YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Mussar for Moderns

By Rav Elyakim Krumbein

There Must Be a Way

Torah tradition and literature have always addressed the spiritual needs and dilemmas of the individual in a direct way. Yet the modern Jew often finds that he is deprived, almost by definition, of access to this vital aspect of our Mesorah. This feeling stems from the perceived gap which yawns between our sources and the contemporary mind-set and outlook, which are part of the psychological and emotional make-up of the observant Jew of our generation. Problems are encountered in relation to central ethical Jewish concepts which are ignored in our culture, and also regarding instinctive patterns of thought and approaches to life.

The result is that the serious Jew in our day may be comfortable when studying Jewish law and philosophy, but confused or frustrated by the demands of our ethical literature. Issues such as guilt, humility, commitment, which our sources take for granted, are openly questioned by society at large. If these concepts are to be relevant to the modern man, he needs to find his way back to them, without denying his identity as a modern man. This is a considerable undertaking, intellectually and emotionally.

Our introduction to Musar - “Musar for Moderns” - aims to be a step in this direction, while realistically acknowledging that it can be no more than that. It strives to propagate a broad approach towards the Musar-endeavor, by using different types of source material (i.e. not only classic sifrei Musar), and by emphasizing the responsiblity of the individual for the direction of his spiritual life, a responsiblity which persists no matter what the text says.

Each shiur explores an ethical topic of concern, often problematic, to man in general and modern man in particular. We will try to dismantle some of the barriers which prevent us from finding meaningful insight in our sources, and instill the conviction that personal spiritual progress is a worthy and achievable aim in the twenty-first century.

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In this first shiur, I will outline what we will be doing in the future. Before anything else, I think I should define what I mean by mussar. I will use this term in a broad sense, which will be best understood by contrasting it with two other major areas of Torah study: halakha and machshava.

Halakha teaches the Torah-committed Jew how to act, usually in a given situation.

Machshava - Jewish thought - develops his world outlook.

But whenever one is engaging in study whose avowed aim is to learn how to live, how to be - he is studying mussar. The Kotzker Rebbe put it once succinctly to a certain talmid chakham: "You learn so much Torah, but tell me: what have you learned from the Torah?"

This definition may not be clear now, but I hope the ensuing discussion will help sharpen matters.

I promised to describe our program, but I request your further indulgence. Before we talk about what we'll be doing, we must talk about why we'll be doing it.

As is well known, the "why" of Mussar as an independent endeavor is, and always has been, controversial. Those who think mussar superfluous can certainly summon several gedolei Yisrael to support their view. I'm not out to change their minds, and I presume they aren't going to read this series. However, in order to grasp where we are going, I feel that I must state the opposing view on this question, which is really the assumption on which this series is based.

Ostensibly, the critics are right. In order to live a Torah life, one must know what the Halakha demands. One needs also to understand why one must adhere to the mitzvot, for understanding is the basis of commitment and fulfillment. These matters are addressed fully by the vast literature of Halakha and machshava. Dealing with these two areas alone is already a prodigious undertaking. Why devote precious time to anything else?

The answer is that living a Torah-committed life is a much more complex challenge than the critics would have us believe. How to live is a question that needs to be dealt with directly. It is not something that can be sufficiently known or sensed, automatically or intuitively, by studying how to behave in given circumstances, or by probing the nature of existence.

I will presently demonstrate this claim, at the same time foreshadowing a technique that I will use continuously: quotation of sources, intended for the reader's careful study and attention. The progress of the shiur will as a rule take for granted such study on the part of the reader.

There are whole worlds of Torah fulfillment that are wont to be ignored by those who would restrict their attention to the Law and its philosophical foundations. The first example we will survey can be inferred from the Ramban's well-known comment on "Kedoshim tihyu" ("You shall be holy," Vayikra 19:2):

The point is that the Torah prohibits incest and forbidden foods, while permitting marital relations and consumption of food and wine. It follows that a hedonist could find legitimacy for depravity with his wife or with many wives, excessively indulge in wine and meat, and utter foul language without restraint, for this has not been expressly forbidden in the Torah. As a result, he would be a scoundrel licensed by the Torah.

There are examples of immoral behavior that are not to be found spelled-out in Halakha. A student of Halakha alone could conceivably be a "scoundrel." In order to avoid this, the Torah had to stipulate that there is a general mitzva of kedusha (holiness), which is not halakhically defined, and which sets no uniform standards. As Ramban continues:

Therefore, Scripture, after specifying the things which are absolutely forbidden, admonishes in a general way that we should abstain from excesses: diminishing marital relations, as the Rabbis said, "So that talmidei chakhamim not be with their wives constantly like roosters," and sanctifying oneself by minimizing wine-drinking, as the nazirite is called "holy"... and guarding one's mouth and tongue from contamination through excessive eating and foul speech... so sanctifying oneself until attainment of the level of abstinence ascribed to Rabbi Hiyya, of whom it was said that he never in his life uttered an idle word.

The letter of the law has a spirit behind it, which points us towards the larger goal of the Torah: striving towards perfection, which can be mandated only in general terms, and which allows for varying levels of achievement in accordance with individual characteristics. Neglecting this responsibility leads to the phenomenon of the "scoundrel licensed by the Torah" - immorality which violates no formal statute.

The second area which is apt to be sacrificed by single-minded attention to the Law is that realm which the Law refers to, when at all, with great brevity and generality: the realm of personality and emotions. There are in the Torah "commanded emotions," such as love and fear of God, love of one's fellow, etc. But, as opposed to commanded action, commanded emotion is not something that can be put into effect in any immediate or obvious way. If love isn't there to begin with, how can one place it there? How does one rid oneself of negative traits? There is a common conception that preoccupation with Torah study in itself is a remedy, if not a panacea. The divine light of Torah is said to possess the capacity for moral rectification. For those who rely on this theory, the Vilna Gaon has some bad tidings. The following is his explanation of the Torah's simile: "Let my teaching fall like rain."

Rain falls everywhere and acts on everything equally. But its effect corresponds to the recipient. Where wheat is sown, the rain causes wheat to grow. Where poisonous plants are sown, the rain will make them grow, too. Yet the rain itself is always characterized as "good." Thus, the Torah, which descends from Heaven, works its action to cause whatever is in a man's heart to grow. If his heart is good, the Torah will increase his fear of God. But if his heart contains a poison root, he will falter all the more when he studies Torah, and the evil in his heart will increase.

The idea propounded by the Gaon may strike us as odd. We will soon get an inkling of one way this can happen. In any event, the Law per se does not address this problem. Preoccupation with Torah, startlingly, can make things worse. A way has to be found to get at the root, to replace the poison seed with a healthy one.

Apart from types of corruption not specifically prohibited by Halakha, and apart from the problematics of tikkun (improvement) of the self to which Halakha and machshava offer little insight, there is a third area which demonstrates that the subject-matter of mussar can be ignored only at great spiritual peril. It appears that it is entirely possible for great students of Halakha, the most Torah-committed Jews, to be responsible for moral failures, even calamities. And this, not because of any laxity of purpose, but on the contrary: as a direct result of their knowledge and commitment.

The Netziv, in the introduction to his Torah commentary, writes that the verse, "Righteous and straight ('yashar,' usually translated 'honest') is He," refers to the reason for the destruction of the Second Temple. The Jews of the time were righteous and pious and toiled in the Torah, but they were not "straight" in the ways of the world. As a result, because of the groundless hatred in their hearts, when they saw someone who acted contrary to their views on God-fearing behavior, they suspected him of being a Saducee or a heretic. This eventually led to blood being spilled and every possible calamity, until the Temple was destroyed. And this Divine verdict is justified in the above-mentioned verse, for the Holy One is "straight," and does not tolerate such righteous men. He favors only those righteous people who are also straight in the ways of the world, but not those who go in crooked paths – even if they do so for the sake of Heaven (le-shem Shamayim), for this causes the desolation of Creation and the destruction of civilization.

The Netziv describes righteous men whose occupation was to toil in Torah, but who had hatred in their hearts. Remember the principle taught by the Gaon? Here we have a historical illustration. These "righteous people" would never knowingly persecute someone out of sheer hatred or jealousy. They did it "le-shem Shamayim," after determining that someone was a heretic. Unbeknownst to themselves, this verdict itself was motivated by hatred and jealousy. Their Torah was their undoing. Their proficiency in Torah polemics enabled them to "prove conclusively" that this person deserved the fate they assigned him. Their total commitment to Torah empowered their resolve to wipe out the evil they were convinced they saw. Yet this commitment served only as a mask, a means of rationalizing the subconscious directives of sinat chinam, groundless hatred.

Torah represents the highest ideal. Its peril lies in its very grandeur and power. Undistilled souls, who cleave to Torah with what they take for idealistic passion, are at risk. They may be flirting with perversion.

I would like, with some trepidation, to bring another source - a controversial one - related to this issue. Em Ha-banim Semekha is a work written in Hungary in the throes of the Holocaust by an eminent rabbi, Rav Yissachar Teichtal, who became convinced that religious opposition to Zionism had been a tragic error that helped seal the doom of countless Jews. In his book, he attempts to convince his peers to support the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael. In the following passage, he is resigned to his inevitable lack of success. The anti-Zionists had used the classic molds of halakhic argumentation to make their point, but Rav Teichtal presents his own analysis:

Those who are biased to begin with won't see the truth and won't accept our words, and all the proof in the world will not help, for they are smitten with blindness, and their self-interest will blind their eyes, so that they deny even things that are as clear as day. For who today is greater than the scouts (sent by Moshe), of whom Scripture testifies as to their worthiness? Yet, since the consideration of office biased them (as is explained at length in the Zohar and the Shelah, for they feared they would lose their positions as heads of the tribes), they therefore despised the desired Land, deluding others in their wake...

So it is in our time, even regarding rabbis, rebbes and Chassidim. This one has a good rabbinic post, this one a good Chassidic court, and this one has a good business or a good factory or a good respectable position with a large income, so the fear looms over them: if they go to Eretz Yisrael, their situation may deteriorate...

People like this are biased by the self-interest hidden deep within their hearts, until they don't even realize that the self-interest is speaking from within, as I have brought in the name of our holy master, the man of God, Rav Yishaya Muskat of Prague ... that a person usually deludes himself into believing that his actions are for the sake of Heaven, whereas in actuality he is being driven by a deeply-hidden self-interest... Likewise, see Divrei Chayim on Channuka, who wrote that a man sees only what he wants to see, and therefore one's power of decision and judgment of the truth is null when he is prejudiced in any way...

And now, who takes responsibility for all the innocent blood shed in our times, by our sinfulness? It seems to me that all those leaders who prevented Jews from joining the builders of Eretz Yisrael won't be able to wipe their hands and say: Our hands did not spill this blood!...

Such a chilling accusation can be made only by a man in the circumstances which overtook Rav Teichtal, and of his stature. We who were spared the Holocaust can be no more than silent bystanders at this debate. At the same time, when reading this anguished excerpt, I find it difficult to escape the conclusion that it is at least possible that he was right.

I would like to sum up this discussion, which was the main body of this lesson. We spoke of three major areas, not directly addressed by Halakha or machshava, which are at risk: immoral behavior not specifically prohibited, inner personal morality, and the pitfall of crimes done "for the sake of Heaven." I won't further belabor this matter, but rather get on with the question: where does one go from here?

Many serious-minded people, convinced of its necessity, naturally turned to mussar study - only to be dismayed at the unexpected obstacles frustrating their progress. Before long, it becomes clear that basic conviction and motivation aren't enough. The questions arise: Can intellectual study really bring about existential change? Can it impart not only knowledge and acumen, but wisdom? If it can, why doesn't it seem to be doing so? If it can't, then what else needs to be done?

The problems don't end there. Today's committed Jew, who lives daily in consonance with the modern temper, finds that temper at variance with the fundamental ideas of what he perceives as the traditional mussar orientation. Other-wordliness, guilt, and humility, among other concepts, seem to be out of step with modernity. Can we still read Mesillat Yesharim the way our forebears did two centuries ago? Can we aspire to live Torah in its profoundest sense while still being a part of the twenty-first century? The frustration and even despair of many well-intentioned people who made the attempt seems to indicate that answer to these questions, if it exists, is not a simple matter.

These problems inspired the idea for this series. Our working assumption will be that there is a way.

Each of the coming sessions will be devoted to a specific issue connected to the content or techniques of mussar. Our discussions will have a dual focus.

One focus will be on problems that erect barriers on the way to rectification of the self. Some of these are matters uniquely faced by modern religious man, and others represent quandaries intrinsic to human nature as such.

Secondly, we will be looking for the underlying approaches, or inner orientations, which influence our ability to engage this area productively. By exploring a variety of sources, the hope is that the student will be aided to the point where his quest ceases to be a blind groping, and becomes a search, guided and directed from within.

One final note. It should be clear from what I have said that we will not actually be "doing" mussar. That is a daily affair, and, if it is to have any meaning, cannot be done only periodically. If we succeed in removing some of the obstacles, and thereby make the search possible, we will have gained our objective. For modern man, it is no small achievement.