Musar for Our Times: The Missing Ingredient

It has been 120 years since Reb Yisrael Salanter passed away. Though he was recognized by thousands and lived long after the advent of photography, there are no photographs or portraits of him (for that was his wish). He shunned the spotlight, yet his impact was indelibly impressed on all those who met him. Most people either concentrate on their own development or lead others. Reb Yisrael was a marvelous mix: he was able to focus on the shortcomings and needs of Klal Yisrael and on his own personal inner development, both in an all-consuming manner.

Reb Yisrael taught us how to know ourselves as well as how to sensitize ourselves to the needs and pains of others. He taught us that the prohibition against causing pain to others is every bit as severe as the prohibition against eating pig. Reb Yisrael was also a subtle and profound thinker [See Mark Steiner, “Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher,” The Torah U-Madda Journal, 9 (2000)]. He wrote about the unconscious many years before psychoanalysis, and raised the question of why a person is created in such a way that his actions may be determined by unconscious motivations (see Reb Yisrael’s profound essay in Etz Peri). His teachings help create Jews imbued with the totality of Torah and help to foster unity in a sorely split world.

Musar is a little-known and less practiced Jewish discipline making its way back onto the Jewish agenda in a way not seen since the Musar Movement of nineteenth-century Europe. By musar, I mean the teachings and methods that were part of the Musar Movement started by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter in Lithuania around 1850 (though some musar texts and practices are much older). Musar’s purpose is to help people understand the ways of the soul and to guide them in overcoming the obstacles that keep them from inner wholeness (kedushah), holiness (kedushah) and closeness to God. Only a generation ago musar seemed destined for oblivion. So many of the teachers and institutions that were the cornerstones of musar learning and practice had been swept away in the ravages of the Holocaust. Then, after the War, musar fell into neglect as the Jewish world focused on rebuilding the basic institutions of communal life, like yeshivot, mikvaot, et cetera. This was the obvious priority, ahead of musar’s concern for refining the qualities of the individual soul. Musar continued to be taught in the post-Holocaust period, but seldom as anything more than a subject on the curricula of some yeshivot.

Typically, a few lines of a classic musar text would be expounded, but this is only a pale shade of the teachings, personal practices, deep introspection and intense exercises that were integral to musar in prewar times. Musar learning and practice is once again taking root. Currently, hundreds of musar study groups can now be found in cities across North America, from Danbury, Connecticut, to Portland, Oregon. Such groups, which meet in private homes, synagogues, yeshivot and k tudim, are delving into classic musar texts like Chovot Hale'avovot (The Duties of the Heart) by Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda) and Mesillat Yesharim (The Path of the Just) by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto. These groups are also bringing to life the methods that were developed in musar circles in past centuries, including contemplation, chanting, diary keeping and other practices. Additionally, several musar-focused societies have recently been founded. The AishDas Society, started in 1994 by Michá Berger of Passaic, New Jersey, is committed to advancing meaningful worship and mitzvah-observance in the Orthodox Jewish community. The Salant Foundation, named for Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Musar Movement, promotes musar study and practice. Started by Rabbi Zvi Miller, this Israel-based foundation is bringing out a translation and annotation of Ohr Yisrael, the writings and teachings of Rabbi Salanter.

There is no question that we are witnessing a revival of musar. The question is why? I will present a few of the major factors I
There is great appeal in the musar teachings on how to cultivate bitachon, which sets a person on steady ground in the midst of a very shaky world. An all-too-common complaint is that Judaism is all ritual code and no soul. Judaism can also be overly intellectualized or reduced to being little more than a cultural or an ethnic identity. A Jewish life oriented in any of these ways is bound to be spiritually unsettled times, even people who do not necessarily see themselves as “spiritual” are searching partly because of the tumultuous events of recent years, including not only acts of terrorism and the situation in Israel, but also the emotional and financial stresses on family life that seem to be ever-increasing.

Musar Movement helped Jewish youth to live Jewishly too. Societies that adopt musar, I am often greeted with the influences to which your child is exposed, in this increasingly wired world in which the Internet will soon be the only way to book an airplane ticket or do banking or send a letter, there is no longer any effective way to separate children from the undesirable messages coming their way.

So inno vative was his approach that he reported that the other provocations, one is vulnerable to feelings of being out of place, people are turning to focus on making their religious lives more meaningful. As a result, the needs of the soul have risen in priority, and since these needs happen to be the age-old concern of the musar masters, the wisdom of musar has suddenly become relevant. The Synagogue of Navarduk

For example, in the musar teachings and spiritual practices of the musar, the soul is not separated from the body, but is seen as the person as a whole, physically and spiritually. This approach to spirituality is in line with the teachings of Rabbi Dessler, who emphasized the importance of living a life of holiness and righteousness, even in the midst of modern-day challenges.

The same is true today. Contemporary musar is again different from what Rabbi Dessler offered to his war-torn generation. But just like Rabbi Dessler and all the ba’alei musar before him, contemporary musar is concerned with helping people foster the inner clarity, wholeness and holiness that the Torah tells us is both the obligation and the promise of being part of Kiddush Hashem.

Of all the remarkable achievements of the Jewish people throughout our history, surely one of the most remarkable is that we are still here. When today can you find the Hittites and the Jebusites, Amalekites and Moabites who were once our contemporaries? We have always been free to turn away from doing the Divine Will, and have continually fought our way through the point of being totally destroyed. What has saved us, repeatedly, is our return to Hashem through the renovation of our interior lives. The current revival of musar reveals that Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, one of the senior musar leaders of our generation, has defined musar as “creating an interior life.”

Many people today have maternal security, events to the extent of having exhausted the allure of “shiny things.” Paradoxically, the world situation is creating greater uncertainty than this generation has previously known. We are also blessed with a vibrant community that sustains a full range of Jewish institutions. Now—as we mark the 120th yahrzeit of Rabbi Salanter (he passed away on 25 Shevat, 1843)—all of these factors are propelling the pendulum of Jewish life to swing toward making the life of the soul a higher priority. With that swing has come a revival of interest in the insights and practical wisdom of musar. No one can say how far this revival will go, but as long as the conditions that prompted it persist, I expect to see an ever-increasing number of people looking for guidance from the musar masters.
Beyond Psychology: Musar in Our Times
By Meir Levin

What is Musar?

The Torah has much to say about human behavior.1 From the intricately woven Biblical narratives to the pithy statements of Chassid to the complexity of kabbalistic and Chassidic literature, the Torah presents a wide panorama of what it means to be a human being in God’s world. Yet until fairly recently, the Torah sought on human behavior did not clearly spell out strategies2 to improve behavior.3

Over the past 120 years, the Musar Movement has set out to accomplish precisely this. Its legacy to us is a systematic presentation of how and why people do what they do and an array of tools and techniques to transform human nature.4 As a movement, a set of teachings and a spiritual discipline, it presented an account of how the soul can recognize his own failings in them, observe and understand the behavior of others as well as oneself.5 Reb Salanter taught that one discovers his own weaknesses by analyzing instances when he behaved in a way that is inconsistent with his beliefs, worldviews or self-image.6 And thus being identified, the weaknesses can then be worked on. A person must also learn from observing others, for he can recognize his own failings in them, unobscured by self-interest and self-love.7 While musar recognizes that each person has a unique mixture of soul-qualities, it is less interested in tracing how this blend came to exist than in accurately diagnosing the proportion of each quality in the mixture. Thus, for example, a person with a temper might suffer from pride, impatience, insufficient faith, a lack of acceptance of Divine decrees and an inability to foresee the effects of his actions. Similar behavior may be occasioned by different combinations of these qualities.

Musar and Psychology

Several decades after Reb Yisrael began his musar work, another discipline, which considered similar questions, was born. Psychology also attempted to understand and classify the psyche and to develop tools that could be used to modify behavior. It is quite understandable for one to see psychology as the sister discipline, for they both focus on the psyche.8 It is important to understand, however, that musar and psychology are different in many crucial respects.

From the beginning, musar was envisioned as medicine for the soul.9 Unfortunately, Musar as a therapeutic modality has been neglected. Much attention has been lavished on psychology; much talent and time have been expended in developing, testing and popularizing its principles. The powerful tools of musar, however, remain dormant in the pages of dusty tomes in yeshiva libraries, familiar only to a few individuals in each generation. Imagine how different the world would have been had even a fraction of the resources devoted to psychology been given to research the theory and practice of musar. Like the Jewish nation, musar is in galut.

One must not minimize the beneficial effects that the spread of psychological insights can have in our communities. And those who do this work are well intentioned. In fact, practitioners of musar would do well to pay at least some attention to advances in behavioral sciences. Yet, psychology is not musar and musar is not psychology. The confounding of the two detracts from each one.

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Psychology and Musar

Are Not the Same

Because of the lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of musar, some have recently begun misrepresenting it as a kind of psychological teaching. The bastardization of musar takes various forms. A number of self-help volumes targeting the Orthodox community have recently been published. While some of the authors of these books explicitly aim at the legitimate synthesis of psychological and musar approaches or at restating musar principles in the language of psychology,17 others use musar to Judaize psychological teachings.
the patient to work on his deficiencies. Musar, in contradistinction, relies on the authority of its texts to ensure acceptance; in other words, it relies on the authority of religion to encourage inner change. One needs to change because one must change. According to the principles of musar, it is more important to understand “what” than to understand “why.” Psychology’s goal is to have a person resume normal functioning. Psychology seeks to correct the factors that impede interaction with family and society; it has no higher goals. Musar seeks to lift an individual above the level of average men; it seeks to have man walk among men but also to have him consort with angels. Musar begins where psychology ends. In this sense, psychology may occasionally play an important role, the Torah spiritual discipline as, as stated above, the mediator, would be a true practitioner of musar, would provide insight to every man but the musar sage provides insight only to the Jew.

Psychology as a Model

The behavioral sciences can serve as a model for the possible revitalization and regeneration of musar in our time. When I propose that musar and psychology be compared, it is not for the truth or eternal value of their respective contents but for their potential to influence society. Had musar been given half the opportunity that psychology had, musar would have developed to the same or higher degree. Comparing the two as they are today is hardly instructive. Psychology is a fully developed discipline that has benefited from almost a century of intense study and experimentation, while musar flowered for a few decades and in much more limited circumstances. It is far more revealing to compare psychology and musar as they were in the late 1920s. At that time, both consisted of only a few schools of thought, both began to report significant successes in transforming lives and society and both produced a large volume of research and theories on the human personality. Unfortunately, musar’s development as a discipline was cut short by the upheavals of the twentieth century while psychology continued to grow and develop into the multifaceted set of teachings that characterize it today. Thus, nowadays, one finds psychological thought centering on industry, education, business, medicine, the military and popular culture.

Today, true musar has minimal impact on our world. Its ability to change lives and affect communities has been vitiated by its inaccessibility. Musar is also perceived by many as being a non-affirming, critical body of teachings and an irrelevant discipline of the past. You might say that musar, the Torah spiritual discipline, came to be identified with the Musar Movement. Using the discipline of psychology as an example can help us understand the powerful effect that musar can make on the modern world, which so thirsts for meaning and a more elevated understanding of human potential.

Unlike psychology, which operates by tracing the individual history of pathology, musar is relatively uninterested in the past.

I n fact, recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in musar in the wider Jewish world. Several individuals have begun the work of popularizing musar teachings. A variety of translated musar works has appeared, and symposia and forums have been held. Alas, most of this activity has been disorganized and without a central thread. For musar to come alive, students of musar must clarify the theoretical underpinnings of the various schools of musar and their relationship to both the classical school in which we live as well as to the massive body of insight that the science of human behavior has made available. This includes not only psychology but also the neurosciences, learning theory and business and organizational behavior. Musar can incorporate much of this knowledge within its own unique worldview; the question is how and in what manner.

Where to, Musar?

Would there be a resurgence of musar in our world? Several authorities who were asked this question have encouraged the popularization of musar beyond the narrow Orthodox world.

Paradoxically, because the non-Orthodox world is a place where musar’s uniquely spiritual voice has never been heard, it is likely to have a wide appeal. Musar can be an effective kiruv tool; the power of musar ideas can change lives. In our society, the idea that people can transform themselves—that we are not captive to our mental and emotional configurations—has tremendous power. Society tells us that we are who we are and that we can be no different. It is the job of others to accept us and support us in expressing what we are, what we were born with. “Kiss me, I’m Irish” (Polish, Republican, gay, and et cetera...) is the motto taught to us from an early age. Musar strongly rejects this idea.

In a certain way, those of us who have been privileged to grow up with musar as part of our spiritual background severely underestimate its power and its redemptive potential. I speak from personal experience, having been involved with ba’alei musar. We live in a world that drums the message, “I am what I am, and if you don’t like it, you are a bigot.” So many of our brothers and sisters are deeply dissatisfied with the shallowness and spiritual minimalism of other spiritual practices. They are looking for something more elevated, something more powerful and more authentically Jewish. These people go from one psychotherapeutic school of thought to another, engaging in years of unproductive counseling or in flirtations with foreign spiritual thought systems. At times, they may succeed in eviscerating one of the frustrations of daily life; at times, they are still in the challenges of relationship building. Ultimately, they remain as spiritually dissatisfied and as forlorn as before. When musar enters the public arena it may just be the beginning of yet another spiritual awakening.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, while psychology is secular, musar is, as stated above, the medicine for the Jewish soul. A therapist must be trained in counseling and understand certain psychological theories, but a true practitioner of musar must be a talmid chacham, comfortable in the sea of the Talmud and in the highways and byways of Jewish thought, philosophy and exegesis. A non-psychoanalytically-oriented therapist need not have undergone personal analysis, but a teacher of musar must have spent years struggling to grow and improve. A psychologist provides insight to every man but the musar sage provides insight only to the Jew.
capturing and remaking communities according to their teachings.\textsuperscript{16} There are, of course, dangers on this path, and rabbinic guidance and oversight are absolutely essential. Yet, the opportunity beckons and we dare not forgo it. The founders of the Musar Movement, Reb Yisrael, the Alter of Slabodka, the Alter of Kelm, Rav Eliyahu Dessler and countless others, of blessed memory, carried the message of musar into new environments in their desire to benefit others; shall we do less in our own time when society is calling out for spiritual renewal?\textsuperscript{16}

Notes
1. Throughout the article, musar signifies moral and ethical teachings; when capitalized and not italicized, it refers to the Musar Movement.
2. Before the Musar Movement, ethical-religious works aimed to present the ultimate goal of Divine service but did not provide a prescription of how to get there. Reb Yisrael was an educator more than a preacher, and he aimed to lessen the distance between the ideal and the current state of an individual. He sought to demonstrate how to traverse the distance between the actual and the desired (Immanuel Etkes, “Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement,” Seeking the Torah of Truth (Pennsylvania, 1993), 96).
3. As Reb Yisrael explains, previous generations did not require his methods because of the religious sensitivity that prevailed, but subsequent generations required novel methods of spiritual arousal. \textit{Ohr Yisrael} (Vilna, 5660), Shaare Ohr, 5.
4. \textit{Ohr Yisrael}, ch. 10
6. A technique of repeating messages to oneself.
7. \textit{Ohr Yisrael}, ch. 20
8. Literally “stock market,” a gathering of individuals for the purpose of discussing musar in small groups. Individuals in the birzhe explored musar concepts and how they applied to life. This took place while walking and included a great deal of gesticulating, shouting and animated discussion, reminiscent of the stock market. Hence, the name.
9. Specific actions for training in particular middot. For example, buying a one-way ticket to a distant location and returning to the yeshivah without asking for help from anyone, in order to practice the trait of reliance upon God.
10. Reb Yisrael appeared to see both the “negative” and at least some of the “positive” middot as residing in the same “animal soul.” He felt, therefore, that both positive and negative middot should be subject to the same methods of musar training. (Etkes, 126-127). This view contrasts with both the philosophical and kabbalistic traditions. In philosophy, good middot are an expression of “form,” (spiritual within man) and bad ones come from “matter” (physical within man). Kabbalah attributed them to the “lower” and “higher” soul, respectively. (See \textit{Moreh Nevuchim}, 3,8 and Rav Chaim Vital, \textit{Shaarei Kedushah}, ch. 1-3). By breaking with this understanding, Reb Yisrael made good and bad middot correctable with the same techniques. The antecedents of Reb Yisrael’s view may have been in the writings of the Gaon of Vilna; see Commentary to Yonah 1.6.
11. See Etkes, 106-108, for a discussion and comprehensive comparative analysis of several passages from Reb Yisrael’s writings regarding this point.
13. See the first line of the introduction to \textit{Ohr Yisrael}.
15. Reb Yisrael writes about the misuse of musar in \textit{Ohr Yisrael}, ch. 2