggesting they deserve less space than their male counterparts. In Mussar literature, one is encouraged to find balance in their Middot. While silence grants clarity for listening and gaining wisdom, Ecclesiastes states,

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[77] Shulchan Aruch, Even HeEzer, 70:5; commentary from Mordechai Reish Dayanei Gezeirot.

[78] Mussar Institute.

"There is a time to be silent and a time to speak."[79] Is divorce truly a moment in which a woman should have nothing to say? No reflections on her marriage, no words about being abandoned by her husband? I answer these questions with a resounding no.

According to Rabbi Adler, "normative systems rest upon stories."[80] Consequently, it is vital for women to participate in Mussar study, practice and teaching, contributing their distinct stories and experiences to the wealth of Mussar literature. I will elaborate on this conversation later in this work when I explore various interviews I have conducted with women and men on the topic of Mussar.

Another subject of concern to the self-identifying feminist Rabbi Adler (and to other feminist biblical scholars such as Judith Plaskow) is Theology. As stated throughout this chapter, Theology is a subject upon which many Mussar scholars have framed their understanding of, and approach to, Mussar study and practice. As Judith Plaskow writes in her article, "The Right Question is Theological,"

> "the images we [the Jewish people] use to describe God, the qualities we attribute to God, draw on male pronouns and male experience and convey a sense of power and authority that is clearly male in character. The God at the surface of Jewish consciousness is a God with a voice of thunder, a God who is Lord and King rules his people and leads them into battle, a God who forgives like a father when we turn to him…. The hand that takes us out of Egypt is a male hand…."[81]

Plaskow also notes that when people use feminine language to describe God, they are criticized and chastised for using language that indicates Pagan beliefs.[82] Plaskow reviews the historical conflict between those who wanted to worship יהוה exclusively, and those who

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[79] Ecclesiastes 3:7, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

[80] Adler, 26.

[81] Judith Plaskow, "The Right Question is Theological," 4.

[82] Ibid.

longed to preserve the Goddess alongside Him - Asherah.[83] Plaskow argues Asherah's erasure suppressed the "female side of divinity."[84] Although feminine aspects of the Divine are present in figures such as Shechinah, the earthly emanation of God as understood by Kabbalists is the sexualized female counterpart to the numerous masculine emanations above her. Most notable of these iterations is Tiferet, who copulates with Shechina each Sabbath night. Moreover, when Kabbalists describe Shechinah as powerful they refer to her with *masculine* pronouns and nouns as if her strength can only be associated with men.

In Alan Morinis' book *Everyday Holiness,* Morinis expounds "the starting point for understanding Mussar is the verse in Torah that tells us, "'You shall be holy,'[85] *for I, the Lord your God, am holy*."[86] While the goal of Mussar is to become holy, the purpose of this accomplishment is to emulate God whom the Jewish people are told is Holy.[87] Morinis acknowledges that studying and practicing Middot requires us to model God's traits in our pursuit of wholeness[88] which supports the notion that our quest for holiness is in aspiration of mirroring the Divine. But for women, or for anyone else who does not identify as a cis-gendered male, I pose the question: how can we emulate the Divine when we do not see ourselves in God's image? We are told in Genesis that all people were created in the image of God, but it is not enough merely to be told this. I believe people must be able to see

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[83] Plaskow, 4. Asherah, often referred to as the tree Goddess, was worshiped alongside Yud Hay Vav Hay as his wife. The Hebrew Bible describes reforms that demanded these statues be torn down and destroyed. These purges erased the Jewish female divine presence through the image of Asherah.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Morinis, 12.

[86] Leviticus 19:2, *The Contemporary Torah JPS*, 2006.

[87] The main focus of the Mussar work *Tomer Devorah,* the 16th century kabbalistic and ethical treatise by the Ramak, is the concept of imitating God.

[88] Morinis, 85.

themselves in this story, in the descriptions and representations of God.[89] Thus, the Mussar sages' normative masculine God language presents an obstacle for women and non-cis gendered men who are attempting to cleave to the Divine and to utilize the other benefits of Mussar. As a result, I posit that Mussar literature requires the inclusion of non-normative perspectives to enable the value of Mussar study and practice to reach more than just cis-gendered men in a traditional halachically-bound system.

In my next chapter, I will delineate why I believe Mussar is an essential asset for progressive Jews who identify in disparate ways, many of whom do not consider themselves to be halachically-bound. I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that Judaism and Jewish texts have always been influenced by historical contexts and experiences of their leaders and authors. With each new perspective, Judaism and Jewish thought have adjusted and grown accordingly. I thus find it acceptable for modern Jewish individuals to shape Mussar in a way that includes themselves in the story, that serves them in a world proliferated with different experiences and viewpoints. I wholeheartedly believe Mussar is a wonderful vehicle to access Jewish texts and halacha. Perhaps an adjusted view of Mussar can allow a broader range of people to approach halacha in newer, more accepting ways that can create new opportunities of connection to the Jewish world and to Jewish tradition.

[89] Kabbalists understand God as both masculine and feminine; the union of opposites. This is one example of female representation in the understanding of God.

שלוש | Chapter Three

The Way of Life is a Lesson of Ethics,[90] ודרך חיים תוכחות מוסר

Derech Eretz

The phrase "דרך ארץ" literally translates to "way of land," but refers to the norms of proper social behavior in a given area or within a community. According to Judah Loew ben Bezalel ["The Maharal"] in his *Netivot Olam, Netiv Derech Eretz,*

"Derech eretz is comprised of all the ethical teachings in tractate Avot, as well as the ethical teachings mentioned in the Talmud, and all other ethical teachings. It consists of conduct that is proper and that is pleasing to people. It includes teachings which, if one does not follow them, he thereby commits a great sin and transgression, so that one must be mindful of them. This is why they are called 'divrei mussar' ('chastising words'), for they chastise a person that he should not walk in the path of evil…*derech eretz* preceded the world…. The world cannot exist without *derech eretz*, as [the Sages] said: When there is no *derech eretz,* there is no Torah. And from here we learn that *derech eretz* is a fundamental part of the Torah…"[91]

In chapter two I argued the Mussar sages I surveyed have suggested, whether directly or indirectly, that Middot are foundational to the Mitzvot. In chapter three I further support this claim by linking Mussar to *Derech Eretz* (or as the Maharal calls it, *Divrei Mussar*). The ethical standards which comprise *Derech Eretz,* perhaps the precursory system of Mussar, antedate Mitzvot and even Torah as stated by the Maharal.

Derech Eretz's precedence is also mentioned in *Vayikra Rabah* which states, "קדמה דרך ארץ את התורה,"[92] "*Derech Eretz comes before the Torah.*"[93] According to *Iggeret HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu,* "Greater is *derech eretz,* for it preceded the Torah by twenty-six generations.

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[90] Proverbs 6:23, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

[91] Yehuda Amital, *Jewish Values in a Changing World,* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub Incorporated, 2005), 132.

[92] Vayikra Rabbah 9:3.

[93] Rabbi Jan Katzew, "Derech Eretz Kadmah L'Torah," 1.

The world essentially existed then through unearned kindness alone."[94] Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter ["Sefat Emet"] echoes this sentiment in his commentary on parshat Lech Lecha when he writes,

"'יפה תלמוד תורה עם דרך ארץ', שלא ישנה סדר הראוי, רק שיהיה קודם דרך ארץ, ואחר כך התורה,"[95]

"'Talmud Torah is beautiful with Derech Eretz,' one must not change the proper order, Derech Eretz should come first, and afterward, the Torah."[96]

In other words, many sages counsel students to study *Derech Eretz,* or ethics, *before* they learn Torah or attempt to perform the commandments we receive from the Torah. I interpret this to mean that one should study and practice Middot before they can wholly fulfill Mitzvot. Consequently, I argue for *all* Jews, including progressive Jews, the principle of *Derech Eretz* sets a precedent for the study and practice of Middot to preface fulfilling the Mitzvot so that shaping one's character elevates the spiritual nature of performing God's commandments.

The Value of Ethics in the Reform Movement

In the 19th-20th centuries, Judaism's early reformers promoted the notion of Judaism as Ethical Monotheism.[97] This construct identifies one God "from whom emanates one morality for all humanity,"[98] and exhorts a primary demand that God's people "act decently

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[94] Katzew, 1.

[95] Sefat Emet, Derech Chayim 2:2.

[96] Sefat Emet, Derech Chayim 2:2, Trans. Rabbi Jan Katzew.

[97] "Jewish Ethics," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethics.

[98] Dennis Prager, "Issues in Jewish Ethics: Ethical Monotheism," *Jewish Virtual Library,* https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ethical-monotheism, 1.

toward one another."[99] Ethical Monotheism is not a concept originated by the Reform Movement, but the early reformers promoted this message in part because it is a fundamental directive from the Hebrew Bible's prophets. The prophets were a central guiding source for the early reformers, and remain so for the Reform Movement.[100]

In 1885, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler gathered Reform rabbis from around the United States to create a list of agreed-upon principles for the American Reform Movement named the Pittsburgh Platform.[101] In this platform, American rabbis laid the foundation for their devotion to ethical aspects of Judaism. For these rabbis, the ethical precepts were superior to Judaism's performative and ceremonial features. Consequently, the term "moral" appears four times in the Pittsburgh Platform's principles. In the first principle, the Pittsburgh Platform rabbis wrote, "We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages."[102] In the second principle, the rabbis acknowledged, "We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction."[103] In the third principle, the rabbis affirmed they, "recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish

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[99] Prager, 1.

[100] Ibid.

[101] "The Pittsburgh Platform," *CCAR Net,* 1885, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/.

[102] "The Pittsburgh Platform," Principle 1.

[103] "The Pittsburgh Platform," Principle 2.

people...and today we accept as binding only its moral laws…."[104] And in the sixth principle, the rabbis confirmed their commitment to the spread of "monotheistic and moral truth."[105]

In the 1937 Columbus Platform, the American Reform Movement's second guiding list of principles was updated according to changes that took place in the modern world after the adoption of the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885. In the Columbus Platform, American Reform rabbis specified what they understood as "moral" by creating an entire section entitled "Ethics."[106] The rabbis averred that in Judaism, "religion and morality blend into an indissoluble unity."[107] This argument rested on the Columbus Platform rabbis' conviction that searching for God equates to a search for holiness and righteousness. By extension, the rabbis believed that when one seeks the love of God, they also seek the love of their fellow Jews. In citing this relationship, the rabbis expressed their belief that norms of social behavior delineated by religious doctrines are crucial to the study of ethics.

In ethics, or the question of how people should behave in social situations, the rabbis affirmed their support for, "the sanctity and worth of human life and the right of individual freedom…[and] justice to all, irrespective of race, sect or class."[108] To this end, the rabbis ratified Judaism's effort to establish a just society through Jewish teachings about "economic order, industry and commerce, and national and international affairs"[109] which discuss the elimination of poverty, slavery, social inequality and prejudice. The rabbis explained the

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[104] "The Pittsburgh Platform," Principle 3.

[105] "The Columbus Platform," *CCAR Net,* 1937, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/.

[106] "The Columbus Platform."

[107] Ibid.

[108] "The Columbus Platform."

[109] Ibid.

rationale for this position by underscoring the prophets as their main source of ethical truth and the original source of Judaism's desire for universal peace.[110]

In just these two platforms which were further amended over the course of subsequent history, the founders of the American Reform Movement and their successors understood ethics to be the primary expression of prophetic Judaism, their most treasured aspect of the Jewish tradition.

While the Reform Movement honors the Book of Prophets as a seminal buttress for the Movement's stance on the importance of Jewish ethics, the study and practice of Mussar literature can be another source of ethical teaching within the wealth of Jewish literature.

Since the study and practice of ethics are so vital to the Reform Movement's identity and activity, I contend that Mussar literature which boasts teachings about the qualities of humility, honor, kindness, equality, love and patience (to name a few), would be a wonderful resource for Reform Jews to access in their pursuit of ethical behavior. As I mentioned earlier, the term "מוסר" first appears in the Torah in the Book of Deuteronomy[111] where the word is used to mean *lesson, correction,* or *discipline*. In modern Hebrew, however, the term "מוסר" has come to mean more directly *ethics* or *morals*. Even before Mussar evolved into a modern movement, texts that have been codified as Mussar literature have always been considered Jewish ethical literature in which the authors describe and prescribe virtues and behaviors that lead to ethical growth. Consequently, if Reform Jews connect primarily to the ethical features of Jewish literature and life, then studying and practicing Mussar is an ideal method for Reform Jews to focus their attention on ethics while also exploring the meaning of traditional scripture and rabbinic texts.

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[110] "The Columbus Platform," 'Ethics.'

[111] Deuteronomy 11:2, *The Contemporary Torah JPS*, 2006.

Familiarizing oneself with Mussar, which many American Reform Jews currently are doing, upholds the foundational principles of the American Reform Movement. This is not to say that studying and practicing Mussar according to its modern interpretations should serve as an alternative to learning Mitzvot. Rather, modern Mussar study should function as either a gateway to learning Mitzvot or as an enhancement to Mitzvot in which Reform and other progressive Jews already practice. I will devote a separate chapter to the Reform Movement's recent embrace and adaptation of Mussar in chapter four.

If Reform and progressive Jews in America perform Mitzvot, they, as humans of the modern world, tend to desire a reason or rationale for their actions. In other words, these practitioners want to understand *why* they are doing what they are doing. Instead of following the adage נעשה ונשמע*, first do and only then will you understand*,[112] American Reform Jews typically do the opposite. Many Reform Jews subscribe to the reasoning of נשמה ונעשה -- first try to understand the purpose and meaning of what has been commanded, and only then, choose what to do. Mussar is the optimal resource for teaching progressive Jews *why* and *how* they might fulfill a Mitzvah and thereby connect their good deeds with both their inner life and their relationships with others.

Halachic Practice by Those Who Do Not Feel Bound to Halacha as a System

Since its inception, the American Reform Movement has struggled with the *obligation* to follow a set of religious laws dogmatically. During the modern period, Jews benefited from emancipation in Europe which granted them citizenship status in their

[112] We see this phrase in the Torah (for example, in Exodus 24:7) and Talmud (for example, in Shabbat 88a:7). In Shabbat 88a:7, Rabbi Simai taught that Israel accorded precedence to "we will do" over the declaration "we will hear." This means in responding to God's commandments, the Israelites will first perform the Mitzvot and then try to understand the meaning and purpose of God's admonitions.

respective countries. This provided Jews a *choice* to practice Judaism as a religion distinct from the past in which the only option available for Jews was to observe Jewish ritual and law as the Jewish people were governed by Jewish leadership. In this new age under the influence of secular governments that recognize a separation between church and state, Jews began to question the relevance of their antiquated body of law. Did these laws still make sense to them? Did the laws of their forebears still hold value?

For American Reform rabbinic leadership, the answer was dynamic. In the Pittsburgh Platform, the rabbis wrote, "today we accept as binding only its [Mosaic legislation] moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."[113] Elsewhere in the platform, the rabbis reported they "hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew…."[114] From these excerpts, it is evident the rabbis released themselves and their communities from the *obligation* to fulfill *every* Mitzvah, especially the laws the rabbis deemed irrelevant to modern life. However, these quotes also demonstrate a resounding aspiration to uphold moral and pertinent laws.

Today, many people mistake the American Reform Movement's stance as one that releases their[115] congregants from any connection to the Jewish system of Mitzvot. We see in the Pittsburgh Platform, however, this is a false perception. As was written later in the

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[113] "The Pittsburgh Platform," Principle 1.

[114] Ibid, Principle 4.

[115] I use the possessive pronoun "their" throughout the rest of this thesis in recognition of my conviction that the information I impart about Mussar is applicable to all individuals regardless of their gender identities.

Columbus Platform, only "certain of its [Mosaic legislation] laws have lost their binding force."[116] I acknowledge there is great debate over the American Reform Movement's concept of "informed choice"[117] -- the notion that people learn Jewish scripture and rabbinic literature and subsequently, choose for themselves what tenets feel applicable to their spiritual lives. However, we must appreciate the Movement's goal is *not* to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather, the American Reform Movement's avowed injunction is to study as much as possible and only then, to fulfill the difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible task, of deciding which laws and principles in the Jewish tradition accord with one's personal beliefs and the societal and ethical norms of the modern, secular world.[118] The Movement also encourages its followers to discover methods of performing seemingly irrelevant Mitzvot in a manner that coincides with one's secular ideology.

American Reform Jews, while not feeling commanded or obligated to pursue *every* Mitzvah recognized in Jewish literature, undoubtedly fulfill some of them out of commitment and belief in their truth and value. As Halachist and Reform Rabbi Solomon Freehof (1892-1990) wrote, "For Reform Jews, Jewish law was to offer "guidance, not

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[116] The Columbus Platform."

[117] Ibid.

[118] In May 2020, the CCAR Journal published various articles about the American Reform Movement's relationship with halacha as a system. Many of the authors strived to demonstrate the American Reform Movement does consider and study halacha, but repudiates feeling bound to *one* static body of law such as the *Shulchan Aruch* or the notion of halacha with a capital "H." Rather, American Reform leadership appreciates and honors the historical development of halacha as a multivocal discourse with majority and minority positions and asserts halacha should remain as such. Thus, the American Reform Movement is not "non-halachic." To the contrary, the American Reform Movement arguably is thoughtful in interpreting halachic decisions in a manner that: (1) reflects the needs and perspectives of modern communities without religious coercion; (2) preserves the concept of service to God; and (3) emphasizes the importance of understanding moral and righteous behavior.

governance."[119] Like it or not, every Jewish person (inside and outside the Reform Movement) picks and chooses which halachic laws to uphold because fulfilling 613 laws a day is inconceivable!

Consequently, rather than traditionally abiding by a law such as *shatnez,* which prohibits one from wearing articles of clothing that mix wool and linen, in 2004, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) reinterpreted *shatnez* "as a call for ethical production processes."[120] According to CCAR, "to study the mitzvah of shatnez. . . can lead us to examine labels for firms practicing *oshek* [oppression] through sweatshop labor or payments of a sub-minimum wage."[121] Additionally,

> "in a speech to the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly in 2001, Rabbi Brad Artson argued that Conservative Jews should reclaim the mitzvah of *shatnez* as a ritual means of expressing the Jewish principle of distinction between the holy and the profane. If we want to retain a religion in which ritual is harnessed to the energy of moral depth…we're going to have to go back to those apparently meaningless rituals and demonstrate their moral base. Separating linen and wool is about making distinctions…It's about separating a holiness that is inherited simply by being from a holiness that is a holiness of striving and of effort."[122]

In their comments about *shatnez*, these Reform rabbis teach that fulfilling Mitzvot for progressive Jews is not as simple as choosing what practices they deem good, easy or preferable while discarding the practices they consider to be extraneous or problematic. My teacher Rabbi David Levine used to say, "You shomer your Shabbat. It may be different, but it's nevertheless 'shomer.'" When we say "shomer shabbat," we accept the Orthodox notion

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[119] Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, "Guidance, Not Governance: Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof and Reform Responsa," *Hebrew Union College Press,* *https://press.huc.edu/solomon-freehof-reform-responsa/#.YZQrmtnMI0o*.

[120] Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "What is Shatnez?" *My Jewish Learning,* https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shatnez/.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Jacobs, "What is Shatnez?"

of what it means to be "shomer shabbat" and ultimately, the "premise that there is but *one* legitimate body of rules which everyone agrees is '*the* halacha' and it is the exclusive purview of the Orthodox 'rabbinic oligarchy' to tell us what '*the* halachah' is."[123] The early reformers' aim was not to reject the rule book, but rather, to be analytical and mindful about thinking differently as to how one should perform the Mitzvot, as in, how to "shomer" one's shabbat.

Reform Judaism often is criticized for being too easy for ignoring the aspects of Judaism that feel too strenuous or that chafe against one's personal norms. I reject this oversimplification, and argue, the act of carefully selecting which Mitzvot to hold up on high as innately virtuous and relevant to modern sensibilities is a challenging feat. This discernment requires critically thinking about behavior rather than slavishly accepting marching orders.

We read in *Mishnah Peah,* "אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור…וגמילות חסדים ותלמוד תורה,"[124] *"These are the things that have no definite quantity...the performance of righteous deeds; And the study of the Torah."*[125] I raise the question of Reform commitment to Mitzvot in an effort to demonstrate that Reform Jews can benefit from the study and practice of Mussar. I reach this conclusion because whether they realize it or not, most Reform Jews *are* abiding by Mitzvot, although not all of the Mitzvot and sometimes in a manner which is different than Orthodox halachic expectations. For many American Reform Jews, the performance of righteous deeds and the study of Torah prioritize engaging in affirmative behaviors such as visiting the sick and feeding the hungry and refraining from negative behaviors like murder,

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[123] A. Brian Stoller, "At the Gates - בשערים: The Redemption of Halacha," *CCAR Journal,* May 2020.

[124] Dr. Joshua Kulp, Mishnah Peah 1:1, Trans. Sefaria, www.learn.conservativeyeshiva.org.

[125] Mishnah Peah 1:1, Trans. Sefaria.

adultery, and theft. These are Mitzvot even though Reform Jews may not consciously identify their actions or inactions as comporting with halacha.

So the question becomes, is it possible to be shomer or shomeret Middot without feeling bound by a static set of Mitzvot? I believe wholeheartedly the answer is yes. Salanter articulated that understanding Mitzvot is an inadequate method of animating behavior. For example, a person may read and appreciate the idea that God wants them to wear tzitzit every day, but such an awareness alone may not galvanize someone to in fact wear the tzitzit. Rather, humans are motivated by emotional drives.

In this same vein, I believe Jews can connect to Middot outside the realm of Mitzvot because Middot are a matter of emotions and character traits. These are elements to which each human being can relate despite their level of expertise on halachic discourse. Just as leaders of the Reform Movement renounce the premise there is *one* body of halacha determined by Orthodox authorities, I seek to refute the perception there is only *one* way to study and practice Middot which inextricably are bound to *one* body of halacha.

Although Reform Jews may not feel *bound* by Mitzvot as a halachic system, we inevitably encounter Middot in ourselves and in other people with whom we maintain relationships. If Middot are defined as character traits or dispositions which can contribute to motivating human behavior, then the human behaviors the Middot can affect need not be restricted to Mitzvot. Rather, like halachic discourse which has always been to some extent malleable, the interpretation of ethical and moral norms according to Jewish literature is also flexible and determined by factors other than halacha. Middot, therefore, can influence behavior that is shaped by Pirkei Avot, the Book of Prophets, *Derech Eretz*, secular judgments of ethics and the insights derived from an individual's life experiences. Rabbi

Solomon Freehof defined halacha as guidance, not governance. This distinction applies with equal force to Mussar. The literature of Middot should be regarded as guidance, not governance. This guidance affords Jewish individuals with concepts they are intended to wrestle with, rather than edicts they are expected to follow without challenge or introspection.

Mussar as an Access Point to Traditional and Talmudic Literature

In addition to connecting people with Mitzvot, studying and practicing Middot can be a fruitful access point for familiarizing Reform and other progressive Jews with scripture and rabbinic literature. Many American Reform and other progressive Jews lack proficiency in biblical Hebrew, modern Hebrew and Aramaic. Their dearth of experience can make the study of Tanach and rabbinic literature confounding, although this challenge is being mitigated by the proliferation of translations and the availability of access to classical Jewish texts on the internet. Even so, many American and Reform Jews must rely on translations that may vary in accuracy and nuance. Further, many of these works pertain to antiquated material that seems unfamiliar to modern readers such as using animals as currency, animal sacrifice, war, and the laws of kashrut. Discussing character traits, in contrast, is something every person can appreciate. Therefore, since American and Reform Jews can more readily connect to Middot as ethical dispositions, the study and practice of Middot can be used to develop some of the linguistic skills that are needed for accessing scripture and rabbinic literature.

A consequence of studying Mussar is relating personally to the texts being analyzed. This phenomenon reminds me of my professor Rabbi Norman Cohen. Rabbi Cohen is a Midrash Teacher who insists that when studying scripture and specifically midrash, one must

see *themselves in the text* and discover how the text applies to them personally. When studying and practicing Mussar, the ability to see yourself in the text is easier than the effort such transportation requires when reading other works in Jewish literature. Because studying and practicing Middot enables people to apply Jewish literature to their own intrapersonal and interpersonal lives, and to their understanding of self, Middot can be an excellent resource for teaching American Reform and other progressive Jews to relate to Jewish texts in ways that previously felt foreign.

And finally, just as American Reform Jews have reclaimed the ways in which they study and recognize Talmud, a body of literature that occasionally has been ignored by the Reform community in America, Reform and other progressive Jews can claim a relationship with Mussar. This rapprochement can be facilitated by modernizing Mussar commentary with up-to-date information on Psychology, insights from women and members of other minority groups, and perhaps perspectives from people who are selective or creative about which Mitzvot they fulfill and *how* they fulfill them. Judaism, for its entire history, has been a faith which evolves in accordance with the historical contexts the Jewish people inhabit and the proclivities of the individuals who interpret Jewish literature. As a result, interacting with Middot in an innovative way is in keeping with the practices of our ancestors who modified halachah, prayer, and social norms to better reflect the changes occurring in their respective societies.

Mussar and Marginalized People[126]

In the introduction to his book *Everyday Holiness,* Alan Morinis draws readers' attention to the phrase "You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart."[127] Morinis believes circumcision can be a "metaphor for spiritual initiation - removing the obstacles to having an open, sensitive, initiated inner life."[128] Morinis omits the rest of this phrase in Deuteronomy which asks people to *stiffen their necks no more.*[129] Engaging in Mussar and removing the hardened shell around our hearts benefits not only the inner experience of the individual practitioner, but also assists the adherent in removing their biases and causes for stiffness against *others*. Consequently, Mussar provides value for marginalized people by opening their hearts to themselves, and to majority group members by encouraging them to open their hearts to marginalized communities both within and outside of their wider tribe.[130]

In Nachmanides' letter to his son entitled, "אגרת הרמב"ן," he writes, "*Accustom yourself to speak gently to people at all times.*"[131] Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer comments on

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[126] I have titled this section "Mussar and Marginalized People" because I believe Mussar can be particularly useful for marginalized people *and* its benefits can extend beyond the Jewish world.

[127] Deuteronomy 10:16; Morinis, 4.

[128] Morinis, 4.

[129] Deuteronomy 10:16.

[130] Rabbi David Jaffe wrote a book entitled, *Changing the World from the Inside Out.* In this work, Rabbi Jaffe illustrates how the study and practice of Mussar can facilitate one's social justice efforts and the efficacy of their allyship. Rabbi Jaffe's book is informed by a program he developed called The IOWA Project: https://www.insideoutwisdomandaction.org/who-we-are. Additionally, action organizer and Jew of Color Yehudah Webster created a practice called 40 Days of Teshuvah which he then made into a film. Webster and Rabbi Jaffe have promoted this film to demonstrate that fighting for Racial Justice is enhanced when we can infuse such efforts with faith practices such as *vidui*, *teshuvah* and Mussar. For more information: https://www.insideoutwisdomandaction.org/40days.

[131] Nachmanides, *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages*, Trans. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer, (Rahway, NJ: Mesorah Publications, ltd., 1989), 27.

this verse and emphasizes that Mussar demands "*all people*"[132] be treated with "equal respect and sensitivity."[133] In political conversations which often polarize marginalized communities from dominant ones, disputes can spark tension and hostility. Mussar requires each of us to speak gently to one another, taking into account sensitivity and love despite our differences in opinion. According to Rabbi Feuer, the Hebrew Bible's King Solomon taught in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "the words of the wise, spoken gently, are heard."[134] I believe Mussar can allow spaces for loving conversations in which everyone is treated with dignity and therefore, is genuinely heard.

Marginalized communities usually bear the burden of educating others about the ways in which marginalized people should be treated with honor and dignity. Mussar practice includes a communal expectation for each individual to continuously improve, despite their social status, so they can learn to act decently toward everyone around them. Perhaps this is wishful thinking, but I believe Mussar can be used to shift the onus of education to each individual, especially those in the majority with power. Since Mussar requires both action and study, each practitioner is expected not only to learn about Middot, but also to behave according to their newly-acquired education so they can balance their character traits for the benefit of themselves and for others.

To reinforce equality among all people, Mussar demands that we recognize no one person is free of sin. Rabbi Feur writes, "no man is free of sin. If one intensively searched his soul and could find no wrongdoing, it can only be that he was equipped with inadequate tools

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[132] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 27.

[133] Ibid.

[134] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 29.

in his search."[135] This perspective demands humility which can ensure space for every individual because this outlook raises awareness that no one person is better or more "pure" than another.

Rabbi Yonah of Gerondi (13th century Spain) once wrote,

"The first opening [for spiritual growth] is that a person knows their own worth and recognizes their strengths and the strengths of their ancestors, including their greatness and significance to the Blessed Creator. One should always make an effort to strengthen their ability to behave according to this attribute.

Mussar also encourages everyone to see *themselves* as being whole and valuable, albeit imperfect creatures of God. This is crucial for marginalized people who are often told to see themselves as lowly members of society. Mussar can remind them of their righteousness, their dignity, their value as human beings, and their spiritual elevation. In addition, the Middah of honor beseeches us to grant this image and this rightful sense of honor to one another. With this attitude, I am convinced it becomes easier to see people who appear different than ourselves (in whatever way) as whole and deserving of dignity.

It is important to acknowledge that I write all of this as a healthy White cis-gendered heterosexual female. I recognize the privileges I have, despite being part of a marginalized group as a woman. I simultaneously compose this call for the Jewish people (myself included) to utilize Mussar techniques to enable us to learn about one another's plights, and to behave and act in response to each other's circumstances and needs as Mussar demands. I must also share that I have no training in diversity, equality and inclusion ("DEI") initiatives, I am not trained in community organizing, nor do I express my optimism for the efficacy of Mussar to benefit marginalized people from a perspective of certainty and experience. I

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[135] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 95.

merely believe in the potential of Mussar to forge stronger bonds between human beings despite their differences.

ארבע | Chapter Four

These are Narratives of the Generations of Humanity,[136] אלה סיפורים תולדת אדם

During the Hebrew month of *Elul* in 2021, I interviewed a group of progressive Jews about their relationships to the study and practice of Mussar. Knowing that all but two of these interviewees consider themselves unbound by halacha, I was particularly intrigued about how they might answer the following question: if you are not bound by halacha, what is so compelling about Mussar?[137] In their explanations about why and how Mussar is valuable to their lives, I recognized common themes: Mussar promotes self-awareness, bolsters relationships by enhancing communication with others, provides accessibility to Jewish authoritative materials, and encourages discussions about Theology. In relating these interviews, I strive to reveal the nuances of our conversations, including when appropriate how each person perpetually explores their Jewish identity and their relationships with Mussar. In light of the interviewees' varied life experiences and distinct relationships to halacha, I will examine their opinions specifically about Mitzvot and their relationship to Middot when most pertinent.

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[136] A plural version of Genesis 5:1, *The Contemporary Torah JPS*, 2006.

[137] This set of interviewees is not an attempt to represent all progressive Jews, nor does this pool of people sufficiently represent the full diversity of the American Jewish people. Out of the nine interviewees, five are women. Each of the interviewees is White. I do not know whether any of these individuals are members of the LGBTQ+ or disability communities.

Self-Awareness

The first interview I conducted was with Frances Scheffler, Ph.D., CCC, a congregant of Westchester Reform Temple ("WRT") in Scarsdale, New York. Dr. Scheffler is a three-year student of a Mussar course I offer at WRT. Dr. Scheffler performs various Mitzvot such as keeping a kosher home, but she does not consider herself bound by halacha nor does she feel she fully understands the breadth of Mitzvot in Jewish life. Nevertheless, Dr. Scheffler believes "everyone should study Mussar," including herself.

Dr. Scheffler appreciates Mussar for giving her a structured practice which offers time and space for self-reflection during her retirement, a period of life which has granted Dr. Scheffler more opportunity for introspection. Dr. Scheffler affirmed that Mussar, "makes communication with one's self and with others come from a deeper sense of self." Dr. Scheffler is a Behavioral Scientist who analyzes how people communicate and think. Despite her profession, Dr. Scheffler acknowledged that until her Mussar studies, she had never perceived thought and communication as a deeper understanding of the soul.[138]

When I interviewed Reform Rabbi Andrue Kahn, he provided a concrete example of how Mussar aids his practice of self-awareness. Rabbi Kahn articulated that Mussar has helped him navigate emotional fluctuations in his life, both in thought and in bodily sensations, specifically during the month of *Elul*. Rabbi Kahn confirmed Mussar assists him (and others) particularly in the realm of patience, reminding him to lengthen the space between the fuse of his extant circumstances and the match of his emotions. Rabbi Kahn noted this is not merely an intellectual exercise, but rather is something he can feel in his body. When Rabbi Kahn experiences himself being emotionally activated in a negative way,

[138] When Dr. Scheffler said this, she was thinking about Mussar literature's division of the soul into three categories: neshamah, ruach and nefesh.

he draws upon his Mussar tools to better pause and ask himself *what part of me is activated? Why am I responding this way right now? What am I feeling? How can I shift my internal frame?*

For Rabbi Ira Stone, who considers himself bound by halacha, Mussar provides the main source of meaning in his American Jewish life -- so much so that he established the Center for Contemporary Mussar in Philadelphia, PA. Rabbi Stone believes Judaism cannot be relegated to the equivalent of a social club. To Rabbi Stone, Jewish life must involve content that is profound and transformative. In Rabbi Stone's view, the great task of Mitzvot is to de-center one's self, to recognize that we as individuals are not in charge. Rabbi Stone's Mussar work helps him sustain this task. Rabbi Stone cautioned me that Mussar is not an easy feat; it requires devotion. During our interview, Rabbi Stone declared that, "*Cheshbon Hanefesh* is not a once in a year proposition (such as on Yom Kippur). That would be worthless. It is a daily practice."

Rabbi Stone is not the first observer to make such a statement. According to Maimonides, "the person who strives for perfection must be ever mindful of his middot and he should evaluate his actions and carefully examine his character traits every day…."[139] According to Ramchal in *Mesillat Yesharim,* "One should designate a special time each day for his personal accounting, to assure that it is conducted with undeviating regularity."[140] Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerondi wrote in his essay *Darkei HaTeshuvah,* "from the moment a person awakens in the morning, he should examine everything he does. One should divide his daily schedule into manageable segments which are easy to monitor."[141] Nachmanides

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[139] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* xiii.

[140] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 98.

[141] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 99.

believed *teshuvah* or the process of atonement and spiritual renewal is, "at its best when it is perpetual. Although Jews strive to become especially attuned to the presence of their Maker during the month of *Elul* and the Ten Days of Penitence, in truth, there is no 'season' for repentance."[142] Further, Salanter wrote, "Generally people work on repentance during the Ten Days of Penitence from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. The more pious ones begin to work on repentance from the beginning of the month of *Elul*. But I say that repentance must begin right after *Ne'ilah.*"[143]

During my interview with Reform Rabbi Lisa Grant, Ph.D., she expressed her belief that Mussar offers its practitioners a particular way of being aware of their actions and the consequences that result from their choices. By focusing on Middot such as אנוה *humility,* שתיקה *silence,* שמירת לשון *mindful speech,* and הכרת הטוב *gratitude*, Rabbi Grant reflected, people are challenged to transform the ways in which they see themselves in the world. These terms are not simply catch phrases, Rabbi Grant explained, but rather, these behavioral measures trigger practice. Rabbi Grant feels deep in her bones the Jewish purpose is to "help people address the fundamental questions of what it means to be a human." We do this with a certain language, stories and practices, Mussar being one of them. Although Rabbi Grant does not engage in a ritualized Mussar practice, she appreciates the way in which Mussar principles have become integrated into the way she thinks and understands the world.

Rabbi David Jaffe, an Orthodox Rabbi who considers himself bound by halacha, devotes much of his life to Mussar study and practice. Rabbi Jaffe first encountered Mussar in his yeshiva *Darchay Noam* in Jerusalem, Israel. Rabbi Jaffe's yeshiva activities consisted of mastering traditional Jewish material, studying Gemara and halacha. During his studies,

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[142] *אגרת הרמב"ן: A Letter for the Ages,* 101.

[143] Ibid.

Rabbi Jaffe sought more spirituality in his curriculum. This led him to devote a portion of every day to learning Mussar. Rabbi Jaffe was drawn to the reality that our rabbis beseech us to be trusting, loving, humble and patient -- traits Mussar underscores. According to Rabbi Jaffe, Mussar helps us soften our hearts. Rabbi Jaffe considers himself an *avodah* person, a devotional person. Thus, Mussar assists Rabbi Jaffe in carrying out the work of *Cheshbon Hanefesh* and ultimately, of serving God.

Dr. Patricia Joseph, a congregant of Wise Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio, self identifies as a Jew by choice who was raised a Methodist and came to Judaism through Buddhism. One of Dr. Joseph's favorite quotes is from Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull who said, "Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins, I answer, 'the one I feed the most.'" Dr. Joseph sees this balancing act in Mussar, which guides her to find the midpoint in a Middah's spectrum, ultimately leading her to balance her character traits and "make her a better person." Like Rabbi Stone and Rabbi Jaffe who believe Mussar softens the heart, Dr. Joseph posits that Mussar helps people cultivate an understanding heart.

<u>Relationships and Communication</u>

Adonai said, "לא־טוב היות האדם לבדו,"[144] "*It is not good for a person to be alone."*[145] Some of my interviewees highlighted their belief that reinforcing relationships and strengthening communication is fundamental to the modern Mussar movement. Additionally, everyone who mentioned Mussar's ability to help with introspection also discussed the benefits of Mussar work on their external relationships. Rabbi Eric Gurvis is a Reform rabbi

[144] Genesis 2:18, *The Contemporary Torah JPS*, 2006.

[145] Ibid.

ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion ("HUC-JIR"). However, Rabbi Gurvis now works for the Mussar Institute, which is mostly comprised of Jews who identify as halachically-bound. Although Rabbi Gurvis does not identify this way, he appreciates the relationship between Mitzvot and Middot and the presence of both disciplines in Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Gurvis has devoted his rabbinate to helping Jews talk about faith, beliefs and doubt regardless of their religious affiliation or practice. Rabbi Gurvis' goal is to retain a connection to Judaism, faith, and Jewish community. Rabbi Gurvis understands Judaism does not declare only one way to believe in God or only one way to practice religious life. He therefore translates the word "Mitzvah" as *responsibility*, often to one another, rather than as a commandment or an obligation.

Reform Rabbi Pamela Wax, the Spiritual Coordinator at Westchester Jewish Community Services, first encountered Mussar through her experience in a cohort with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality ("IJS"). Rabbi Wax now employs Mussar study and techniques to assist many of her students undergoing relationship woes. Rabbi Wax once worked with a couple in which a partner lost work. Mussar enabled the couple to find compassion and to place themselves in each others' shoes, thereby reducing each other's feelings of shame and anger. Rabbi Wax disclosed that after a month of Mussar study and practice, the couple seemed like newlyweds! Rabbi Wax mentioned that forgiveness often surfaces in her Mussar groups, revealing that Mussar serves as a balm in mending relationships after situations of pain and conflict.

According to Rabbi Stone, the goal of humanity is to "recognize that we are responsible for one another…the moment we feel we understand we are commanded by the

very presence of another to serve them and bear them as our burden," is what he calls "the Sinai moment." Rabbi Stone argues Sinai, perceived as myth, is a communal literary device to communicate the trauma of being commanded to bear the other. Rabbi Stone notes this existential moment is historically and traditionally translated by Jewish people into Mitzvot.

According to Rabbi Stone, Mitzvot remind the Jewish people to bear one another's burdens, while Middot articulate the skills needed to discover *how* one can bear these burdens. Rabbi Stone concurs with my assessment that Middot precede Mitzvot. Similar to Rabbi Wolbe's position, Rabbi Stone believes Middot comprise the skill set of Mitzvot, or in other words, Middot constitute the *how* for the *what* identified by Mitzvot. While Mitzvot are the declaration to bear the other's burden, Middot reveal *how* to do so.

Rabbi Stone admittedly struggles with the idea of disassociating Mitzvot from Middot altogether. He wonders, *if you take Mitzvot away and turn only to Middot, are you just a Christian without Jesus? And does that matter? In the end who cares? Is only what matters that something is Jewish because it is identified that way?*

For Rabbi Grant, Mussar is equated with Mitzvot, particularly with Mitzvot בין אדם לחברו*, in human relationships.* During our interview, Rabbi Grant asked rhetorically, "what is the motivation behind Mitzvot such as lighting the Sabbath candles or the intentions guiding actions like listening to the sound of the Shofar if not to awaken ourselves to the brokenness of our world?" In other words, Middot and Mitzvot are interrelated but not identical, each providing a particular pathway for practice. While Rabbi Grant does not perceive Mussar as the sole path to introspection and bearing another's burden, she considers it a viable and valuable option.

Accessibility to Jewish Authoritative Materials

I define accessibility in this context as the capability to understand authoritative Jewish materials such as Hebrew scripture, Talmud, and other Jewish sources with which people either have a language barrier or lack prior experience studying.

At the outset of our interview, Dr. Scheffler immediately appraised Mussar as an accessible Jewish resource. As someone, she explained, with minimal knowledge of Hebrew and limited exposure to Tanach, Talmud and their commentaries, Dr. Scheffler nevertheless identified with the Mussar materials she studied. This connection allowed Dr. Scheffler to recognize the educational value offered by Mussar despite her lack of familiarity with Jewish texts. Although Dr. Scheffler still finds Mussar study to be challenging work, she could instantly relate to Mussar's concepts of internal balance, emotions, and communication with the self and others.

Rabbi Kahn agrees with Dr. Scheffler's sentiments, and regards Mussar as a "powerful playing field leveler in Jewish spaces since so much of it is personal." Consequently, Rabbi Kahn created a millennial outreach program with Mussar as its touchstone. Rabbi Kahn designed the curriculum for this program as a continuation of his "Introduction to Judaism" class. In our interview, Rabbi Kahn revealed that many Reform spaces consist of people who possess a variety of knowledge. As a result, Rabbi Kahn finds it extremely useful to share texts from Mussar literature that are easily contextualizable for the self. According to Rabbi Kahn, this framework is effective for thinking about one's internal life, which can be applied to anyone living in any place at any time. Further, Rabbi Kahn maintains anyone can palpably relate to Mussar because its concepts are not only comprehended, but physically felt.

Rabbi Kahn considers the notion of being bound by Mitzvot to be a novel expression, introduced in response to the modern formation of Judaism's Reform Movement. According to Maimonides, Rabbi Kahn contends, the intention of Mitzvot is for moral training, but performing these commandments does not always achieve the goal of attaining moral lives.[146] Mussar, Rabbi Kahn opined, can be extremely effective at helping people understand Judaism through an ethical framework, thereby realizing the essence of Mitzvot but through a different mechanism. Rabbi Kahn surmised Mussar study and practice may lead some to engage in Mitzvot they previously ignored or misunderstood. Therefore, Rabbi Kahn believes Mussar can lead progressive and specifically Reform Jews to acquire a sense of what it means to be a Jew outside the Orthodox lexicon that defines being a Jew by being *bound* by Mitzvot.

As alluded to earlier, Rabbi Jaffe wrestles with the notion that Mussar can be taught outside the realm of Mitzvot, or even to Jews who do not consider themselves to be bound by Mitzvot. Rabbi Jaffe acknowledges Mussar was not taught on an altar of its own. Ultimately, he does not believe Mussar and Mitzvot are binary devotions. Rather, Rabbi Jaffe considers the performance of Mitzvot to be a spectrum -- everyone is engaged, but at different magnitudes. Therefore, Rabbi Jaffe concludes Mussar can function outside the obligation of Mitzvot. However, Rabbi Jaffe hopes Mussar study and practice bring people closer to the commandments and to understanding the intentions behind Mitzvot, which he finds people often perceive as irrelevant.

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[146] In Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah,* he listed four types of perfection: material, physical, moral and intellectual. Throughout his work, Maimonides defined intellectual perfection as humanity's ultimate goal. However, at the very end of his writing, Maimonides explained that intellectual perfection serves moral perfection. Scholars and rabbis have argued, therefore, that if intellectual perfection leads to moral perfection, moral perfection represents humanity's ultimate goal.

While Rabbi Jaffe maintains commitment to Mitzvot is the ideal path of a Jew, he remains dedicated to teaching anyone Mussar and trusts that doing so brings Torah into the world. Rabbi Jaffe agrees Mussar is more accessible than other realms of Jewish learning. Further, Rabbi Jaffe believes the objective of Mussar is not solely to execute Mitzvot, but also to effectuate the separate purpose of enhancing one's moral being. It is particularly astounding and exciting that Rabbi Jaffe, a halachically-bound Jew, makes this claim in harmony with my thesis. As someone immersed in the world of Mitzvot, it is not a given that Rabbi Jaffe's ideas about the aspirations of Mussar should align with mine, someone who does not consider herself halachically-bound and who is studying to become a Reform female rabbi.

Rabbi Wax shared with me her ideas about creating a course on *Shmita*, which exemplifies Mussar's potential role as a gateway to further Jewish learning. Rabbi Wax envisions a *Shmita* curriculum revolving around the concept of forgiveness. She plans to teach this material in the context of Mussar literature. Rabbi Wax expects Mussar to initiate conversations about forgiveness in general, which can shepherd her class' discussions of *Shmita's* purpose and its role in forgiving debts.

Liz McOsker is a congregant of Wise Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mussar has helped Liz discover comfort in her own Jewish identity. Liz was raised as a Conservative Jew, but her community felt more to her like Conservadox, as she named it. However, Liz was raised in a non-kosher home with other familial customs that differed from those of her more traditional community. These differences caused Liz to feel like an outsider. When Liz married an Episcopalian who later adopted a Jewish identity, they compromised on practicing Reform Judaism together.

As an adult, Liz has taken the time and effort to better understand the Mitzvot so she can consciously choose which laws to observe and find value in rituals she has not yet assumed. Liz loves Parshat Kedoshim, specifically its commandment to refrain from putting a stumbling block before the blind or to mock the deaf. Practicing and studying Mussar helps Liz to live by Parshat Kedoshim's demands, stimulating her to cultivate her soul.

Dr. Joseph is the epitome of a congregant for whom Mussar has provided a portal to further Jewish learning. Dr. Joseph was raised Methodist, practiced Buddhism during her midlife, and later found Judaism. After marrying a Jewish man, Dr. Joseph explored Jewish life with him. Eleven years into their marriage, Dr. Joseph finally converted to Judaism. For her, the moral basis of Judaism was one of the religion's most compelling attractions, which Dr. Joseph says Mussar embodies.

Theology

Perhaps the most interesting result of my interviews was our discussions about God.[147] Dr. Scheffler, for example, sees Mussar as a path to God and therefore, a source of spirituality. Although Dr. Scheffler does not pretend to subscribe to a certain and unchanging definition of God, she cited Mussar as a resource for exploring her ideas about the possible characteristics of God and the ways in which she can embody those features. At present, Dr. Scheffler perceives God as the mixture of all human behavior. "God gave us a playground that kind of manages us," she said, "and what one takes from it and how they move in it is free will."

[147] I use the term "God" to clarify when I am referring to conversations about Theology. By using this term, I do not suggest that every one of the interviewees has the same understanding of divinity or even uses the same name to refer to divinity. I would argue, rather, that each person has a distinct understanding of this entity and a unique relationship with their notions of God.

In reflecting on Theology, Rabbi Gurvis quoted a famous Mark Twain phrase: "The most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why." Rabbi Gurvis' "why," he exclaimed, is in part learning how to help people in his community bridge the gap between their Jewish identities and their beliefs and faith in a Divine being. How does Rabbi Gurvis conduct these conversations? Through Mussar. During his time at the Mussar Institute, Rabbi Gurvis held a networking session on the question: *what should one do when they think they are lacking faith?* Rabbi Gurvis shared with me the response was so overwhelming, he realized this subject required more conversation. Since the topic of God is relevant to every Middah, Mussar provides a non-threatening and non-judgmental foundation for these kinds of discussions. Mussar enables exploration of God without getting mired in one's present theological questions.

Rabbi Wax, who is very involved in healing work, relies heavily on Mussar for dialogue about faith and divinity. Rabbi Wax recalled feedback from one of her students who said, "if not for Mussar, my faith and compassion would not have been possible."

For Rabbi Stone, the core of Mussar -- learning to bear another's burden -- is founded on Theology. In his book *A Responsible Life,* Rabbi Stone draws on ideas from French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as the underpinning of Rabbi Stone's theological claims. According to Rabbi Stone, bearing the burden of others is how we serve God and thereby, how we bring divinity into the world. Rabbi Stone defines revelation as "the recognition of our responsibilities in the world…."[148] By studying and practicing Mussar, Rabbi Stone extols, one is constantly engaged in this act of revelation.

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[148] Rabbi Ira F. Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar,* (New York, NY: Aviv Press, 2006), 15.

Rabbi Jaffe, like Mussar sages of the past, posits that life's purpose is to serve God. He considers Mussar to be a tangible, structured path for achieving this goal, although not the exclusive route. As mentioned before, Rabbi Jaffe believes Mussar is best practiced in conjunction with learning and performing Mitzvot. Rabbi Jaffe believes Mussar supports people along their journeys of inner development so they may walk in God's ways. Rabbi Jaffe excitedly elucidated that for him, "Mussar is about having a really alive relationship with God on fire and seeing the good and joy and trying to bring that presence of God into the world with attention to Middot."

Liz McOsker revealed to me that Mussar helps her manage mental wellness. Liz has undergone treatment for post traumatic stress disorder ("PTSD") which she described as incredibly rewarding but lacking the ability to connect her to God. Mussar allows Liz to focus on the balance modern Psychology seeks to achieve while incorporating spirituality into her life. I have shared with Liz that I prefer to include a search for God's presence in my treatment for anxiety. Although I cannot pretend to know about any realities of God, speaking about a divine entity beyond myself reminds me I am not alone, and encourages me to perceive a larger purpose for my suffering than the personal struggle I am aware of at any given moment.

As Rabbi Wax noted, divinity can be an incredibly powerful tool for healing. But as Rabbi Gurvis explained, discussions about God can hinder people's ability to connect deeply to Judaism's rich tradition of text study and of cultural practices. I appreciate the freedom Mussar allows people to explore their opinions of divinity without imposing on them a one-size-fits-all paradigm of Theology that truncates their vision like blinders on a draft horse. The flexibility Mussar practice affords disciples for contemplating the Divine should

provide the vast majority of Reform and other progressive Jews with greater ability to reap the benefits of Jewish practice in the process of exploring theological ideologies.

Gender

In preparing for these interviews, I intentionally sought female interviewees based on my desire to hear female perspectives on Mussar. While some of the individuals I interviewed have no qualms with Mussar literature having been written primarily by men, I have found men and women who, like me, appreciate the legacy we have received while simultaneously seeing room for the inclusion of different voices and experiences in the teaching of Mussar.

I want to include Rabbi Gurvis' voice here because although he identifies as a man, Rabbi Gurvis strives to delineate differentiated perspectives in his Mussar courses. Rabbi Gurvis refers to himself as a "Mussar treasure hunter," who looks not only for Mussar literature of the past, but also seeks secular wisdom in the present to incorporate into the modern Mussar movement. As one of Rabbi Jaffe's students, I have experienced Rabbi Jaffe following a similar bent in his educational courses. Rabbi Gurvis sees himself as pushing the envelope, based in part on his recognition that Torah is all around us.

Rabbi Grant was relatively unconcerned with the male dominance in Mussar literature. She notes that Mussar literature was composed mainly in a different cultural context. In her view, this is a reality we cannot undo. Whatever the original source of Mussar wisdom, Rabbi Grant is comfortable utilizing this material while framing it in such a way that allows us to recognize we live in a new moment with a new reality. Rather than fretting about the past, Rabbi Grant advocates adapting relevant principles to our current circumstances and discarding anachronistic constraints that no longer pertain to us. Instead of

seeing women as outside the language of Mussar because women used to be excluded from this conversation, Rabbi Grant is confident we can claim ownership of Mussar sources -- old and new.

Rabbi Wax, on the other hand, divulged that from time to time, she struggles with the reality that Mussar is mostly embedded in a traditional worldview in which female rabbinic voices are less common. When Rabbi Wax compiles resources for her courses, she yearns for more female voices to plumb. Rabbi Wax raised two specific Middot that women typically relate to differently than do men. One is כעס *anger* and the other, ענוה *humility.*

In one of Rabbi Wax's Mussar groups, her female participants were outraged over classic Mussar viewpoints that categorized anger as a negative trait. Women, she expounded, are rarely encouraged to legitimate their anger, which in turn suppresses their emotions. This affects women in a variety of contexts, including profession, social justice, family, and education. While most Mussar literature encourages people to decrease their anger, Rabbi Wax chooses to emphasize that Mussar is about balance and each Middah has a spectrum. Consequently, when confronted with women who tend to the extremity of silence or apathy, Rabbi Wax urges them to practice increasing or tending to their anger.

A Middah related to anger is humility. Humility is about finding one's rightful space, not making one's self so small they feel like a dishrag. For example, it would be anathema for me, Rabbi Wax, Rabbi Grant or any other female rabbi to disown her title of rabbi in order to please Orthodox communities. In the same manner that Mussar literature counsels people to decrease anger, it also persuades people to lower inflated feelings of self-worth to avoid succumbing to arrogance. Women, as Rabbi Wax and I discussed, tend to gravitate to the extreme of self-deprecation. This orientation can be offset by encouraging women who

underestimate their intrinsic value to pursue initiatives that boost their ego in order to rebalance their humility.[149]

Liz McOsker and Dr. Joseph both expressed frustration with the topic of modesty. When studying modesty, Liz could only find sources that dealt with "gray bearded men wearing black hats telling women how to speak and dress." This myopic focus reminded Liz of her upbringing when she was instructed to refrain from wearing pants. Liz noted that her Mussar classes consistently have been populated primarily by women. Liz wonders what effect this could have on the future of Mussar, although she does not assume what the outcome will be.

Dr. Joseph was revolted by writings about modesty until she found an article penned by a male rabbi about personal modesty. This work spoke about how to present one's self, and was not restricted to the way one dresses, but rather focused on one's behavior. Like Rabbi Wax, Dr. Joseph appreciates that men and women (cis or non-cis gendered), and I will add non-binary persons, have unique perspectives of the Middot given their disparate life experiences. For example, when she studied humility, Dr. Joseph had to learn how to speak *more often* in class rather than how to make more space for others. In her male-dominated career, Dr. Joseph was often marginalized. She has used Mussar to learn how to create space and opportunity for herself in the workforce.

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[149] The reflections Rabbi Wax and I share are supported by contemporary literature. For example, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook (now Meta Platforms) Sheryl Sandberg wrote a book entitled *Lean In* which describes how women hold themselves back from opportunity. Sandberg suggests, like Activist and Author Reshma Saujani in her book *Brave Not Perfect,* women tend to act only when they expect their results to be perfect. "Done is better than perfect," Sandberg states. In 1982, American Psychologist Carol Gilligan wrote a book titled, *In a Different Voice* in which she detailed her theory on the development of women's morality and sense of self. Although Dr. Gilligan has been critiqued for presenting a single homogenous female voice, her work is still studied as an important contribution to the exploration of gendered orientations toward ethics.

Despite what women and other non-cis-gender male identities may feel about the likelihood or efficacy of Mussar changing to reflect their experiences, the reality is Mussar invariably will evolve by their participation in Mussar study and practice alone. During my studies, Rabbi Jan Katzew said to me, "women either are changing or will change Mussar in part because the same behaviors that men and women exhibit are interpreted differently when one behaves that way vs. the other." Rabbi Katzew shared with me a phrase he appreciates which states, *how can we eliminate the "ר" in "אחר," meaning, how can we bridge the gaps among one another to create unity?* I pray incorporating more diverse voices into the world of Mussar literature will counteract the assumptions we all make of the "other," giving space for individuals to create narratives that accurately represent the ways in which Middot are present in their beings.

חמש | Chapter Five

The way of life is observing Mussar,[150] ארח לחיים שומר מוסר

In our contemporary world, Mussar is considered a genre of Jewish literature, thought and spiritual practice. Unlike other realms of Jewish life, some of the greatest exponents of Mussar such as Bahya and Ramchal may not have realized they were writing Mussar works, but they have since been credited with such scholarship retroactively. Salanter more recently established Mussar as a curriculum long after many of its foundational texts were composed. Every contributor since Salanter's innovations, including Rabbi Dessler, Rabbi Wolbe and even myself and my contemporaries are now expanding the lexicon of Mussar.

[150] Proverbs 10:17, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

Despite the breadth of Mussar as a genre, Mussar literature has been shaped by those who have contributed to creating and developing this canon. Mussar study and practice traditionally have been described within a framework of halacha, binding the two together. In yeshivot, Mussar was added to Talmud study as a complement to halacha. The *mashgiach ruchani*, the spiritual director, would give a weekly Mussar *shiur* as a lesson followed by discussion. And yet, as I have endeavored to prove, Mussar is more than merely the handmaiden of Talmud. In the same vein, Middot are more than merely an accessory to Mitzvot. Rather, Middot represent the executive function of Mitzvot. As Ramchal and Rabbi Wolbe suggest, Mitzvot are the *what* whereas Middot are the *how* animating Jewish moral living.

All of the Mussar sages I discuss in this thesis have promoted Middot as being primary to Mitzvot whether directly or indirectly. Bahya defined duties of the heart as "יסודי כל המצוות,"[151] the foundation for all of the Mitzvot. Ramchal argued without the study and practice of Middot, "it is not at all pleasing but rather despised and detested,"[152] to fulfill Mitzvot. Although Salanter did not explicitly prioritize Middot over Mitzvot, his encouragement of the study and practice of Middot as the motivation and assurance of performing Mitzvot, (despite the ridicule he received from his colleagues), suggests the primacy of Middot over Mitzvot. Rabbi Dessler wrote, "the building of the outer Temple must depend on the building of the inner Temple, which is the sanctity of the heart."[153] This recognition of Mitzvot's dependence on Middot insinuates the study and practice of Middot must take precedence as a means of preparing one to fulfill the Mitzvot. Although Rabbi

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[151] *תורת חובות הלבבות: Duties of the Heart,* Vol. 1, 10.

[152] *מסילת ישרים: The Complete Mesillat Yesharim,* 294.

[153] *מכתב מאליהו: Strive for Truth*, Vol. II, 54.

Wolbe did not expressly categorize Middot as being primary to Mitzvot, Rabbi Wolbe's lifelong dedication to Mussar exemplifies its significance in his purview. Enveloped in the yeshiva world in which Talmud reigns supreme, Rabbi Wolbe nevertheless focused on Mussar, thereby implying Mitzvot are necessary but insufficient to lead a life of Torah.

As all of these thinkers were influenced by the contexts in which they lived, so too am I. My opinions about Mussar are shaped by my identity as a Reform female rabbinical student at HUC-JIR living in 21st century North America. I understand Mussar to be a dynamic, evolving process of ethical growth and refinement that bristles with the capacity to reach people beyond the yeshiva, beyond rabbinical seminaries, and beyond the previously rabbinically created boundaries of education and gender. Like Mussar sages who precede me, I welcome feedback on my views and write to *continue* the perennial conversation about Mussar rather than to end it. Mussar is a dialogue manifested in ancient, medieval and contemporary texts as well as the myriad manuscripts emblazoned on living souls.

In his book *Everyday Holiness,* Alan Morinis writes, "The word *mussar* itself means 'correction' or 'instruction' and also serves as the simple modern Hebrew word for 'ethics.' But Mussar is most accurately described as a way of life."[154] Ramchal entitled his seminal Mussar work מסילת ישרים, the *path* of the just ones. *Derech Eretz,* which I affirm as the precursor of Mussar study and practice, refers to the "way" of the land, or the ways in which we behave that accord dignity to individuals within a community. As others before me have hinted, I believe Mussar is but one path, one way, one road toward finding one's purpose, toward the service of God, toward living an ethical life consisting of devotions like studying,

[154] Morinis, 7.

journaling, reciting mantras, visualizing, meditating and other mindful, soulful practices to initiate and sustain moral behavior.

I am inspired by the leaders of the American Reform Movement who renounced the premise there is only *one* body of halacha, the one determined by Orthodox authorities. Honoring their example, I reject the claim that there is only *one* way to study and practice the Middot of Mussar, a perspective that inextricably binds Middot to *one* body of halacha. I am confident Mussar can grow and thrive in today's milieu if it invites the participation of additional communities and recognizes new narratives from non-cis-gendered men; from people who consider themselves free from the *obligation* of halacha; from people exploring methods of practicing Jewish law in meaningful and updated manners; from people playing with descriptions and titles for divinity; from people who understand behaving ethically is a daily process that doing Mitzvot will not engender by themselves. We are more than the sum of what we do; we are most appropriately defined by how and why we create our reality.

The interviews I conducted with men and women who identify with Orthodox and non-Orthodox branches of the tree of Jewish life illustrate Mussar's value both for those who do and who do not identify as halachically-bound Jews. This collective of united, rather than divided, individuals evidenced Mussar's significance in increasing self-awareness and healing; improving communication skills and thereby strengthening relationships with oneself, with other people and with God; providing opportunity for accessibility to Jewish authoritative literature; and creating a diverse platform for theological exploration. In their reflections, I welcome the new dawn, "חכמות בנתה ביתה חצבה עמודיה שִׁבעה," *It is Wisdom calling, Understanding raising her voice.*[155]

[155] Proverbs 8:1, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 1985.

Tefilat HaDerech is a prayer recited before the onset of a physical journey in which sojourners request safety throughout their route. I offer this prayer as an invitation for everyone who embarks on an ethical journey, seeking the path of Mussar during their earthly pilgrimage. I pray they find internal peace, purpose and compassion along their "way."

Tefilat HaDerech

"May the holy desire come from You, Adonai, our Source and our ancestors' Source, that You will lead us toward peace and make our every step be a step toward peace and our path be a path of peace. May You help us reach the true target of our desire: life, joy, and peace. Rescue us from all enmity and ambush and theft and predation, from all impulses to harm that confront us on this path, and from any dangerous complications that may arise from the passions that come into the world. Bless our actions and handiwork and grant us grace, love, and compassion in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who behold us, for You are the one who is listening to hear the prayer of every mouth of every creature. Blessed be You who listens for prayer."[156]

[156] Rabbi David Seidenberg, "Tefilat HaDerekh," *Ritual Well,* https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/tefilat-haderekh.

Interview Appendix

With every interview I conducted, I tailored certain questions to each of my interviewees. The following list outlines the topics I addressed with the volunteers who so generously dedicated their time to my pursuit of a contemporary appreciation for Mussar wisdom.

1. How were you first introduced to Mussar, or how did you first discover Mussar literature?

2. How has Mussar shaped your Jewish life? As in, why do you choose to continue practicing Mussar?

3. The aim of my thesis is to suggest it is possible and even desirable for someone practicing a Jewish life to be shaped by Middot even if the person does not consider themselves to be bound by mitzvot. Does this ring true for you? Why or why not?

4. If you are not bound by halacha, what is so compelling about Mussar?

5. Right now, we are in the month of *Elul*, the prime time in the Jewish calendar for performing *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of the soul. How does Mussar affect your current *Elul* practice or the way in which you approach *Yamim Noraim*?

6. How would you describe your typical Mussar practice? Do you have a focus Middah? Do you have a Mussar text to which you often return? Do you have a particular "Mussar sage" whom you admire or read about the most? Who are they and why?

7. How have you utilized Mussar in your congregation or in your Jewish community?

8. Is there anything you feel is important to say about Mussar I have not asked?

9. Do you have any questions for me?

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