

עלי שור

A Liberal Jewish Commentary on Selections from Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's Mussar Treatise

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

January 25, 2018

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Translator's Preface

Mussar was my first personal foray into a Jewish text that was not assigned to me. I was a young woman and recent convert to Judaism in my mid-twenties, when I picked up a copy of “Everyday Holiness” by Alan Morinis. It was one of the few books I hadn’t already read from the paltry Judaica section of my local Barnes & Noble bookstore in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I took the book home, hoping to get to it at some point between nursing my baby, playing with my toddler, and my work as a cantorial soloist. I devoured the book, feeling for the first time that Jewish tradition had something to say about my own self-improvement.

A few years later, Rabbi Jan Katzew came to Lancaster to be our scholar in residence and discuss his work in the field of Jewish ethics, known in Hebrew as מוסר, (mussar). By then, I was reading more and more and incorporating these mussar ideas and texts into my life. Little did I know when I heard his talk that he would become a friend and mentor of mine, proctoring this thesis for me eight years later.

In creating this translation, I had a few distinct goals. First, I wanted to keep the cadence and “voice” of Rabbi Wolbe’s writing. His sentences are often lengthy and complex, the subjects changeable, and phrases are frequently punctuated by exhortations of blessing towards God or a Sage’s righteousness.

I also wanted to do justice to the fact that Hebrew is a language that can only be imperfectly translated into English. Words in Hebrew have a different semantic range than words in English. In Hebrew, the word שלום (*shalom*) peace

conjures up the word שלם (*shalem*) wholeness because they are related through the same root. This is not so with the English words “peace” and “wholeness,” and has proved to be a great challenge when translating this text. Because of this, I have allowed some words to remain untranslated, and instead have transliterated and commented upon them so as to give the reader a better sense of the wide range of meaning inherent in the word. In other instances, I have translated a single Hebrew word in different ways depending on the context.

Finally, I have given much more complete textual citations in both the translation and the commentary, so as to prevent the reader from needing to cross-reference continually with the Talmud and commentaries they may not possess or have access to. It is my hope that this opens up what has been until now an insider text to anyone who wishes to study it.

In that vein, the commentary which accompanies the translation serves a few distinct purposes, the first being to explain what is difficult to understand. Rabbi Wolbe’s text was written for people immersed in Jewish text in a way in which it is difficult to replicate in the liberal Jewish world. This culture has its own shorthand, its own way of referencing and linking texts throughout Jewish literature, and its own value system. All of this must be translated for the liberal reader just as much as the Hebrew.

The commentary also gives context for the many citations of books in the canon of mussar literature. Where a new author or text is introduced, I have included a short summary which places it properly in the timeline of Jewish history and the geography of the Jewish world. It is my hope that this will be used

to both make the context clear and also whet the appetite for more mussar study on the part of the reader.

This translation and commentary could not have been completed without the aid of a great many people: Rabbi Samuel Joseph, who suggested I do a text-based thesis; Rabbi Richard Sarason, who spent three weeks of his summer helping me brush up on my Rabbinic Hebrew; the students of RAB 511 in Fall 2017, who offered feedback on the translation of my final chapter when I taught their class; my husband Benjamin Zober, who constantly makes me explain and re-explain concepts until I am clear and cogent; and my children, Tobias, Naomi, and Ramona, for whom I thank God every day.

My final and greatest thanks go to Rabbi Jan Katzew, who began this project with me as a teacher and has ended it, I hope, as a friend. From his first mussar class to multiple independent studies, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to study mussar under his tutelage, to teach by his side, and to chavruta with him throughout this process. It is my wish for every rabbinical student to have such a kind and empowering mentor as he. I am a better rabbi and person for it.

This is a text that was not written for a female Reform rabbi. In fact, I am so different from Rabbi Wolbe's intended audience that it is almost comical. However much our values and social circles differ, there is great wisdom in his words, wisdom which liberal Jews should not dismiss because it comes from an orthodox pen. Mussar, and this work in particular, has applications and meaning

for Jewish contexts far more liberal than the yeshiva world. It is my hope that this translation and commentary aids in revealing this.

I present this work to you, the reader, in humble gratitude.

Sara Margaret Zober

Translator and Commentator

The Yeshiva

AleI Shur was written for a specific context which does not exist in the world of liberal Judaism. The yeshiva (pl. “yeshivot”), an orthodox institution of higher Jewish learning, educates boys and men in the study of the Talmud and other legal codes. There are many styles of yeshivot throughout the variegated orthodox world, each with its own structure and focus. For the purposes of this text, we will look at the Lithuanian-style yeshiva and examine its structure and value system to best understand the milieu in which it was written.

William Helmreich, author of “The World of the Yeshiva,” gives five characteristics which he states are common to all Lithuanian-style yeshivot, even today.

1. All such institutions have programs in which the students spend most of their time in Talmudic study. Subjects such as mussar and Bible are also taught.

2. All yeshivot have one or more of the following goals – to transmit the tradition at the highest levels, to train rabbis and teachers, and to bring other Jews closer to the Jewish faith.
3. The hierarchy in all yeshivas is similar with the *rosh yeshiva* at the head of the institution.
4. Most yeshivas have European antecedents in that the faculty members are European or the entire school has been transferred to this country from Europe.¹ Certainly their philosophical approach originated there, for the most part.
5. Leaders and members of the yeshivas... tend to move in the same social circles, sharing a common system of norms and values. (Helmreich 2000)

These institutions tend to be a world in and of themselves, with a hierarchy for students based not upon class, but upon their talents in Talmudic learning. Here, text is learned as *torah lishmah*, or learning for its own sake, and students pore over Talmud for hours a day and years on end.

Physically, yeshivot differ. Some are campuses with many buildings and both faculty and student housing, while others are no more than a large multipurpose room where men and boys commute to study. Each yeshiva has a *beit midrash*, a common studying room with tables and seating where the bulk of the learning happens in pairs called chevrotot (singular: chavruta). The next most

¹ Though Helmreich is writing here about American yeshivot, this is true as well for those in Israel. Though this is less the case today, when AleI Shur was written, the generation that fled Europe was still very much in control of the highest positions in the yeshiva.

important location is the library, where *sifrei kodesh*, or holy books, are kept. The students do not only study Talmud and Torah, but also mussar texts, other legal codes, and commentaries. All of this is in service to learning the ins and outs of Talmudic discussion and argumentation.

The most authoritative voice in the yeshiva is that of the *rosh yeshiva*, who acts as faculty member, dean, and spiritual guru to everyone within the school. Second to this is the *mashgiach ruchani*, acting as the dean of student life.² The *mashgiach* is charged with the moral and emotional welfare of the students in the yeshiva, and mussar texts, with their wisdom on self-improvement, are a vital part of the resources he needs to do his job. In addition to the normal administrative staff for such a school, there are other faculty members with expertise in certain areas and, of course, the students: men and boys from *kollel* (graduate) to *beit midrash* (undergraduate). (Helmreich 2000)

² Interestingly, we have no such position as the *mashgiach ruchani* at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Similar pressures face modern rabbinical students, and it can be even more difficult for liberal rabbinical students to navigate the pressures inherent in both the secular world of which we are a part as well as the pressures of rigorous Torah study than our orthodox counterparts. We are part of the secular world for much of our lives – we eat out at restaurants, we join running groups and sports teams, we read the newspapers and listen to the radio, we often have non-Jewish friends and sometimes relatives. But we also are full-time rabbinical students, studying theology and liturgy, halacha and lifecycle, and working at pulpits and in religious schools. Our lives, more even than those in the yeshiva, run on two vastly different calendars, and that feeling of being pulled in two directions can be disconcerting for students. Some students are able to find mentors among the faculty or other rabbis in the field. Others go it alone, some struggling enough that they prolong their course of study to achieve a better balance, and some excel on their own. For all students, however, this is a dance that takes time to master, and is made easier by help from one who has gone there before you.

Though in many ways the structure of the institution mirrors secular institutions of higher learning, the schedule paints a very different picture. Where on many college campuses, students take a few classes each semester at staggered times, in the yeshiva, the day begins for everyone early in the morning.

The day begins early, usually about 7:15am, when the *bochur* [student] is awakened by the cry, often said in Yiddish, "Wake up! Wake up to do the work of the Creator!" The young man washes up, recites the prayer customarily said at this time, and leaves the residence hall for the *beit midrash*, to participate in the morning prayer service. The prayers are not said hurriedly, but with great care and precision. With no job or responsibilities, the student can afford to take his time to reflect on the words in the service.

The morning service is followed by breakfast and perhaps a short break to allow the student to take care of his personal needs. At about 9:30, the learning part of the day officially begins, though some people may be in the *beit midrash* even earlier. Until about noon, the students learn together in preparation for the lecture to be given by the *rebbe* [whichever teacher is teaching that day]. Together with their learning partners, they struggle to understand and explicate the often difficult concepts in the Talmud, taking note of those that escape their comprehension with the intention of raising them in class...At the appointed time, everyone goes into his respective classroom, where, for

the next one and half hours or so, he discusses and debates the assigned portion of the text with the *rebbe* and the other students. Alternating between lecturing and a give-and-take discussion, the *rebbe* controls the tempo of the class.

After class, a short break is taken for lunch, perhaps followed by a half hour or so spent perusing various works of an ethical or philosophical nature. At about 3:00pm the afternoon session begins. Students spend the next several hours in independent study, either reviewing the material covered in class or learning (studying) other portions of the Talmud...Those who are not enrolled in [evening] college classes study until suppertime (usually between 6:00 and 7:00pm) when they break for an hour before returning to the *beit midrash* for yet a third session of Talmud study, usually in a subject area of their own choosing... The 10:00pm evening prayer service marks the conclusion of the formally required study period. After this, the young man is free to do whatever he pleases – read a book, get something to eat in the school canteen, or just relax with friends in his room or elsewhere on the yeshiva grounds. Quite a few of the students continue learning in the *beit midrash* until the wee hours of the morning, stopping only when overtaken with fatigue.

(Helmreich 2000)

As illustrated, nothing could be further from the experience of those in secular institutions of higher learning. This exhaustive, single-minded approach to learning Talmud and Jewish text only stops for Shabbat, when services are

longer, study sessions revolve around the Torah portion, and rest during the day is encouraged.

This is a truly hierarchical institution. Not only does the administration have a hierarchy, but students are also ranked according to their ability, and they are constantly engaged in a tussle with their fellow students to impress the rabbi and get to the top of the class. There is also a hierarchy of what is studied, with Talmud at the top of the pile, mussar below, and subjects like Bible and philosophy occupying much lower status. It is within this institution where we join Rabbi Wolbe and his students studying ethics.

Rabbi Shlomo (Wilhelm) Wolbe and AleI Shur

Rabbi Shlomo (Wilhelm) Wolbe was born in Germany in 1914, where he grew up in a secular Jewish home. He became observant during his university studies at the University of Berlin from 1930-1933. After school, he attended the Hildescheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin and eventually the Mir Yeshiva in modern-day Belarus. Being a German national, he faced deportation in 1939 when the Nazis captured Poland and the Mir Yeshiva moved into Russia. He instead went to Stockholm, Sweden, to be the private tutor for the children of a young man from the Mir Yeshiva, and there Rabbi Wolbe waited out the Second World War, continuing to teach, learn, and write.

In 1946, Wolbe moved to Mandatory Palestine, where he married and continued to study in newly-established yeshivot which were being reconstructed in the wake of World War II. Two years later, he took over a small yeshiva in Be'er Yaakov and began building it up himself. He eventually became the *mashgiach ruchani* of the yeshiva, and worked in that position for 30 years. In his later years, he opened many other yeshivot where mussar was a much greater focus, calling each a *beit mussar*. Wolbe died in Jerusalem in 2005. (Wikipedia 2006)

Rabbi Wolbe's concern in AleI Shur is in alignment with the ultimate goal of the yeshiva: educating young men in Torah. As the *mashgiach ruchani*, he was responsible mainly for the spiritual and moral uplifting of the students in the yeshiva. In close quarters, under stress, and with long hours of study and time away from friends and family, yeshiva life could be very difficult. There were also

pressures from the outside world, as life in the yeshiva goes against the grain of life in the secular world, and even against the grain of life in an orthodox family.

AleI Shur is a two-volume work written over Wolbe's career as a *mashgiach ruchani*. The first volume, about the proper way to train a yeshiva student's moral and emotional traits, was published in 1966. The second volume, published 20 years later, focuses on practical instructions and exercises for each of the attributes that should be cultivated in a student.

This translation and commentary includes Wolbe's Introduction to the first volume, where he explains the importance and relevance of mussar study to his students' overall education. What follows is his two chapters on mussar and studying mussar, which are a defense and explanation of the body of mussar literature and its place both in the Jewish canon and the curriculum of the yeshiva. Finally, I have translated one chapter from his second volume outlining his primary innovation in the field, the concept of התלמודות (*hitlamdut*), or lifelong learning.

עלי שור

Alei Shur

General Introduction

What is the foundation of Torah education? Before the gates of guidance will open before us, let it be said that these matters are within the domain of mysteries of the world. Unlike the ways in which we maintain the ease and simplicity of a lecture, we will try here to reveal the essence which is woven throughout the book in all its depth. These words will be understood and fully confirmed only after inspection of the whole book, until we unlock the gates and reach the very end, for its end is rooted in its beginning.

The author of the “Duties of the Heart” wrote in the introduction to his book:

Torah education – The world of the yeshiva revolves around Torah study. Here, Wolbe reminds the reader that everything he will be saying in this book has as its central aim the betterment of Torah education and study.

Its end is rooted in its beginning – This is a signal that the entirety of the book will need to be read and then reread in order to be understood. This is the nature of mussar and Torah itself. Rabbi Wolbe’s ideas are complex and meant to be life-altering. Each time a student approaches a text as a learner, they will glean something different from it, and his book is no different.

“Duties of the Heart” – This is a philosophical text by Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda, who lived in Muslim Spain during the eleventh century. He originally wrote the text in Arabic, after which it was translated into Hebrew by Judah ibn Tibbon in 1161 and given the title “Chovot HaLevavot.” (Vajda 2007)

Ibn Pakuda and Rabbi Wolbe are agreeing with one another in some respects, but from very different points of view. Ibn Pakuda looked around him and saw many rabbis following the letter of Jewish law, but violating the spirit of it, and many lay Jews disregarding both. “Duties of the Heart” was his attempt to present Judaism as a “spiritual truth founded on Reason, Revelation (the written law), and Tradition, all stress being at the same time laid on the willingness and the joyful readiness of the God-loving heart to perform life’s duties.” (Kohler and Broyde 1906)

This is aligned with a yeshiva mindset, though both of these gentlemen are separated by both ideology and time. Ibn Pakuda was an 11th century philosopher, and Rabbi Wolbe a 20th century educator. Ibn Pakuda was an ascetic who was in so many ways inventing these concepts well before others were writing about it, whereas Rabbi Wolbe had the benefit of millennia of mussar literature to pull from. Wolbe was writing in a sovereign Jewish state, and Ibn Pakuda was writing as a minority in Muslim Spain. While both are interested in the hand-heart connection, they come from very different ideologies and are working with different resources.

Citing this older text, Rabbi Wolbe begins to ground his text in tradition. This becomes a technique of his throughout the book, and as he surrounds the reader with seminal mussar texts, the reader is brought in to the conversation that is mussar literature.

“Man is connected in soul and body, and both are from the goodness of our Creator. The one is visible, and the second not visible, and we are obligated to serve God on account of this: the body in physical and observable ways and the soul in hidden acts.

Man is connected in soul and body – Body and soul are connected together, and humans cannot exist without both, though the way in which they are connected remains a mystery. Anyone who has seen a dead body knows this. The person should ostensibly look the same as if they were sleeping, but they are missing something which can only be described as life-like. Many religious traditions say that it is the absence of the soul which makes the body look different, but this is difficult to quantify.

Both are from the goodness of our Creator – For Ibn Pakuda, body and soul have been shaped and given to each human by God. In his worldview, this is an example of God’s unconditional love, because humans are not worthy of such gifts. From a liberal Jewish point of view, it is enough to agree that God shaped us all.

Visible – This refers to the body, which takes up physical space and can be seen and examined.

Not visible – This refers to the soul, which one cannot see, but must be there.

We are obligated to serve God – The commandments that Ibn Pakuda mentions indirectly here are, in his worldview, obligatory upon all Jews according to their status. Jewish tradition speaks of the “yoke of the commandments” as a

Physical acts - duties like prayer and fasting and the rest. However, these hidden acts, these are the duties of the heart - acknowledging God's unity, having faith in God and God's Torah, and performing God's avodah,

way of thinking about Jewish law. One does not keep kosher, observe the Sabbath, or wear tefillin because it is the right thing to do or conveys benefits upon the doer. One does them because it is the law of God.

Prayer – Ibn Pakuda assumes that his readers are Jewish men who already pray the traditional Jewish liturgy three times daily according to Jewish law. This assumption means that many of the readers of his text, myself included, are not his intended audience for the text.

Acknowledging God's unity – Ibn Pakuda, in Muslim Spain, was very concerned about Jews being seen as monotheists. This conferred a protective status within mainstream Islamic society.

Having faith in God and God's Torah – This is the belief that God exists and the Torah is God's Word, written by Moses. Ibn Pakuda and his contemporaries were applying philosophy to religion, and looking to prove that Judaism was a system of belief that in no way went against the laws of reason.

Avodah – I have chosen to leave this word untranslated deliberately. The Hebrew word עבודה (avodah) is a word with a wide semantic range. Based on the

fearing God, and surrendering to God and the rest, and anything like this which culminates in the meditation of the heart and conscience, with no dependence on the surface limbs of the body.”

There are in this two innovative ideas needing examination: The first - the definition of body and soul as “visible and not visible,” which according to our understanding the main distinction is: the body - matter related to evil,

context, it can take any and all of the following meanings: work, service, sacrifice, worship, prayer. It is a word which suggests faith integrated with action throughout the day and the lifecycle. This is the ideal for a religious Jewish life.

Fearing God – This is a spiritual condition in which a person contemplates God and stands in awe. It is the acknowledgment that we do not understand how God works or what our fate will be, but we pray for God to be merciful towards us and know that our lives are in God’s control.

Surrendering to God – One must realize at a certain point that people are not in control and God is. This is also a concept which Judaism shares with Islam, so it is a subject on which ibn Pakuda is comfortable writing extensively.

Matter related to evil – This idea is based in the thought that humans must earn their reward from God. Rabbi Mordechai Rose, in his commentary and translation of “Knowing God’s Plan,” says:

“To earn his own reward, he must be in a situation where he has to struggle to perfect himself. This is only possible if he is created imperfect and incomplete, with the potential to overcome his weaknesses and perfect himself. This is achieved by being created as a combination of two

the soul - spirituality related to holiness, then why did the author of “Duties of the Heart” choose to say this seemingly in a side note? The second becomes clear in this, for the body and soul are obligated in two different types of avodah and it is precisely because of the definition indicated above: observable acts and hidden acts. This also needs understanding.

separate entities – body and soul. The body is incomplete and lowly, and the soul is elevated and perfect. The body is the source of man’s deficiencies, and the soul gives him the ability to perfect himself. If man had been created from the beginning as a single combined entity, he would not have had this possibility of choosing to overcome his deficiencies and perfect himself.” (M. H. Luzzatto 2016)

This reflects a worldview foreign to many liberal Jews, and must be examined. For Wolbe, this is what Jewish tradition teaches about the physical world and it is incumbent upon us to believe the wisdom of our sages. For others, myself included, this may be a theology to reject or modify. The physical body can be faulty and imperfect without being associated with evil, and the struggle which Rabbi Rose brings to our attention will be just as pronounced without the heaviness of our physicality being associated with evil.

Spirituality related to holiness – The word that Wolbe uses for spirituality is (רוחניות) (*ruchaniut*) a word that has only come into being in modern Hebrew. This word would have been foreign to ibn Pakuda and his contemporaries. It is derived from the word for רוח (*ruach*) spirit/breath/wind, and attempts to convey the richness of an inner spiritual life.

To pair this word relationally with holiness is insightful on Wolbe's part, as holiness is quite a concrete idea in Jewish text. Leviticus 20:26 states: "You shall be holy to me, for I Adonai am holy and have separated you from the peoples, so that you should be mine." From this, we learn that we are holy because God is holy, and Wolbe reminds us that it is the soul which gives us this God-like quality.

Introduction 1

The words of Bahya touch upon the essential issue of body and soul in which the creation of the human being alone compels us to consider deeply “what was God doing by creating a body and a soul as two different creations and not as a single creation so that a human being would be one reality without being a composite as is now the case?” This is the question the Ramchal, may his memory be a blessing and may he live in the world to come, poses in his

What was God doing? – This quote is from a text by Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto. The text is formatted as a question and answer dialogue between the soul and the intellect. The translator of this edition noted that extensive commentary is necessary to render these terms faithfully, and he reverted to the labeling in an earlier manuscript copy where Luzzatto labels this a Student/Rabbi dialogue. The translator argued that this seemed to be a more faithful representation of soul and intellect, the soul being the part of the human that yearns for truth and wisdom, and the intellect being the part which imparts wisdom.

In this quote, the student wonders why God, in all of God’s wisdom, created human beings with a soul that will struggle against the limits of the body? It would make more sense to create a perfect being with an united body and soul that work together to further God’s aims, would it not?

book "Knowing God's Plan."

Ramchal – Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto (1707-1746) was a kabbalist, ethicist, philosopher, and poet. He was born into a wealthy and respectable Jewish family in Padua, Italy, and quickly showed great genius with Jewish knowledge. He became a mystic and met with some disgrace after writing about being visited by a heavenly spirit in 1727. The Jewish community of Italy told him to desist from teaching mysticism and writing about this voice, fearing that he would try to start a messianic sect.

He moved to Amsterdam, after turning over his writings to the authorities and promising to never teach mysticism again. There, he continued to write ethical works and poetry in peace. He eventually moved to the land of Israel, ostensibly to escape the prohibition on teaching mysticism, and he and his family died there in a plague.

Luzzatto's most important ethical works are "Mesillat Yesharim: The Path of the Just," "Derech HaShem: The Way of God," and "Daat Tevunot: Knowing God's Plan." These three, especially the first and last, gained him great acclaim after his death and were widely considered required reading in the Eastern European yeshivot. (Dan and Hansel 2007) When the founder of the Mussar movement put together a list of core ethical texts, Luzzatto's "Mesillat Yesharim" became a central piece of the curriculum for its erudition in explaining the many attributes which one must cultivate to truly be a righteous person.

"Knowing God's Plan" – This text describes in detail "how God runs the world with perfect justice, directing it toward the Messianic era and the eventual

His answer is: “Therefore, God made the human body **coarse and dark in form**, unworthy of being filled with the light of God’s holy presence because of its lowly nature. Only **those who are perfectly prepared** can approach the Sovereign’s gate and frequent God’s palace. This darkness, which is inherent in the body’s very nature, is the cause of all the **base desires** which rule over the body and it makes the body prone to all the negative things that happen to it.

perfection of all existence.” (M. H. Luzzatto 2016) Through describing a complete worldview including the reason why evil exists, Luzzatto makes the case that it is the job of each Jew to eradicate the evil within and around them in order to help get creation closer to perfection and the Messianic era.

Coarse and dark in form – This theology can be difficult and off-putting, but it is not necessary to believe the theology to gain the wisdom of his words. Feel free to think of this as the body being created imperfect and needing the soul to perfect it in order that it can be even more filled by God’s presence.

Those who are perfectly prepared – Preparation is necessary to visit royalty, the Ramchal reminds us. A visitor would put on their best clothes and be on their best behavior in order to visit a human king, so of course we should do the same in approaching God, the one who rules over all earthly rulers.

Base desires – A story is told in the Talmud (Yoma 69b) about the *yetzer ra* (the evil inclination) and the *yetzer tov* (the good inclination). The rabbis begged God to turn over the *yetzer ra* to them so that they could be rid of their improper desires. They fasted for three days, and at the end of the three days, God turned

After that, God made the **pure soul**, fashioning it from beneath the Throne of Glory. God then made it **descend** and “breathed” it into the body in order to purify the body and make it holy. It is important for you to understand that the ultimate purpose of the soul entering the body is not to enable the body to live **this life of futility**.

over the *yetzer ra* to them. He came out from the Holy of Holies in the Temple like a fiery young lion and remarked “If you kill me, the world is finished.” So the rabbis imprisoned him for three days, but in those three days there was not a single fresh egg to be found in the land of Israel. The rabbis despaired, realizing they needed the *yetzer ra* and he had spoken the truth that the world would be doomed without him. Instead, they put out his eyes and let him go.

While these base desires do indeed have sway over the body and make it prone to weakness and sin, they can also be harnessed and used for good. With this story, the sages remind us that this force is necessary for creation to move the way it was meant to.

Pure soul – In the morning liturgy, we pray: “God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You shaped it, You breathed it into me, and You guard it within me.” This theology is central to Judaism – that our souls are given to us from God and are holy and pure.

Descend – The soul’s purity means that it belongs with God, and not in an imperfect world. But God breathes the soul into the imperfect human body to perfect the world through humanity.

Its real purpose is to purify the body completely and to elevate it from its lowly level of physicality and darkness to the exalted level of the **ministering angels**. We have seen that **Moshe actually achieved this**: he was worthy of purifying his physicality to the extent that he returned to the level of an actual angel. In fact, the entire Jewish people saw that the skin of Moshe's face radiated with a brilliant light...The way the soul can purify the body is through performing the mitzvot and keeping the Torah..."

This life of futility – The Ramchal gives a nod to Kohelet, the book of Ecclesiastes. “Futility of futilities, says Kohelet, futility of futilities! All is futility. What does one gain by all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-4) To contemplate our smallness in the grand scheme of the world and its history can easily lead us to wonder why our efforts make any difference at all. But he gives us a glimmer of hope that the purity of the soul can drive us to make the world less futile if we are able to elevate the body closer to the level of the soul.

Ministering angels – Angels feature prominently in Jewish theology from biblical times, through the Talmud, and into the Medieval period. They are superhuman beings with distinct personalities who are powerful and dreadful messengers from God. Here the Ramchal is talking very literally about angels.

Moshe actually achieved this – In Exodus 34:29-35, we read:

When Moses came down from Mt Sinai with the two tablets in his hands as he came down from the mountain, he did not realize that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the

This is the end game of creation - to overthrow the **hidden face** of the body in order to spread the light of holiness in the body itself until the point at which all the body would be revealing of heavenly honor. This end will be reached through obligations of the limbs.

Those are the obligations of the body, and they sanctify the body and they bring about this **reversal from hiddenness to enlightenment**. From this point on - what about the “hidden acts?”

people of Israel saw Moses and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to go near him. But Moses called to them and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. Afterward, all the people of the congregation drew near to him and he commanded them regarding all that God had said to him on Mt Sinai. And when Moses finished speaking with them, he placed a veil over his face. Whenever Moses would go before God to speak with [God], he would remove the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what was commanded, the people of Israel would see that the skin on the face of Moses was shining. Moses would again place the veil over his face until he went in to speak with God.

Luzzatto sees this example of Moses’ face shining as proof that the purity of the soul can indeed purify the body and change it physically.

Hidden face – This, in Hebrew, is *הסתר פנים* (*hester panim*), a concept which refers to times when God’s face is hidden from us. In the book of Esther, there is not one mention of God. Many people have asked why it is included as a book in

We've discerned in Berachot 10a "Corresponding to whom did David say these five instances of 'Bless the Lord, my soul!?' He said it corresponding to no other than the Holy One of Blessing and corresponding to the soul. Just as the Holy One of Blessing fills the whole world, so too the soul fills the whole body; Just as the Holy One of Blessing sees and is not seen, so too the soul sees and is not seen. Just as God sustains all the world, so too the soul sustains the whole body. Just as God is pure, so too the soul is pure. Just as God sits in a chamber within a chamber, so too the soul sits in a chamber within a chamber. The one whoever it is that comes and has within them these five aspects, it is only fitting that he should praise the one who also has these five aspects!"

the Bible, and this concept of *hester panim* (a play on words with the name Esther) hints to us that God is in the book, but is hiding. The trick is to find God even when God seems absent.

Reversal from hiddenness to enlightenment – While it is an ambitious goal, Rabbi Wolbe posits that by faithfully keeping the mitzvot and allowing the soul to work on the perfection of the body and its inner life, we too can reach the point Moses reached, where the light of God's Presence shines from our faces.

Berachot 10a – Rabbi Wolbe worked in a yeshiva, and had an encyclopedic memory of Talmud texts, which he taught to students for decades. By pulling in texts that he knew his students studied, he was able to not only reinforce their learning, but show the relevance of this spiritual work. For the yeshiva student, these are the texts which they came to the yeshiva to study.

We learn from this that it is specifically **the soul which can give praise** to the Holy One, Blessed be God, so too it is only the soul that can find “common ground” with God, so to speak. Indeed it is only the aspect of the soul which enables man to serve and worship his Creator, and it is specifically this why the “Duties of the Heart” attributed to the soul are **the essence of avodah**.

This text, from Berachot, draws a parallel between the qualities of the soul and the qualities of the Divine. This reinforces a theology which Rabbi Wolbe reinforces throughout the text; that when we say that mankind is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, it is the soul to which we are referring.

The soul which can give praise – Rabbi Wolbe uses ibn Pakuda’s writing to teach about why this inner work is important. The soul is important because it is the part of the human which can communicate with and imitate God, and inner work puts the body in harmony with the soul.

The essence of avodah – This is an idea which is distinctive to Rabbi Wolbe’s writing. When one speaks of mitzvot in his world, they are usually discussing those commandments which are visible: keeping kosher, praying daily, wearing *tzitzit*, observing the holidays and Shabbat. Rabbi Wolbe instead says that these are of course important (and in the yeshiva world they are assumed), but the mitzvot which concern the “duties of the heart” are the essence of the mitzvot themselves.

Rabbi Wolbe here is using the terms heart and soul interchangeably, in good rabbinic tradition. Because the soul is closest to God and can reach out toward God, Wolbe argues that the mitzvah of the body is incomplete without the

Nevertheless, we learn from their words (may their memories be blessed) that part of what defines the soul is that it sees but is not seen. In this passage Chazal describes for us, what does “spirituality” have to do with this? It nurtures all the world and the body and fills it - the root of all that is created in the world and also all the limbs of the body is in spirituality, and from this root, life-force comes to them. This spirituality fills all existence until “there is nothing aside from God.” This spirituality itself - it is pure, it is internal, “it sits in a chamber within a chamber,” and those who want to merit it must first penetrate to the core of internality of all things to stand upon his soul, for this is the essence of his being: to see the presence of the spirituality of the entire world.

soul’s involvement in it. Mitzvot done by the limbs are required in his worldview, but without the heart and soul, they do not fulfill the purpose of purifying the body and drawing Creation closer to perfection.

Chazal – This is an acronym for the Hebrew phrase לְחַמְיֵנו זִיכְרוֹנָם לְבִרְכָה (chochmeinu zichronam livracha), or “our Sages, may their memories be blessed.” It is an honorific way to refer to the sages of the Mishna, Tosefta, and Talmud, and also to indicate the consensus of halachic opinion culminating in the Talmud.

“Spirituality” – This word is in quotation marks in the original Hebrew, because Rabbi Wolbe wants to draw attention to the fact that this is a new word in the language. Derived from the word רוּחַ (*ruach*), spirit or wind, this is a Modern Hebrew word with no ancient equivalent. In this paragraph, Rabbi Wolbe makes

How and what gets (us) there? Chazal reveals the **central point** - upon which we all must base our avodah, whether our service is through spiritual attainment or with material things. Thus, “Just as God sees but is not seen, so too the soul sees and is not seen!”

In order for a person to be lifted up to discern his soul and to discern the “one who fills and sustains the entire world” - it is necessary for a moment to ignore **entirely** the visible world, for all that the eyes see belongs to the world of matter and body, and only that which cannot be seen defines the realm of spirituality. This spiritual realm is **no less real** than things in the material realm, e.g., a table, a chair, a house, a tree, other than it is impossible to discern it with the eyes. And do not think that this existence is a theoretical matter. It is not.

yet another equivalence: the soul is the heart and both are also the wellspring of spirituality, the life-force which animates the body.

The spirituality of the entire world – If spirituality is the name of the life-force within a person, it also connects the human with the Divine, as stated above. So, to penetrate to one’s own core and stand upon one’s own soul means to know yourself and see yourself clearly. Only then will a person be able to see their own connection to the Divine that is in all things created by God.

The central point – Wolbe is asking us how we demonstrate that it is the soul which is the essence of the human being and not the body, which is commonly believed. He argues that we are like God and made in God’s image because of our souls. Our soul makes us who we are, and the part of God which makes God

“God **sees**” it and also the soul **sees it**, as it is said: The Blessed One lives and sees me! Consequently, we have to teach ourselves to discover our spirituality, the interior of the soul within us, and only when we insist upon the reality of the soul-world and on the interior nature within us can we truly **worship the Creator**: “Come you who has within them praiseworthy qualities of God and praise the one who placed them within you!”

With this we have been privileged to shed new light on the words of the author of “Duties of the Heart” who we have already mentioned in our opening words: the distinction between the body and soul specifically from the perspective of “seen and unseen.” This is the beginning to all attainment of truth and the basis of all our worship and sacred service. Just as the body carries the evil inclination (and surely this defines for us its **essence**),

God is also the unseen part. He wants us to get beyond the problems and activities of the body and the mitzvot of the limbs to get to the heart and mind and soul, because it is only with these three things that we can imitate God.

No less real – Wolbe argues that despite being unseen, the spiritual realm is absolutely real, and just as discoverable as the physical realm. In the early 21st century, as we are acknowledging the reality and significance of “unseen” things like mental health and gravitational waves, we can see how revolutionary his words may seem to a traditional community. To say that prayer is not just the words on the page but the duty of the inner life as well, is a shift in focus for a traditionally observant Jew.

but it does not define for us the point where we **transcend corporeality**. **The** point of transcendence is precisely this: that the body **is seen** and the soul **is not seen**, just as we have already explained.

Worship the Creator – The argument is this: those who disbelieve the existence of the “soul-world” and think that the inner life of a person doesn’t matter when it comes to worship are only seeing part of God and God’s Creation. They are ignoring their own soul, which is the very part of them which can communicate with God! Not only that, but they have an incomplete understanding of God’s Divine Self.

Transcend corporeality – In Wolbe’s theology, the body is what brings with it the necessary but detrimental evil inclination, which must be managed carefully. Even so, the soul is so much more powerful and pure that while the body is essentially evil, the soul, if nurtured and given its time, can help the body transcend its base nature.

Introduction 2

From now on, we must explain (with God's help) the relationship between soul and body in avodah. That is to say, between "duties of the limbs" and the "duties of the heart." On one hand, everything depends on the duties of the limbs, since they sanctify the body, removing the evil part and bringing it towards self-enlightenment so that it will discover the honor of heaven. On the other hand, the soul is uniquely capable of praising the Holy One, Blessed be God and performing avodah. How do we align these two, and with what do we begin? Our words are not said as one who would detract from the mitzvot, taking this soul-work seriously and mitzvot lightly, but rather as one who knows that a person needs to build oneself and one's avodah.

They sanctify the body – Traditionally, it is understood that Jewish law was given to elevate every action and every moment in service of God. The restrictions keep us far from sin and evil, and the positive commandments train us to do good deeds and further God's work on earth. Rabbi Wolbe brings this in here because he is arguing that there is another, equally important element of being mitzvah-observant, and that is the work of the heart.

Uniquely capable – He is now going to show us where the Talmud (Berachot 10a, above), ibn Pakuda ("Duties of the Heart"), and Luzzatto ("Knowing God's Plan") all agree with him that inner work is equally important to the mitzvot performed by the body.

Build oneself and one's avodah – Here we get hints of Wolbe's central innovation, that of התלמודות (*hitlamdut*) lifelong learning. He argues that the

Because piety has “foundations” and avodah “roots”, and these mitzvot of the body ought not be diluted or minimized by anyone. The one who knows he needs to build himself from the foundation to the walls is grounded in the words of Chazal, applying the proper order of his avodah. “Come you who has within him praiseworthy qualities of God and praise the one who placed them within you.” The beginning of man’s avodah, to feel spirituality and to build his interior self and this avodah involves duties of the heart! And the confines of avodah include turning away from all that is materialistic and everything that is seen with the eyes, to not allow our eyes to see any material benefit that is liable to derive from it when they see us fulfilling mitzvot.

mitzvot of the limbs, positive and negative commandments, are still essential, but we never want to stop growing or get complacent in our worship because we are completely satisfied with our religious life. There is always more Torah to learn, and this soul-work is an often-neglected area of learning.

Piety has “foundation” and avodah “roots” – Piety’s foundation and avodah’s roots are things which are also unseen but everyone understands intrinsically.

From the foundation to the walls – Everyone knows that one must build a strong foundation before building upwards. Rabbi Wolbe here insists that mitzvah observance is a basic foundation which must be strong before tackling more complex inner work, thereby maintaining the primacy of the mitzvot and keeping himself well within the orthodox fold. He is deconstructing the ever-popular binary in rabbinic thinking, where if there are two choices and one becomes important, it

And in essence, to become accustomed to believe in “the Living One who sees all, the Seer who is unseen.” The one who focuses upon this internal point and enters into “secret/private worship” can persist with this spirituality even while performing his observable worship, acts of the limbs, and in so doing reach his goal, to transform even the darkness of the body to spirituality and enlightenment. Without this discerning internality and without private worship, the body will persist in its material self, and the worshipper will not succeed in elevating his observable worship so that it too will be spiritual service.

The above will be clarified in the words of the author of “Duties of the Heart” in the Gates of Faith chapter 4 where he wrote these astounding words: “The Blessed Creator makes recompense for the observable deeds of the body a reward in this world, and makes recompense for hidden and secret deeds - a reward which is hidden, a reward in the world to come.

means the other is less important. He is insisting instead that it is not a scale but a pyramid, with mitzvot on the bottom and then the soul work built on top.

Material benefit – Do the mitzvah to do the mitzvah! This is an admonition to not get caught up in the perceived benefits of the mitzvot. When performing any mitzvah, our attention should be on the one who commands us to do the mitzvah (God), and not on the commandment itself. The mitzvah is a way of connecting the human being with the Divine, and not something that a human does to get brownie points. It’s also not about being seen doing the mitzvah. The mitzvot are

Consequently, they remember David, of blessed memory with a word that teaches this lesson, as it says; (Ps 31:19/20) “Oh how great is your goodness that you have hidden/stored up for those who fear you.” And this needs more study: In accord with the opinion of Rabbi Ya’akov, who says that there is no reward for a mitzvah in this world (since one is rewarded for mitzvot only in the world to come). (Kiddushin 39b) And according to our way, this is our goal: to unite the duties of the body and the duties of the heart and they will be united, so that observable deeds are transformed into “deeds concealed and hidden,” full of soul and full of faith. And the author of “Duties of the Heart” said this in regards to “observable acts upon the body” without connection to “heart,” not about faith or good attributes.

meant to get the body out of the way of the soul’s connection with God. The point is what your soul, heart, and mind are doing while your body is occupied with the mitzvah, and they should be focusing on God. In this way, the body is elevated by the soul during the course of the mitzvah.

One is rewarded for mitzvot only in the world to come – Bahya ibn Pakuda argues that the mitzvot of the limbs receive a reward in this world and the duties of the heart are the duties for which we receive our reward in the world to come. But this would seem to contradict Rabbi Ya’akov in tractate Kiddushin, so Rabbi Wolbe sees a need to reconcile the two opinions. He does so by reminding us that we have the ability to turn the mitzvot of the limbs into duties of the heart by connecting our souls to God while we perform the mitzvah.

and when the “heart” receives Torah and performs a mitzvah, it increases and glorifies Torah immeasurably. And if Moses our rabbi was standing upon Mt. Sinai for years upon years, still his heart would not say “enough!” We find that the mind expands the boundaries of deeds: when it, the mind, seeks to observe shabbat, and it became involved with Masechet Shabbat with all its halachot, interpretations of our ancestors and the history of the 39 forms of prohibited work, the laws of dwelling, its edicts and its rulings, and such is the case with all 613 mitzvot of Torah.

This is what we meant when citing the words of the author of “Duties of the Heart”. When constructing the duties of the limbs from the perspective of the mind, that is within fulfilling the duties of the heart, then the observable mitzvah is transformed into an inner/interior mitzvah and an act of hidden service, and in so doing the body of a person, through all of his or her limbs, displays honor to God.

This becomes, then, the ultimate goal: to turn each and every mitzvah of the limbs into something which not only gives us a reward in this world, but which also gives us a reward in the world to come. According to Wolbe, the two scholars are in agreement. Ibn Pakuda spoke of duties of the limbs which are *divorced* from the heart. Those have only a reward in this world. But through this

A famous statement by Ibn Ezra (commentary on Exodus 31:18) is: “Empty minded people will wonder what Moses was doing on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. They do not know whether he stood there with Hashem that amount of time or double or triple as many years. Such a person could not understand one thousandth of the deeds of Hashem and God’s ways and the mysteries of all the mitzvot which God commanded to him, for they think that the essence is the act, but it is not so. Rather, it is the heart and then the deed; the heart and the tongue set the habit. And therefore, it is written ‘it is in your mouth and in your heart to do it,’ and our ancestors said “the Merciful One requires the heart.” The root of all the mitzvot is: ‘you shall love Hashem with all your soul and cleave to God.’ (Ki Tisa, Sheini) Apparently, (according to Ibn Ezra) the error of the empty minded ones is in their thinking that the primary concern of the Torah is mitzvah doing, and the mitzvot were such that Moshe Rabbeinu could receive them in a few days. So what does the response of Ibn Ezra, that the heart and the deed are essential - and what made the “heart” of Moses extend his stay upon the mountain? This is the truth: the heart of humankind and also the heart of Moses **has no border**,

soul-work, we can elevate them and make them count towards the world to come as well.

The heart of humankind and also the heart of Moses has no border – Our hearts, like Moses’ heart, do not have a limit. We continue to love and learn and expand, even as our bodies fail and lose their abilities. There will come a time

when putting up a sukkah is beyond our physical capabilities, but our hearts will forever be able to connect with God, engage with mitzvot, and learn from this engagement something about the Divine and our own nature.

Introduction 3

And we do not understand what we do, because we are distant, very distant from our internal lives, and we wonder, how do we begin our service? Surely, it is upon us to begin from the simple grammar of performing mitzvot, in those “duties of the body” and the matter of Torah, and through this we strive to get to our inner world. Come and see how we exemplify these two paths in kria shema:

The First, the way of the Ultimate Ruler: The Oneness, let God’s name be praised - “God is one!” then emanates the love of God, which is embedded within the word “heart.” The heart fills with Torah - “place these words... upon your heart” and in this a person lives in the world of Torah beyond separation from it even for a moment; whether sitting at home, or in walking along the way. At this level, the *mitzvot maasiyot* - *tefilin*, *mezuzah* – become the angels of God stationed around those who fear God, and the awe is strengthened around them so that the person who fears God does not sin.

The way of the Ultimate Ruler – This is a mystical explanation of how to unify the duties of the heart with the duties of the limbs.

Mitzvot maasiyot – This is a way to designate mitzvot which require a blessing and an action. The mention of the angels after this is to remind the reader that angels lack the ability to sin, differentiating them from humans. Angels do not have to do mitzvot because God created them without the ability to sin. Humans can only reach this point by uniting heart and body, soul and flesh, through the many mitzvot we have been given. Humans, with free will, have the power to

It can happen that a person or a generation falls from this level. The heart is seduced, deviates, and serves the idols of silver and gold and their kind - “guard for yourselves lest you be seduced!” and so on - and their punishment was exile: “you will soon die” and so on. (This degree of concentration and understanding is no longer in existence!) This generation must begin in its rising all over again, for the internal life and the “heart” are no longer. My advice for this generation is thus: (Deuteronomy 11:18) “Put these words of mine... bind them for a sign upon your hand and make them frontlets for your eyes.” This is the precision and the soul-dedication precisely in the **doing of the mitzvah**, and the power of the mitzvot is that they bring one again to Torah so that one can move up a level. In this case, the command to study Torah comes **after** the mitzvah of *tefillin*; and here at the hands of the minutia of the mitzvot, one turns and we again arrive at a life of Torah and in living in it without cease, while dwelling in your house and going on your way, in your rising and your lying down, [this is when one has risen to] the level of “heart” we need.

choose to obey God and God’s commandments or to not obey, which makes their obeisance even more powerful when they choose to not sin, like an angel.

When one has merited this, we turn again to the mitzvot maasiyot, the “duties of the body” - “to write them” and so on, and the internal shining light of Torah and “mind” is upon the limbs of the body and their mitzvot. So we arrive again to our goal: “That your days and the days of your children be multiplied... as long as the heavens are upon the earth.” (Deuteronomy 11:21) Uniting in our lives “heaven and earth,” mind and deed, the internal life and the body, and there will be a reward for this trial, “as long as the heavens” – that is, spirituality - “are upon the earth” - that is, the body and its deeds.

No commentary.

Introduction 4

There is more to say on this matter, because when things look simple and clear, they are actually very hidden and distant from us. Who of us has come into contact with “hidden service”? It is not the nullification of all contact, the lack of all human thought, society, the “world,” concern or desire, present and future, or exclusive truth of the Creator alone, and it is also not in order that we attain this, but rather that we **self-abnegate** before God. Who **thinks** about this and who **attains** this, even for a moment? However, this is the meaning of “Duties of the Heart,” and this is the soul-state of the one who performs them.

But this is not understood by us, who are remote from all this: The one who has truly come into contact with **hidden service** - a new world is revealed within them, a new dimension within the depths of the person. This dimension cannot be described with words. From within this hidden service, one stands upon the supernal world, which carries this world like the soul bears the body.

Self-abnegate – Self-abnegation is the denial of one’s self and one’s interests in favor of another’s. In this case, it is prioritizing what God wants from us above what we want for ourselves.

Hidden service – This hidden service is the act of focusing our mind and heart and soul upon God while we perform mitzvot. Doing a mitzvah and going within to connect to God allows us access to a hidden world inside of us where we can commune with God in an intimate and connected way.

This is also included in: “Come, any of you who have within yourselves praiseworthy qualities of God and praise the one who placed them within you.”

As a consequence of this “hidden service” **in oneself**, in traces of hidden service, one can know up to a certain degree of sensory evidence of a **world** that is hidden, and belong to this world like the heaven to the earth.

They teach in **Perek Ro’eh** (Berachot 54a): “The mishna relates: At the conclusion of all blessings recited in the Temple, those reciting the blessing would say: Blessed are You Lord, God of Israel, forever [haolam]. But when the **Sadducees** strayed and declared that there is but one world and there is no World-to-Come, the Sages instituted that at the conclusion of the blessing one recites: from the beginning of time until the end of time[*min haolam v’ad haolam*].”

Perek Ro’eh – This is a way to designate an often-taught passage in yeshiva-speak. This passage of the Talmud discusses a truth which still holds to this day among the orthodox. There is a belief that with each successive generation since the Temple was built, we have strayed further and further from God. The rest of this section will be Wolbe’s defense, through the use of classic scriptures and commentaries, of the idea that there are two “worlds” within a human being, just as there are two worlds in Jewish space and time, this world and the world to come, or the afterlife.

Sadducees – The Sadducees were a sect within Judaism during the time of the Second Temple. They denied the existence of the world to come and the

Rashi: “And that is what they said in the First Temple, that nothing was said except ‘Blessed are you God, God of Israel, forever.’ The Saducees were mistaken when they said ‘there is no world but this.’ The fix: Ezra and his followers who were known to say ‘from the beginning of time until the end of time [*min haolam v’ad haolam*].’ We learned that there are two worlds, and reject the idea of the Saducees who deny the resurrection of the dead.”

The point becomes clear in the book “Nefesh HaChayim” (by R. Chaim Volozhin, student of the Gra - the Gaon of Vilna).

theology of the resurrection of the dead in the Messianic age. This is also a critique that Rabbi Wolbe would have of the Reform movement as well.

From the beginning of time until the end of time [*min haolam v’ad haolam*]

– This is a temporal argument which refers to both future and past. “Forever” reminds us that God will always exist, but the question can then be asked “when did God *begin* to exist?” This was a question which the philosophers pondered, and Jewish tradition has an answer: God has always existed, both in the past and in the present. God created time itself, so was the original Being before time even began. This was a thought which the Sadducees also rejected. In addition, the word for “world” העולם haolam is used twice in this passage, hence: two worlds.

Gaon of Vilna – Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), also known as הגרא “HaGra,” was the most famous Lithuanian rabbi and Talmudist of his time. He was a staunch rationalist and opponent of Hasidic Judaism. His writing is still

In the First Temple, which was perfectly inspired by the Shechinah, the hidden world was connected to the revealed world and everyone saw that they were unified. Consequently, they used to say just “until forever.” By contrast, during the Second Temple period, when there were five things missing and the world could not achieve unity, and everything was rotten, it was ordained necessary to say “from the beginning until the end of time” in order to teach that from every perspective, this world is not primary, but rather secondary. In truth, the revealed world and the hidden world are one world, and likewise the body and soul are one within a person. In the period of the First Temple, everyone felt palpably the spirituality of the world. When the First Temple existed, there was prophecy. In this period, it was impossible to deny the reality of the highest world (spiritual). The strength of feeling in the spiritual world led to mistakes **in divine service**: there were those who **cut off the shoots**, and attribute independent existence to spiritual powers aside from God, but heresy was impossible as such.

highly revered in non-Hasidic orthodox circles, and everyone in the yeshiva knows to pay attention to his interpretations.

Cut off the shoots – This is a reference to Elisha ben Abuya, also known as האחר (*HaAcher*) The Other. Rabbinic legend (Chagigah 14b) has it that four rabbis were so pious that they were allowed to “enter the pardes” (Garden of Eden). Those four were Simeon ben Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiva. Each of the four had a different reaction to beholding the splendor of heaven in this way (commentators differ on whether it was a

In contrast in the Second Temple, things changed and the Shechinah was not completely revealed in wholeness. This formed a schism between the world that can be seen with the eyes and the supernal (spiritual) world. The philosophers and the worshippers could feel the unity of the worlds also in the Second Temple, but the **sensory** feeling of it went away and was not inherited through the generations. Only then could the Saducees say “there is no world besides this.” Among the peoples of the earth was the pervasive wisdom of the Greeks, as critiqued by the Ramban: “The cursed Greeks and their evil disciples who believe only what their eyes can see.” During this time, the rabbis determined the version “Blessed are You Hashem, God of Israel from the beginning of time until the end of time,” to position ourselves on the truth, for the world of spirituality is the highest one

literal ascension or a glimpse of heaven during an ecstatic prayer experience).

The Talmud tells us that Ben Azzai saw heaven and died, Ben Zoma saw heaven and went mad, Elisha ben Abuya cut off the shoots, and only Rabbi Akiva returned safely. Elisha ben Abuya, by “cutting off the shoots,” became an apostate. Other sections of the Talmud give more detail to the story, including the suggestion that it was his love of Greek philosophy and literature which led him astray. (Ginzberg, ELISHA BEN ABUYAH (called also by the Rabbis Aḥer, "the other") 1906)

Believe only what their eyes can see – This is a rabbinic critique of empiricism, the idea that one can only know what one can experience with the senses. The rabbis rejected this notion, which requires evidence *before* belief. It is often

and **it stands above this world** which is seen with the eyes. This is not only so that we do not deny (heaven forbid!) the existence of the highest world or create a separation between the worlds, but rather so that we have an understanding of the hidden world up to the point of **sensory** belief. This must have been the intention of the Ramban in his words because he said “the mitzvot are commanded to us from the beginning of time until the end of time.” (Beshalach, the end of the 4th Aliyah – Ramban’s commentary on Exodus 15:26) It will be the intention of all the mitzvot to **join together the worlds** and in doing so, unify them, for each mitzvah brings us near to the spiritual realm and roots us there. And the intention of all this is to elevate us from above all materialistic grasping and ambitions in this world and to illuminate our world and our body in the highest light and pleasant splendor, sanctifying the One Who Lives for all time and space.

contrasted with rationalism, a philosophy which many rabbis praised, which says that one can use the mind to come to reasonable conclusions to learn about something in the absence of sensory evidence.

It stands above this world – Rabbi Wolbe is now using the literal meaning of *min haolam v’ad haolam*: from the world and upon the world. He envisions a physical world over which is laid a higher, spiritual plane that we can access, but only with our souls and not our eyes. They are one inseparable world, but different faculties must be sharpened in order to “sense” the spiritual realm.

Join together the worlds – The mitzvot are the vehicle through which the soul can purify the body. They are the outward manifestation of inward soul-work if a person does the mitzvot correctly. When we engage our soul in the work of the limbs, the spiritual realm is brought closer to earth and our work helps to unify the two worlds within us.

Introduction 5

The period of the Second Temple is characterized by this, for after observing more we revealed the unity of both worlds. The destruction of the Second Temple opened a new period in characterizing the people of Israel and its worship: “The First Temple was destroyed why? Because of three matters: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed... However, the people of the Second Temple were engaged in Torah and mitzvot and kind deeds, so why was it destroyed? Because there was baseless hatred, and so on... Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar both said: In the case of the former, (the people in the First Temple era) whose sin was revealed and no attempt was made to disguise their conduct, the end of their punishment was revealed, and the prophet informed them that they would return to their land in seventy years. In the case of the latter, (the people in the Second Temple era) whose sin was **not revealed**; rather, since they attempted to disguise their conduct, the end of their punishment was not revealed.” (Yoma 9b) The Sages clarify this, that the Second Temple was destroyed because we destroyed the **internal world** of the generation, as opposed to the First Temple where there we faltered in many grave sins, but their internal world was not devastated by these sins. The sin was **revealed**, and in the internality of their hearts they could stay and remain close in faith and in repentance, and therefore their punishment was revealed. They were exiled for a limited time and then they returned to the land of Israel and repented.

However, in the Second Temple there was among them **baseless hatred**: in their external world there was no flaw, for they were engaging in Torah and mitzvot and even with **kind deeds**, but kind deeds do not indicate the love that is in the heart. Here we find, due to baseless hatred, that it is the root of the evil attributes, the destroyer of their inner world, and this internal destruction resulted in the destruction of the Temple. We have revealed in this a great foundation: **Evil attributes destroyed the internal world of humanity!**

This is the truth: There is no real achievement and no real feeling that can be found in a heart in which hatred has nested. And if building our inner world is what we desire - and here we stand on necessity that it be said! - it is obligatory to plant in our hearts good attributes.

What is the foundation of Torah learning? The central point is - "heart/mind" from there we open before us the hidden world, the supernal realms, and from there the person will be affected with the emanations of holiness upon the body and the world of deeds. And our inner world will obligate us to build upon the work of our hands and we will work hard on

Evil attributes destroyed the internal world of humanity! – This is a revolutionary statement. Rabbi Wolbe reasons that our world is like the world of the Second Temple. People do good deeds and engage in the actions of the mitzvot, but since their souls are not similarly engaged with the duties of the heart, there is room for baseless hatred in them.

Chapter 11: Mussar

Mussar is the practical wisdom of all of the Torah as a whole.

In every state, there is a legislative branch (National Assembly, Parliament) and a body of implementation (government): “Judges and officers you shall make for yourselves” - Institutions of justice and institutions to implement a policy. In building houses, one must have a designer (plans drafted by an architect) and an engineer (the engineer constructs the building). In music - the composer and the musician that plays it.

When the Holy One of Blessing commanded Moses to build the mishkan, Betzalel was commanded regarding the work of the mishkan, and Moses said to him “You are in the shadow of God,” (Midrash Tehillim 91a, at the end) for he knew how to oversee the structure of the building.

“Judges and officers you shall make for yourselves” – (Deuteronomy 16:18)

Rabbi Wolbe is setting up the theoretical framework for the importance of the study of mussar, working with preexisting structures well-known to his students.

Mishkan – The mishkan was the portable sanctuary that was built at the end of the book of Exodus. It housed the ark of the covenant, and was a collective building project of all the Israelites in the desert.

Betzalel – (Exodus 31:1-5) God tells Moses that Betzalel will be the builder of the Mishkan and Moses will reveal God’s plans to him.

Midrash Tehillim 91a – “Rabbi Simon said: God sits in the uppermost secret place, where God sees but is unseen. And in the shadow which Betzalel made,

And so it was that Moses Our Rabbi, may peace be upon him, revealed the building plans, and Betzalel executed them.

Thus, halacha is law and precept from Torah which teaches us what to do, and the mussar is how to do it, i.e., **how to fulfill the mitzvot**.

The prophets laid mussar's foundations. In the Mishnah it was embedded in Masechet Avot. In the **gemara**, it is embedded in the part dedicated to aggadah which also have within them halachot. It is also in "halachot of values" in Rambam's Mishneh Torah. (One knows this because **the Rif (may his memory be for a blessing) showed only halacha which were settled**, and you would be amazed over the many *sugiyot* in **aggadah** that the Rif understood in full!).

he will complain that it is enough. A song of afflictions Moses would say when he would go up to the heavens and say when he was sitting in the uppermost secret place."

How to fulfill the mitzvot – This makes mussar a complimentary system to halacha, Jewish law. While halacha tells the Jew *what* to observe, mussar addresses the *frame of mind and spirit* of the Jew while they are observing it.

Gemara – This is yeshiva jargon for the Babylonian Talmud. A section of *gemara* is called a *sugiya* (pl. *sugiyot*).

The Rif... showed only halacha which were settled – The Rif, as Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi ha-Cohen (1013-1103) was known, was an authoritative Algerian halakhist and Talmud scholar. Rabbi Wolbe points out that even the

The midrashim and the Holy Zohar broadens this wisdom. Our rabbis of the early and late periods, may their memories be for a blessing, completed it astonishingly.

In the center of the halacha stands the mitzvah itself. In the center of mussar, the person who performs the mitzvah. Changing situations and different times also cause changing obligations. For example, when making aliyah from outside the land of Israel to the land of Israel, the change in obligation is in the observance of mitzvot specific to the land of Israel. Peace and war, health and plague, that is to say - to different situations different halachot apply. However, many more than situations which obligate different behavior when it comes to halacha, are situations which require a different

great halachic scholars taught mussar, because of the importance of the inner world.

Aggadah – Within the Talmud, there are two types of texts. There is halacha, laws and argumentation over the rulings, and there is aggadah, legends of a moral nature. Rabbi Wolbe sees mussar literature in the ethical teachings throughout the aggadic material of the Talmud.

Our rabbis of the early and late periods – The early rabbis are the rabbis who came before the publication of Josef Caro's *Shulchan Aruch* in 1565. The late rabbis came after him. The *Shulchan Aruch* quickly gained authoritative status in Jewish law, and everyone after Caro has had to contend with its rulings. In this way, Rabbi Wolbe ends his proof that mussar is not a modern system invented in

the late 19th century, but is merely a way to classify the inner work that we have been studying and practicing since antiquity. Not only that, but it has appeared through שלשלת הקבלה (*shalshet hakabbalah*), the many different strata of Jewish tradition, both mystical and rational.

Many err in this fashion – This is a direct indictment of liberal Judaism, which gives halacha weight but not authority. Rabbi Wolbe's answer is an orthodox

questions that, according to the masses, require changes in the halacha, are truly about a change in attitude. In the situation of war or emergency a person is liable to become changed and cannot see how to perform Torah and mitzvot while in their new position. The practitioners of mussar will find it **within themselves**, amidst their new position, and understand how it is incumbent upon them to be prepared anew towards fulfilling the commandments. And in this they will find eternally a process towards wholeness, amidst changing times. However, a person is more in need of support in fulfilling the mitzvot in times of panic and strain than in times of calm.

Consider that mussar is the study of a person and their relationship to the mitzvot. This instruction is deep and wide. It is hereby upon us to clarify the most important things that are in the study of mussar. This teaching is actually the main innovation, that event being the wisdom of mussar, and the great innovator is our Rabbi the great Israel Salanter, may his memory as a righteous man be a blessing, who included the method of study as we shall clarify it, may peace be upon him.

one, that the halacha should remain unchanged and the inner world should change its orientation to better fulfill the mitzvot.

Chapter 12: The Study of Mussar

The Rambam writes, in Chapter 4 of *Eight Chapters of Mussar*: “the moral man will constantly examine his characteristics, weigh his deeds, and daily investigate his soul-condition, and if at any time he finds his soul deviating to one extreme or another, he will hasten to apply a proper remedy and not suffer an evil quality to acquire strength by his repeating the evil deed... And therefore he will put before his eyes his inferior qualities and make an effort to remedy them always.”

Eight Chapters of Mussar – Known in Hebrew as שמונה פרקים, (*Shmoneh Perakim*) or “Eight Chapters of Ethics” is the Rambam’s preface to his commentary on Pirkei Avot. He wrote it as an introduction to basic ethics, categorizing it thusly:

1. On the Soul and Its Powers
2. The Nature of the Soul’s Powers; Defining the Elements Where Both Positive and Undesirable Qualities are Found
3. Spiritual Illness
4. Healing the Spiritually Ill
5. Directing Our Powers to One Goal
6. The Difference Between a Pious Person and One Who Overcomes Their Desires
7. Veils of Our True Selves and How They Operate
8. The Composition of Human Nature

The foundation of mussar teaching is not in hearing conversations and reading texts, but rather in the constancy of the day to day, the appointed “daily investigation of his soul-condition,” by means of teaching ethical books continuously, and returning to them time and time again, like the laws of learning Torah. Whatever one speaks, writes, preaches, and thinks about in the name of “mussar” is nothing but peripheral to this central point: The obligation to devote time every day to studying mussar and making an **accounting of the soul**. Here it is cited in the pamphlet “Gates of Light” the Gaon Rav Israel Blazer, may his memory be for a blessing, (**which is the Introduction to *Sefer Ohr Yisrael***) in the name of prior and ancient great ones, and therefore all of our great ones who have yeshivot in the last generation agree.

Wolbe quotes here from the chapter on “Healing the Spiritually Ill,” where the Rambam sets himself to the task of remedying the soul’s extremes and encouraging a middle way.

Accounting of the soul – The soul-account is traditionally seen to be the work of the days of the month of Elul, leading up to the intense prayerful period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rabbi Wolbe states that mussar expands this time period for soul accounting to every day.

Which is the Introduction to *Sefer Ohr Yisrael* – Rabbi Israel Blazer compiled the writings and notes of his teacher, Rabbi Israel Salanter, in the book *Sefer Ohr Yisrael*. In his introduction, he states:

From experience, it is known that fixed time to study mussar daily changes one for the better without them noticing it; in their behaviors, in their caution, and in their aspirational focus to the level of instruction.

Sometimes, one despairs from seeing the benefits from learning this. However, they will be deeply influenced and secure.

“Let a person’s heart not despair if he studies Mussar and is not awakened, or if he feels no impression on his soul motivating him to change his path. It is known with certainty that even if the physical eye does not perceive the impression, the eyes of the intellect nevertheless perceive it. Through an abundance of [Mussar] study over an extended period of time, the hidden impressions will accumulate, and he will be transformed into a different person. His desires will be reigned[sic] in, without excessive indulgence, and some [desires] will even be completely neutralized. Experience testifies [even] through a cursory observation, that Mussar study – whether a lot or a little – elevates a person above his peers, both in thought and conduct.” (Light of Israel, R. Salanter)¹

There is no reason in the world to think that it would dissipate his strength and no day like today to develop a taste for learning it. There is no more efficient way to guarding the form of man and implementation of the mitzvot.

[Rabbi Salanter’s] course of treatment was to teach his people knowledge, wisdom, and mussar – the general remedy for disease of the soul, which rescues it from the cunning machinations of the evil inclination. To this

On the contrary, if one is in a period of many problems, it is doubly beneficial to learn mussar.

Not every man is gifted in the capacity for creative thought or the capacity of excited feeling. The capacity for creation is the inheritance of every man - this is introspection. There is no one who is unable to concentrate, through relaxation, on a certain mindful place, among the unfolding actions of a person and in the foci of one's life. Introspection like this has embedded within it Creation. The person is renewed through it by their own hand.

Seeing as we are remote from [achieving] this state of introspection, it is necessary that I expand upon the issue a bit.

Rabbi Ovadiyah Sforno, in "Kavanat HaTorah":

end, he advised people to set daily, organized times to study works devoted to mussar and the fear of heaven. Moreover, he stressed that such study should not be done in a perfunctory manner. Rather, it must be pursued with sincerity of heart, with one's lips aflame. (Salanter and Blazer n.d.)

A period of many problems – Rabbi Wolbe makes the point that the more hectic and chaotic one's life is, the more one can benefit from the focus required by mussar study. This seems to be logical – that in times of great stress, the repetition and inward focus on the self while performing one's duties can be both soothing and centering.

“And in these intimate understandings, the observer will acquire eternal life. In one’s deeds, their potential intelligence, which has no concrete existence in reality apart from potential alone, one will acquire in their contemplation an intelligent self which exists in reality and it will allow it to live forever, according to its nature.” It is necessary to delve into this wonderful saying: The intellect from its nature is only in potential in a human being. How does the intelligence become transformed to active, so that a person will become “intelligent”? **This is the power of introspection**, that through it spirituality and intellect becomes transformed to human reality and indeed becomes the person. It is a sublime thing to the person who contemplates thus!

Even more we find in the Targum Yerushalmi at the end of perek Tavo:

Embedded within it Creation – This sort of introspection is refreshing and renewing, a relaxing of the active mind and focusing on the simple task of doing with a learner’s eye.

Kavanat HaTorah – Rabbi Obadiyah Sforno’s commentary on the Torah. Rabbi Sforno was an Italian rabbi of the late 15th and early 16th century. He was interested in both ethics and medicine, and wrote prolifically on the subject of Bible.

Intimate understandings – By this, Sforno is referring to direct, unmediated knowledge.

Only in potential – Rabbi Wolbe agrees with Sforno that if one doesn't use their intellect, it never becomes activated. We have all seen this – the incredibly intelligent person who refuses to apply that intelligence and instead languishes, wasting their gifts. Or, worse, they apply their intelligence to some ill-thought-out end, and instead run astray. It is introspection that allows us the power to know that our intelligence is being used properly, that allows us to activate that intelligence and use it to better ourselves and the world around us.

Targum Yerushalmi – This is an Aramaic translation and commentary on the Torah. Here, he is quoting from the commentary on Deuteronomy 29:8.

“And you must guard the words of this covenant and do them yourself in order that you will become wise in all that you do – and you will find words of praise in this Torah, that you should serve God with the goal of contemplation in all of your deeds.” Behold, the aim of all the Torah in one sentence - **Introspection in every deed!** The ultimate aim of Torah: to change a person from hasty actor, panicked impulses, and instead to become in everything mindful!

Here we have arrived at an important task, the highest in the Torah and in the life of a person, and therefore we must expand by way of an explanation. Introspection: this is the greatest secret of the secrets of the Torah. It is clarified in “Derech Eitz HaChayim” by **Moshe Chaim Luzzatto**, z”l: “And this you will see, that there are two things that were both created with one common trait: the intelligence of man and the Torah which gives him intelligence. “And the Torah is light” - literally light and **not just wisdom**.

Introspection in every deed! – Rabbi Wolbe reads this verse as the Torah telling us that the goal of our worship and service towards God is introspection in every deed.

Moshe Chayim Luzzatto – “Derech Eitz HaChayim” (The Way of the Tree of Life) was a book written by Chaim Vital, to which Moshe Chayim Luzzatto wrote an introduction. Rabbi Wolbe is giving an inexact citation here, likely from memory. These are texts which are well-known in the yeshiva world, and he can recall them at will.

Not just wisdom – Light in a metaphorical sense.

Torah also was compared to fire, for all its words and its letters are like embers, that if one seeks to hold them as they are, they will only see almost opaque coal. One who tries to engage with them will become enthused. This is analogous to the intelligence of a person which is made thus, for one has within them the power of great accomplishment only when one becomes heated with the power of contemplation and focus. Therefore, this is the charge, incumbent upon a person, to make oneself into a person who contemplates.”

And why were we created intelligent in potential?

“If it is so that knowledge was widespread and rested upon the mind of humanity, there would be no sinners in the world, not even an impulse to come close to sin or for it to have control over someone, and it is so that the Holy One of Blessing wants for people to become **masters of their inclinations**, that those inclinations can be defeated or overcome with thoughtful consideration, therefore they have within them the knowledge, though it be sealed up like an opaque ember, and we must allow it to be spread like a flame, and the choice is in the hands of the person.”

Masters of their inclinations – God wants us to be in control of our desires and not the other way around. Our will and our ability to think through our actions by contemplation are the God-given gifts we have to stay in charge of our inclinations.

Therefore, the need to contemplate is foundational to creation, for this is the way one gets to activate their intelligence, and everything which strengthens and broadens the intelligence of a person **annuls even more the inclinations.** Torah has the quality of the intellect itself, and contemplation of it reveals the “real light.” The distinction between **“light”** and **“wisdom”** is because “light” is knowledge which neutralizes the inclinations, and “wisdom” is knowledge that does not have the power to neutralize them. This is a wondrous definition for the contemplative one!

From this we understand the words of the author of Mesilat Yesharim (Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) in the preface - “However, to the degree that these rules are well-known and their truth self-evident, they are routinely overlooked, or people forget about them altogether.”¹ Well-known truths like these, exactly in proportion with their well-known status, lack introspection, and they are therefore no longer in the category of “light,” but instead of “wisdom,” and the impact will not be felt by anyone any more - **they will just forget!**

Annuls even more the inclinations – When we broaden and strengthen our intelligence, we can think through our actions and grasp the consequences before we make a mistake.

“light” and “wisdom” – Above, Luzzatto remarked that the Torah is “light” – literally light and not just wisdom. Here, Rabbi Wolbe reminds us again that there is a further distinction between the two. “Light” from the Torah helps us to gain

This is the task of mussar: to revitalize introspection, and then by means of it to turn wisdom (of the mind) - to light (enlightened behavior). We are aware of individual providence, but there is no light in this knowledge. We are aware of our obligations in our world, but there is no light in this knowledge.

Introspection turns this knowledge into light, banishing the inclinations and annulling evil.

charge of our inclinations, and “wisdom” is just knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

They will just forget – It is easy to come across something profound in our texts. This is wisdom. It is far more difficult to integrate that wisdom into one’s bones, to turn it into light, which becomes an essential part of a person. For example, we all know the commandment to love one’s neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). This is great and profound wisdom. But how many of us live a life which reflects this wisdom in all our actions and thoughts? Very few.

Turn wisdom to light – Wisdom is a thing which is only experienced by the mind, as an intellectual enterprise. Light, however, touches the body, soul, and mind all at once, and this enlightened behavior can be seen and felt by others when they witness it.

How does one achieve perfection in the observance of the commandments? In what manner does one “acquire” faith and awe, in what manner does one merit good attributes, and how does one reach for repentance?

It is impossible to get to a certain level without constantly studying introspection. This is the intention of studying books of mussar constantly: to bring us to concentrate on ourselves and on our relationship to every aspect of the commandments.

Mesillat Yesharim defines all the necessary attributes for us, and the guide for us to acquire them. This guidance is, in essence, “upon what does one contemplate in order to merit a particular quality?” In particular, it is about acquiring good attributes and banishing the evil ones by means of contemplation!

Vigilance - the essence of the attribute is introspection. (According to that great document the Targum Yerushalmi that was mentioned previously, remember that the aim of all Torah is introspection in every deed: “Torah brings one to be care-full!”) The way to acquire caution is to focus on the physical aspect of service.

Cleanliness: Continuous reading of the words of the Sages.

Asceticism: Seeking the minimization of earthly pleasure.

Purity: All that which one goes deep into and sticks with in order to recognize the unimportance of materialism.

Piety: Growing the desire for and multiplying the times for introspection, when he increases his contemplation of the growing exaltedness of God!

Humility: Becoming accustomed to contemplation: **Know from where you came**, and the rest.

The fear of sin: The one who contemplates this will feel that the presence of God is real and that God is watching.

Holiness: This is the wondrous study of the secrets of the supernal providence, hidden creation, and knowing God's transcendence, God be praised!

Maybe that is why it is hard for us to learn mussar, because we can only access it by continuously learning introspection, and without introspection things remain cold and dry, "an almost dull ember," and knowledge does not transform to light...

"My people do not contemplate..." (Isaiah 1:3)

Know from where you came – "Akavia ben Mahalalel says: Keep your eye on three things, and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an account and a reckoning. From where did you come? From a putrid drop. And to where are you going? To a place of dust, worms, and maggots. And before Whom are you destined to give an account and a reckoning? Before the King of Kings, the Holy One of Blessing." (Pirkei Avot 3:1)

Introspection has two stages: In the first, one delves into the book that one is learning or into one teaching of the Sages, in order to understand the shape of the argument like in the learning of Talmud. In this stage, one needs to be especially careful that one does not judge the words to be “rhetorical flourishes,” lest he not understand them in their simplicity. The first assumption in learning mussar is that there are **no rhetorical flourishes in Torah**.

For example: it is taught in Chapter 2 of Mesillat Yesharim (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto): “The concept of vigilance relates to a person’s actions and affairs. One must contemplate and survey their actions and conduct to see whether they are good or not, so as not to risk the loss of one’s soul, Heaven forbid. And one must not pursue one’s habits thoughtlessly, the way a blind person walks as in darkness.” Firstly, he is accurate and correct that we must engage in introspection and observation, and he will clarify himself what the difference is between them. Thus, he stands upon the difference between deeds (individual) and traits (we would say “attributes”, consider **Avodah Zarah 6a**): “The danger of destruction” is not rhetoric or hyperbole,

No rhetorical flourishes in Torah – Rabbi Wolbe is reflecting a principle in orthodox study of Torah which says that every word and letter was placed in the Torah for a reason. There is nothing random or inconsequential in all of Torah. This is one of many methods of approaching the Torah text to see what is revealed within.

Avodah Zarah 6a - “but according to the one who said that a ritually impure animal can bear offspring, what can you say to that? The verse says “with you”

and one must clarify for one's self what this destruction is, and why "pursuing one's habits thoughtlessly" is so dangerous. What is result of this regarding the habits of the person who has become accustomed to them since childhood?

In the second stage, the learner compares what they understood of the words of our sages (may their memories be blessed) or the book with their condition and reality. **This learner** makes an effort to determine which attribute they are far from and what factors led to that distance.

In this stage of learning, our Rabbi the great Rabbi Israel Salanter (may he be remembered unto life in the world to come) brought his central innovation: this requires **frequent repetition** on the same saying many times,

implying similar to you. But how can we tell that Noah himself was not ritually impure? Because the word "perfect" was written about him (Gen 6:9). Perhaps this means he was perfect in his manners? It is also written about him that he was righteous. Perhaps he was perfect in his manners and righteous in his deeds." This passage distinguishes between deeds and traits in the same way the Ramchal and Rabbi Wolbe are emphasizing.

This learner – Rabbi Wolbe is outlining the method of learning mussar here. It isn't enough to read the text, as many do. This second stage asks the learner to read the text as if it was addressed to them personally. How did you understand this text? What moral was it trying to teach? How is it relevant to your life? Where is your own soul close to this text, and how can it be made better by it?

Frequent repetition – The repetition of a text in voice and with frequency helps it to sink into the learner. When using a text as a mantra, the learner can focus on its relevance and think hard about the meaning of living this piece of wisdom.

and not mere repetition, but rather “with a stirred soul and stormy spirit, and with burning lips” (in Igeret HaMussar, in the 5th letter). That is to say: this repetition will be in voice and music, in order to arouse feeling and wonder.

By this repetition, things become even more clear, and burning in the heart of consciousness of “coming to recognize the shameful of the transgressions and the loss and destruction inherent in them, in order to withdraw himself from them” (Shaarei Teshuvah, Gate 3, section 3)¹ and a strong desire to come clean and repair himself. This passion leaves an impression on the heart even if you forget it after a while. When one learns mussar daily, while going on their way and making these subtle impressions even stronger, even without feeling the effects, it makes a mark on every behavior.

Sometimes the student of mussar gets into a place through their passion and arrives at an awakening to action: they decide to quit some bad habit or strengthen a good one. The content of this change doesn't have to be major and profound. Among the principles of mussar, this one is primary: that one must pay attention precisely to the details which one might treat lightly, and the smallest change for the better is a very great thing.

Pay attention... to the details – Rabbi Wolbe reminds us that the changes need not be large. Breaking a small bad habit can have massive repercussions, and the attainable goal is the best goal by far.

The one who understands mussar is very careful to not be so burdened with boundaries and great deeds that they worry that they cannot stand them. This is the rule: “When grasping at much, you grasp at nothing, but when grasping at a little, you can grasp something.” (Hagigah 17a)

One cannot measure the tremendous impact that is felt through the fixed and ongoing study of mussar. Rabbi Naftali Amsterdam, may his memory as a tzaddik be for a blessing, (one of the three great students of the Rabbi Israel Salanter) wrote in his last will and testament: “In general, I will tell you that what put me on my feet in the service of God was only learning mussar, and as I received and saw in my days in the world, our master, teacher, and rabbi, may his memory as a tzaddik be for a blessing, that he would repeat the saying “All those who depart from the words of Torah - a fire will consume him” over and over in a loud voice, with burning lips and great enthusiasm. And every day that I learned mussar, then all of my deeds, speech, and thoughts were improved. The order of learning was, (this I heard from the mouth of our master, our teacher, and our rabbi) - that we should divide the study of mussar into two parts: for example, if we designate one hour for learning, and divide it into two parts: for a half hour we learn from ethical books, as is the case with other studies. We contemplate ideas in “The Path of the Just” or “Duties of the Heart” or the like; and the second half hour we learn with passion, learning sayings and repeating them many times, sayings like the ones in “Duties of the Heart” or in “First Wisdom” or sayings in Pirkei Avot or the like. This was the order of learning.”

Chapter 5: Ongoing Study (Eight Pillars)

In this chapter, we are brought to actual **avodah**. It is incumbent upon us to find a way in avodah that does not stimulate one's pride. This is a difficult thing, for it is almost a contradiction in terms. For how could one not be proud when they become an "accomplished person?" Isn't it reasonable to be proud? After all, they aren't obligated to do these things and are voluntarily striving to accomplish something. It is difficult obligating ourselves to pave a new life-path: a way of continual growth. So what is this path?

"A woman who studies Torah will receive a reward. However, that reward will not be as great as a man's, since **she was not commanded** to do this mitzvah.

Avodah – This is the Hebrew word עבודה (*avodah*) which means service, worship, sacrifice, work, and prayer. I have deliberately left it untranslated. As you read, remember the diversity of the word, because Rabbi Wolbe uses it in all of its many meanings.

She was not commanded - Whoever performs a deed which he is not commanded to do, does not receive as great a reward as one who performs a mitzvah that he is commanded to do. In Rabbi Wolbe's world, women are not commanded to perform the same mitzvot that men are, and therefore should not perform them. In a liberal Jewish context, however, we have many differences with this worldview.

Firstly, egalitarian ideas are central to a liberal worldview, so the idea that a woman would be commanded differently from a man is antithetical to this.

Even though she will receive a reward, the Sages commanded that a person should not teach his daughter Torah, because most women cannot concentrate their attention on ongoing study, and thus transform the words of Torah into idle matters because of their lack of understanding. Thus, our sages declared: whoever teaches his daughter Torah is like one who teaches her vanity.”

We are taught by the Rambam in this that the ultimate goal of learning Torah is ongoing study, and whoever does not have it within them to concentrate their attention to undergo this process of ongoing study - they are exempt from this study of Torah. What is this lifelong learning which we are able to see in every book of the Mishneh Torah? For example, the learner who studies deeply the tractate on damages and works at it and on the rulings of the Rambam in **The Laws of Purity Regarding Tzara'at**, poring over it greatly.

There is also a fundamental issue with whether you believe that God commands you to keep the mitzvot in the first place! There are many devout modern Jews who believe that the mitzvot are not commandments given by God, but actions from which one may choose to augment and deepen one's connection with the Divine and the world.

One thing with which we can agree with Wolbe is the statement that “lack of understanding” and concentration can often turn holy words and actions into things said and done to make someone look better (without good intentions for a system larger than one's self). A different way of reading this is that anyone who cannot concentrate on learning and relearning over their lifetime may want to

study something different than mussar. It is a subject which must be learned and relearned daily to do it justice.

The Laws of Purity Regarding Tzara'at - This is a section of the Mishneh Torah by the Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204CE). The Mishneh Torah was his summary of Jewish law, written in the late 12th century. He sought to take the legal material from the Mishnah and the Talmud and systematize it thematically and in plain Hebrew, to make it accessible to anyone. (Dienstag 2007)

In the section quoted here, the Rambam spends sixteen chapters discussing all the Talmud has to say about the biblical disease *tzara'at*, a skin affliction;³ how it is identified, its many variations, how it is transmitted, and how it is cured. At the very end of the final chapter, the Rambam cites the passage which Rabbi Wolbe cites here (Deuteronomy 24:8-9) and begins to address the *cause* of *tzara'at*: derogatory speech. After a technical manual about blemishes and lesions, he ends the chapter: "Certainly, an inference can be made with regard to the wicked and foolish men who speak extensively about great and wondrous matters...In this vein, [Psalms 73:9] states: "They set their mouths against Heaven and their tongues strut on earth." What caused them to "set their mouths against Heaven"? Their tongues which previously were given free rein on earth. This is the speech of the wicked that is caused by loitering on the street

³ Contrary to popular belief, this is not leprosy.

When they come to the end of the laws of the Rambam, they will find words there forged in burning flame, forbidding derogatory speech.

corners, frequenting the assemblies of commoners, and spending time at the parties of drunkards. In contrast, the speech of proper Jewish people only concerns words of Torah and wisdom.” (Maimonides 2009)

Forbidding derogatory speech – In Hebrew, לשון הרע (*lashon hara*). This is gossip, slander, words used to hurt and destroy. Rabbi Wolbe reminds us that the laws in Torah have layers of meaning given to them by the various strata of rabbinic commentary. It would be easy to say that since *tzara'at* is no longer a concern, we should no longer study the passages of Torah or rabbinic text which deal with it. Rabbi Wolbe instead reminds us that *tzara'at* was a punishment for this derogatory speech, and that we still need to be reminded to be cautious with our words, to refrain from gossip and slander, so studying those laws can be used to reinforce this real and modern problem.

And as if a curtain had been torn from before their eyes, they will find out that in the whole tractate he has really dealt with the book by the **Chofetz Chayim** on the laws of derogatory speech! And this student will be amazed, how in all their diligence with the tractate, they did not sense that the material with which they were dealing was actually derogatory speech. And this exact portion is found in the Torah: (Deuteronomy 24:8-9) "Take care, in a case of tzara'at, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you. As I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. Remember what the Lord your **God did to Miriam** on the way as you came out of Egypt."

Chofetz Chayim – Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), a Lithuanian rabbi of the mussar movement, who became known by the title of his most famous book, *Chofetz Chayim*, (The One Who Desires Life) a detailed treatise on the laws of slander, gossip, and derogatory speech.

What God did to Miriam – This episode can be found in Numbers 12:1-16.

Miriam and Aaron spoke with Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken (as a wife), for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, "Has God spoken only through Moses? Hasn't God spoken through us also?" And God heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all the people who were on the face of the earth. Suddenly God said to Moses and to Aaron and to Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. God came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. God said, "Hear my

words: If there is a prophet among you, I make myself known to them in a vision; I speak with them in a dream. This is not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of God. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” The anger of God was kindled against them, and God departed. When the cloud departed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was covered in tzara’at like snow. Aaron looked at Miriam, and behold, she was covered in tzara’at. Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.” Moses cried to God, “O God, please heal her—please.” But God said to Moses, “If her father had spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again. After that the people set out from Hazerot, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.⁴

⁴ Translation mine.

Rashi - "If you wish to take precautions against being stricken with tzara'at, then do not speak derogatory words. Remember what was done to Miriam, who spoke against her brother Moses and was stricken with lesions." And at present, this learner has learned well the tractate on damages, but without lifelong study...

The Rambam, in **The Laws of Studying Torah** opens before us a new way in which to engage with Torah - a way of lifelong study, and with it, we are able to learn even tractates which do not seem to touch upon actions, like the one on damages, and grow to appreciate them with great respect. Lifelong study - this is a new and wondrous way of life, not only in Torah education, but rather in all areas of life. This is made explicit in the Mishnah, and because it is so compelling, we will elaborate on it:

"Ben Zoma was known to say: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person. As it is stated: (Psalms 119:99) from all of my teachers I have grown wise." (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

till

The Laws of Studyig Torah – The first chapter of this section of the Mishneh Torah deals with the obligation to study Torah. He asks the question: "Until when is a person obligated to study Torah? Until the day he dies, as (Deuteronomy

Rabbi Ovadya of Bartenura: “Who learns from every person - even if they are lesser than you, since the wise one does not spare their honor and learns from children, it is clear that their wisdom is for the sake of heaven and they should not be arrogant and boast about it.”

Wisdom and mussar from **Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv of Kelm:** “Every person who has within them a sense of something will be highly sensitive whenever they see it. For example: A tailor who sees a person looks immediately at their clothing, a shoemaker at a person’s shoes, a haberdasher at a person’s hat, and thusly merchants with their merchandise will be very sensitive toward speech and action which will benefit them in their trade.

4:9) states: ‘Lest you remove it from your heart **all** the days of your life.’

Whenever a person is not involved with study, he forgets.” (Maimonides 2009)

Rabbi Ovadya of Bartenura – Rabbi Ovadya was an Italian scholar of the 15th century best known for his commentary on the Mishnah. His commentary combined and synthesized two important commentaries by Rashi and Maimonides, and remains an important work to this day. (Ginzberg, Bertinoro, Obadiah (Yareh) B. Abraham 1906)

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv of Kelm – He was the head of the yeshiva at Kelm, in Lithuania (pre-Holocaust), and his treatise “Wisdom and Ethics” is a compilation of his mussar talks to his students at the yeshiva, a valuable resource for a *mashgiach* such as Rabbi Wolbe.

This would not be the case for another person who would not hear or see it the same way, for their mind is not so dedicated to seek and investigate these matters further, for **they have no desire for them**. Therefore, in the service of God, the one who has a fear of God, for example, will observe the laws in the Shulchan Aruch as they are stated and will learn from another when they are able to identify with the other person, but this will not be the case with something to which they are not accustomed. This person would not sense in the actions of others the love of mankind, acts of lovingkindness in actions and words, carrying a burden with a friend, to prevent damage from too much sophistry - all this, if he has no sense of these, he will not understand to engage in this ongoing learning process from others. If so, the one who can learn **from every** person is a great merchant who **trades in lifelong learning**, so therefore they will learn from others and they will be called a sage.”

(Wisdom and Ethics, Vol 2, paragraph 113)

They have no desire for them – The things we lack an interest in are the things we fail to notice. How many of us have friends who are very brand-conscious, whereas we are not? How many of us have gone to concerts and cringed at a musician who was slightly off-key while others never noticed? This sensitivity is an individual thing, based on our interests and training.

Trades in lifelong learning – Lifelong learning means that you trade in wisdom instead of material goods, so you are trained to be sensitive to wisdom wherever you can find it.

The meaning of our master Rabbi Shlomo Zalman is this: The tailor looks only at the other's suit, the shoemaker only at the sandals, the hatmaker only at their hat. Therefore, the God-fearing look only at the details of the mitzvot of others, and the masters of kindness only on others' kind deeds. But the one who learns *from all* people learns from their fellows *all* that which it is possible to learn, and also things which until now had been so far outside their sphere of interest. They pay attention to their friends and learn from them. Behold, the one who learns from every person is open to everything that they see in the world to learn about one's self from it. And we will also add: It is not only from people they learn! They learn also "modesty from the cat, which covers its excrement, and thievery from the ant, and forbidden relations from the dove, and civility from the rooster, which first appeases the hen and then mates with it." (Eruvin 100b) For "Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the birds of heaven?" (Job 35:11) Behold, our sages were great "lifelong learners," and showed us how to learn from animals and beasts and birds.

In addition to this we will add: "Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says: Why is the portion of an ascetic (Numbers 6) placed adjacent to the portion of an adulterous woman (Numbers 5)? This was done to tell you that anyone who sees an adulterous woman in her disgrace (as she undergoes the rite of the bitter water) should **renounce wine.**"

Renounce wine – According to the Sages, wine is one of the causes of sexual transgression, as it loosens inhibitions. For this reason, the Torah teaches these

The one who studies constantly knows that every transgression which they recognize in their fellow, they themselves are likely to stumble into, for they are also in possession of an evil impulse just like those they observe. Therefore, in observing the adulterous woman in her ugliness, the lifelong learner doesn't get worked up about her immorality. Instead, they should immediately look at how she got into this sad condition and they will understand that she is definitely worn and debased, that she was debauched. She drank wine - and immediately the lifelong learner decides to observe caution with wine, so that they not tempt their own descent into the pit... Indeed, it is possible to learn from those who commit transgressions! And how far away is this approach of lifelong learning from the approach of many people expressing their disgust with the deterioration of the sinner, without contemplating how close they are - God forbid! - to stumbling into **the same transgression**, for every person is also in possession of a similar evil inclination!

Lifelong learning is a great and rich web, and it is incumbent upon us to engage with it for at least half a year until we will be transformed into lifelong learners of all that is before our eyes.

passages one after the other and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi states that he arranged these tractates in the Mishnah one after the other.

The same transgression – Rabbi Wolbe cautions us to learn from those who have committed bad deeds instead of judging them. Those who judge others for

After all, this is not a private attribute, but rather the **lifestyle** of the practitioner of mussar. And if we only came up with this understanding, it would have been sufficient: if all our mussar work would bring us only to lifelong learning, it would already be tremendously useful.

We return to the beginning of the chapter: After all, we were looking for a way of avodah which prevents any awakening of pride. So how do we find this in the path of lifelong learning? The Rabbi Ovadiya of Bartenura on the mishnah “who is wise?” already hints about this: *In lifelong learning, pride has no place!* If I do some good deed, I am likely to become prideful of it. If I am *constantly learning* to do some good deed - indeed, I cannot do anything of which I am able to become prideful, because indeed, I am still only in training! And when I am in training - I am constantly encouraged to see that the deed was not perfect in every facet: the sense of criticism which accompanies me in every deed forces me to find those things which are possible to improve.

their misdeeds fail to do the soul-searching that is necessary to prevent falling into the same trap.

Lifestyle – This is not a process to be engaged in during one’s spare time, and this is also not an activity restricted to the *beit midrash*, or the study hall. This is a change in perspective in one’s entire life, and should touch upon every aspect of it at every moment. It is truly a lifestyle change to put on learners’ eyes in everything that you do, and a lifestyle change which will serve well to keep you humble, energized, and constantly learning to be a better version of yourself.

And if lifelong learning turns into a way of life for me, and in every one of my interests I “merely” constantly grow, and I always see a place to improve and to grow in perfection - I will never fall prey to pride on account of the deeds which I do.

The one who wants to “work on one’s self” needs to understand thoroughly the depth of these things, and they must agree to place one’s self, from now and for their whole life on the basis of this lifelong process, that they will be in all of their interests only ever a trainee, and this the learner must do until their last day. And even when they reach the day of their death, they will not die, but rather they will learn how to die. This is the way of the one who pursues the work of mussar.

From now on, we will learn the practicalities of lifelong learning.

Never fall prey to pride – Here is the truth of the matter: a learner is always humble, always seeking to learn more and become better at what they do. To be a sage, in Rabbi Wolbe’s understanding, is to never stop learning how to do the things you do better and more fully. That wisdom can come from anywhere, so our eyes must be open to everything, to learn from it all.

The First Pillar

We begin our avodah with an easy thing: We learn over and over in what manner to say “Adon Olam” in the morning, and not to make an error in it: It is *not* our purpose in this to increase **intention** (it is difficult to be weaned from the outlook of **frumkeit** which is attracted to making the goal of avodah being more “frum”). Our intention is to learn continually *in what manner* to say Adon Olam. Everyone will quickly agree that they have almost never looked at what was written, and from now on they will learn to pay greater attention to what they are saying. Truly, a new “Adon Olam” will be revealed before us. This constant learning and relearning will last for several weeks, until they receive a “taste” of constant growth and study.

Adon Olam – The text of this prayer is familiar to many because of its ubiquitousness within the synagogue walls. However, its grand poetry is often lost, and it can be easy to ignore the words themselves in favor of the melody, even in liberal contexts where we are concerned with understanding what we say.

Intention – Rabbi Wolbe’s understanding of intention and ours differ here. Wolbe sees intention as the visible signs of devout behavior: the people who throw their prayer shawl over their head and rock furiously, those who go to extremes fasting and meditating before prayer or study, or those who say prayers so fast that no one else can keep up. In liberal circles, intention is a focus on the words we are saying, the feelings that they engender, and creating a connection with the Divine. This is what he is trying to advocate for.

Frumkeit – This is a deliberate put-down. Someone who is “frum” is obviously observant of the mitzvot just from their basic outer appearance and behavior. Think of women wearing head-to-toe black and men who refuse to eat broccoli for fear that a non-kosher bug will be accidentally stuck in it and eaten. Wolbe is saying that the purpose is not to *look* more observant! It is to *become* more observant by knowing what we are saying and why we are saying it.

The Second Pillar

To concretize to themselves even more what is “lifelong learning,” they will now shift to study over and over some blessing, this also according to the same format. There is no intention which they must intend more greatly, but rather that they learn over and over *in what manner they are to bless*.

In what manner – Again, his emphasis is on the blessing itself. Simply saying the blessing over the bread fulfills the mitzvah, but the mussar student should consider that the blessing is not a simple one. We bless the Creator “who brings forth bread from the earth.” What a strange and mysterious blessing! There is wisdom in this, if we think about it and learn about it, and Rabbi Wolbe wants to encourage this study. If we don’t pay attention to what we are saying, we miss so much of the wisdom Jewish tradition has to offer us.

The Third Pillar

Now we tackle an issue which is much more difficult. “Who is wise? The one who learns from every person, as it is written, from all my teachers, I have gained wisdom.” Therefore, we must learn continuously from each and every person: some small behavior, some attribute, or some wise thing. We attempt, therefore, to continually learn three things every day from our friends. In the beginning, it may be difficult to get to this number, for we are not accustomed to this practice. Criticism of our friends wells up in us every hour, but to see in them something good and worthy which it is possible to learn from them - **this we have never done**. A long time will pass until we succeed to reveal among our friends something good, something worthwhile to learn. However, we cannot escape from the task, and with consistency, we will succeed at the end to pay attention every day to find within our friends little things which are worthwhile to learn from them. And after we discover these things, we continue for a few more weeks, and now it has become lifelong learning in actuality, that we will pay attention to a specific good behavior of a friend and learn it for ourselves, saying: “How beautiful is this behavior, and I will do as my friend does in this matter!”

This we have never done – Rabbi Wolbe does not mean to imply that we are all terrible friends to one another! He instead is making the point that when we are with our peers, be they co-workers or friends, it is easy to evaluate one another critically. I can recall many critical conversations in rabbinical school after leaving services led by a fellow student. Most of the students were commenting about

the sections they could have done better or evaluating one another's skills. This is exactly the behavior Rabbi Wolbe is warning us about! It is easy to learn what *not* to do from a friend. It is much harder to learn *something good to do* from a friend every day, and he is pushing us to make this practice a fundamental part of our lives.

The Fourth Pillar

From here, we will go one step further. Every day, we meet with diverse people: the shop clerk, the postal worker, the bus driver, the maid, and young children. Now we attempt to learn constantly *from them* three things every day. Things like this generally don't occur to us when we think about the simple people in our lives, that it would be possible to learn from them something good. However, our sages said "to learn *from every person*," without exception! We are **not speaking about great things**, but about a good movement, a good word which we are able to learn from each person. Also, this will be very difficult in the beginning, but over time a new world will be revealed before us, of simple humans who are as full of mitzvot as is the pomegranate, and it is worthwhile to practice this learning for a very long time. And already one of the **higher holy ones** said that he had learned a few things from thieves and children.

Not speaking about great things – This is important for Rabbi Wolbe to reiterate here. Earlier, he indicated that when we grasp at much, we often come up empty-handed. This is still true! Perhaps the shop clerk collects pennies so that she is always prepared if someone is short of change. This small thing is a lovely thing to learn, whether you learn it on a micro level (having extra savings) or on a macro level (be prepared with extra money in case you are faced with someone else in need). This kind of learning can be constantly perfected and expanded.

From thieves, he learned that the main part of their work was in the night, and what they worked on at night, they sold in half a day for nothing, and they had good company in other thieves. From children, he learned that they never sit idly, and when they need something, they cry...

Higher holy ones – This is an honorific for the rabbis who have come before him.

The Fifth Pillar

There is nothing in creation from which you cannot learn, because God created everything. Already our sages said “Even if the Torah had not been given in the desert, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat, which covers its excrement, and thievery from the ant, and forbidden relations from the dove, and civility from the rooster, which first appeases the hen and then mates with it.” (Eruvin 100b) From this we now learn to constantly learn from animals three times each day. And if we are not able to discover something to learn from them in their behavior, we must learn to see in them the wisdom of the Creator, God be praised!

No commentary.

The Sixth Pillar

Now we will turn and lay out something new: incidents in the world. Usually we hear about various events, from near and from afar, day in and day out, and it is enough for us to hear it without getting caught up in it. People read in the morning paper about a terrible disaster (May the Merciful One save us!), but they continue to quietly drink their coffee, because the thing does not concern them at all and they say nothing at all. Here is a place for multiple levels of lifelong learning. Except for the matter of our avodah, we see in this not a little mental numbness, that we are so indifferent when it comes to a disaster which has impacted some people, and moreover if it has hit a fellow Jew (May the Merciful One save us!). We want to become “lifelong learners” at our essence, so that these events from which we may learn something don’t pass us by. What is possible for us to learn about ourselves from this? whether we can learn to recognize the attribute of justice or the attribute of mercy, if that is

Incidents in the world – Though insular, the ultra-orthodox world is affected by the news and current events. However, those of us outside of orthodoxy should take care to pay special attention to this section in our own spiritual practice. We consume news at a breakneck pace and almost constantly, and it is all too easy to forget that it is a choice how we consume and react to the news.

A fellow Jew – This likely reflects Rabbi Wolbe’s understanding of כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה (*kol Yisrael aravim zeh lazeh*), each Jew is responsible one for the other. Anything which disadvantages or hurts a fellow Jew should garner a reaction from us, in his opinion.

revealed in it, whether one learns to carry the yoke along with those who have been injured to some degree, or whether one learns from the resourcefulness of people in a difficult situation. Ostensibly, this should have been a natural reaction, that the disaster not pass us by, that we read or hear about it without thought on our part. And what will we do, when the numbness of the mind has control over us, and none of us feels and none of us responds at all except for a few words of surprise, a fascination with the language, and **stress**. We will work to learn something three times each day from what we hear or what we read about various incidents.

Stress – When someone dies, when there is a great tragedy or scandal, we cannot let the opportunity for learning pass us by. We can learn caution, as Wolbe suggested we do with the adulterous woman, by watching others in the news make mistakes and fail. We can learn resourcefulness from stories about communities who are responding to floods and fires. There is so much to learn from and react to in the news, and we should seize every opportunity we have to learn from what happens to others.

The Seventh Pillar

A note about the gendered language in this passage: I have kept the masculine language in this passage, because this is a problem that is not exclusive to ultra-orthodox men. By and large, women are socialized to respond, to play the diplomat, and to be mediators in their homes, and understanding their spouse and children is a job which is expected of them. This is not to say that women have no ongoing work to do in the area of the home. Far from it! It is merely to make the point that women are *already socialized to do this work*.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for us to do is for a man to become a constant learner in his own home. The man of the house is already accustomed from his wedding to encounter in his home surprising things: his wife doesn't understand him and he doesn't understand his wife's opinion and her behavior in many matters. He already is accustomed to respond according to his own feeling without attempting to understand her. And who understands his children, and why they are unruly, stubborn, and quarrelsome? The troubled father, who cannot endure their disturbances, answers them in the same moment as he feels: reprimanding, slapping, anger, without having to bother himself by understanding *why* they are behaving thusly. Man is accustomed to living in his home for years without attempting *to understand* what happens in his closest surroundings. The damage that grows from this is clear, and there is no need to elaborate further.

When we begin to constantly learn from the members of our own households, it may be possible to reveal before us a truly brand-new world - a new epoch in matters of **peaceful living** and in the education of our children. We begin, then, to learn three times a day to understand the wife and children. After all the stages of the work of lifelong learning which he has already worked, there is great hope that he not limit his learning to three times alone, but rather that it will span every situation and every time, especially in his home, as it is the essential place, **the weak spot**.

It is impossible that one not feel as if he is “a constant, lifelong learner” after this and know how it has expanded his inner world as a result of these actions, and that his life has become far more rich.

Peaceful living – In Hebrew, שלום בית (shalom bayit) is the concept of having a good relationship with one’s spouse and children. Much has been written by male rabbis across the centuries on this subject, and with the rise of feminism and ideas of labor balance in the family, much is still yet to be written by Jews of all genders.

The weak spot – It would be interesting to see lifelong learning *begin* in the home, instead of end there. Surely it is more necessary to attempt to learn from one’s family than from shopkeepers and animals? While also more difficult, it seems to me to be a much more worthwhile place to spend earlier efforts.

The Eighth Pillar

We have dealt in lifelong learning for many months, and have high hopes that with a multiplicity of actions, we will succeed in acquiring desirable attributes in our souls. From now on, we will be most able to approach our mitzvot from a perspective of lifelong learning, which will replace the habit and routine that took over our being for so many years. From now on, we will constantly learn to lay *tefillin*, to wear *tzitzit*, to give *zedakah*, to do Shabbat. There is no limit to the scope of this learning with regard to mitzvot or everyday behavior or in the motions of sitting or standing or walking in the street. Those who have internalized lifelong learning, when you have already walked upon this path, will always find new things around them from which to learn. We constantly learn from this lifelong study of mitzvot according to our custom: we will try to become a lifelong learner by putting on *tefillin* and by wearing a *tallit*, by giving *zedakah*, and by our approach to the *mincha* prayer every day. We should ask ourselves: what am I going to do, how should I begin?

According to our custom – While many liberal Jews do not wear *tefillin* and *tallit* or pray three times a day, many do have deep spiritual practices which we consider “our custom.” Through giving *zedakah* with deep engagement, through our acts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), through our worship services, our study sessions, our rousing song sessions, we too can use this process of lifelong learning to integrate the values of Judaism into our very souls.

At the end of our avodah, it is incumbent upon us to emphasize another time that all the success of the work of mussar depends on the path of lifelong learning being in our souls. Without this, there is great fear that the work will turn us to our detriment, instead of true elevation. One can add pride and boasting to the avodah described in the following chapters. To think, “Here am I, a ‘Master of Mussar!’” is to move away from all our work in lifelong learning and turn it into an evil attribute (May the Merciful One save us!), and hide everything under a cover of “frumkeit” which is the addition of every action which is done without true ongoing learning. Therefore, one does not move from the process of lifelong learning until we have bought into it with strong ownership, and the one who does not succeed in it and is unable to endure in it - he will cease entirely from the work of mussar, and will **become a good Jew without it.**

Become a good Jew without it – Rabbi Wolbe reminds us at the end of this chapter that it is entirely possible to be a good Jew (which in his world means to be mitzvah-observant) without this lifelong learning process. This process of learning is meant to augment the character and spiritual practice of the person who takes it up, and should always be done with enthusiasm and excitement. If one finds only criticism and despair, or if it becomes too difficult to maintain, he gently reminds them that it is an extra task and not mandatory.

Conclusion

As we have seen, mussar has applications beyond the yeshiva and has meaning for Jews outside ultra-orthodoxy. By orienting ourselves to the world and our daily lives in such a way that we are constantly learning from everything around us, we can expand our hearts and minds while still remaining humble. It is a truism of life that there is always more to improve, more to understand, and more to learn, and AleI Shur takes this wisdom from secular to sacred Jewish space.

Each and every Jew, whether mitzvah-observant or not, can find wisdom in Torah which connects to their own life. This is the power of Torah. Mussar texts and mussar practice help the Jew to address their own soul's well-being and health in the same way that the mitzvot and other Jewish texts try to align our bodily actions with God's Will.

So what of us who have a different relationship to Jewish law? As Reform Jews,⁵ we are committed to informed choice and finding a way of observance that makes us feel closer to God and our Jewish heritage. We have in some instances embraced mitzvot in their traditional form, in others rejected them, and in many more, we have modified the traditional mitzvah to better align with our theology and understanding. Rabbi Wolbe's concept of התלמודות (*hitlamdut*) lifelong learning reminds us to never allow our practice to become rote or static.

⁵ By far not the only group that can benefit from these texts, but the only one for whom I can presume to speak.

There is always more to explore and learn, and it is always possible to draw even closer to God in our spiritual work.

Reform Judaism has a similar goal to the mussar movement. We want to connect the heart with the head in the same way and have our deeds be united with what lies inside. Whether we do this through the mitzvot we choose to observe or in our daily lives lived in the secular world, mussar can be a boon to those of us who seek to integrate spirituality into our lives and thereby draw closer to God.

Though our values are quite different from those espoused by Rabbi Wolbe and the students of the yeshiva, our goals are similar. We too are interested in the betterment of our character.⁶ We too hope for a life that is less stressful, more orderly, and more ethical. And if we are to be honest, we all have trouble integrating the wisdom of Torah and Jewish tradition into our being. This is not just a problem for those who spend their time following halacha to the tiniest detail, and on the other end of a wide Jewish spectrum, this is not just a secular problem either.

It is my hope that this has shown the relevance of mussar and our ability as liberal Jews to be in dialogue with a tradition that has so often been relegated to the orthodox world. This text has been an attempt for a female Reform Jew and a male orthodox Jew to be in dialogue with one another across space, time,

⁶ Perhaps this is why Americans spend an estimated \$549 million every year on self-help books. (Citation: Gilbert, Matthew. 2014 *Self Help Books and the Promise of Change*. Accessed January 15, 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/01/14/self-help-books-and-promise-change/4nJqRBpinOSWQ4wU536jPP/story.html>.)

ideology, and gender. It is also an invitation to you, the reader, to join this conversation, wherever you may be in the Jewish world. Torah can only increase from your participation in this dialogue.

Mussar adds another facet of Torah to the richness of Jewish tradition by reminding us that we have hearts to tend to as well as bodies. Mussar reminds us in the words of one of the earliest mussar texts to “turn it and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it. Do not turn from it, for nothing is better than it.”⁷ To echo the words of Rabbi Wolbe, when it comes to spiritual improvement “we should ask ourselves: what am I going to do? How should I begin?”

⁷ Pirkei Avot 5:22

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