Six years ago, in the pages of this journal, Rabbi Ira Stone proposed that Musar should be “the aggadah” of the Conservative movement. An aggadah, as he defined it, is the narrative that supports Jewish practice. The Conservative movement, he wrote, has “a distinctive halakhah, that is, a distinctive approach to Jewish law and practice,” but does not have a well-articulated aggadah, a story as to why halakhah is compelling. We can best find our storyline, according to Stone, in the Musar tradition—the tradition of Jewish reflection on good moral character and how to provide discipline (musar) for destructive human impulses—especially as expressed by the nineteenth-century Eastern European Musar movement. The compelling narrative offered by the Musar movement, in Stone’s interpretation, is that human beings are torn between their evil inclinations and their good inclinations, and that Jewish law can help to direct us toward that which is ethically good.¹

The essence of Stone’s proposal is that the Conservative movement should offer narratives that explain the purpose of Torah in forcefully ethical terms. In this sense, his proposal is continuous with the way that rabbinic leaders of the Conservative movement have often spoken. Consider, for instance, Solomon Schechter’s focus on imitating God’s goodness in all walks of life, Mordecai Kaplan’s vision of religion providing “ethical purpose and meaning,” or Louis Finkelstein’s hope for Judaism to serve as a moral beacon for humanity.² Reflecting the modern Jewish insistence that Judaism should be characterized by its drive toward ethical excellence, the Conservative movement has historically encouraged understanding the whole of Jewish practice as filled with ethical meaning, and members of Conservative congregations commonly think of Judaism as primarily direct-
ing them to be morally good people. Stone continues this admirable trend, though offering his own innovations: he shows the ethical power of traditional aggadic language in his interpretation of terms such as *olam ha-ba* (“the World to Come”), and he urges the Conservative movement to describe its overarching narrative with the word “Musar” and to take up the legacy of the nineteenth-century Musar movement.

Stone is right that the Musar movement can offer us profound narratives (*aggadot*) that depict moral sensitivity as the epitome of service to God. The Musar movement saw itself as recapturing the ancient and medieval Jewish focus on moral virtue, and it sought to popularize the ethically oriented *aggadot* found in classical rabbinic literature as well as in the later Musar literature authored by diverse rabbis including Bahya ibn Pakuda, Maimonides, Nahmanides, Yonah Gerondi, Asher ben Yehiel, Moshe Cordovero, and Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto. Drawing on these sources, the Musar movement spoke of the wayward human heart and the battle between the evil inclination and good inclination, as Stone notes; it also offered a compelling, teleological vision of how we are called to realize our true purpose by “walking in God’s ways” (i.e., by imitating God’s qualities)—above all, by loving God’s creatures.

Admittedly, however, similar narratives can be found throughout the history of Jewish thought without looking to the Musar movement, and other compelling narratives that support a moral life can be drawn from other Jewish sources. Moreover, some of the particular theological narratives of the Musar movement may be problematic for Conservative Judaism, which cannot rest easily with the Musar movement’s traditionalist understandings of the revelation of Torah or God’s role in human suffering; nor will it easily embrace fanatical tendencies in Musar which, as Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky put it, sometimes depict “every ethical lapse as a fatal stab wound.” And Stone, my teacher who introduced me to the study of Musar, has himself pointed to the off-putting nature of aspects of Musar theology, and he has sought to ground his vision of Musar in an alternative theological language that draws on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. If we are seeking *aggadot* that inspire us toward moral excellence, the tradition of Musar and the movement that championed that tradition are important resources, but it is hardly essential that we adopt “the *aggadah* of Musar.”
I do, however, think that the legacy of the Musar movement is essential for Conservative Judaism in another respect: not in determining our narrative, but, rather, in guiding our practice. The distinctive gift that the Musar movement offers us is not the narrative of Musar, but the practice of Musar.

The Musar movement’s chief innovation was that it demanded not only the inner qualities and external behavior commonly understood to be required by the Torah, but also other practices that can help to cultivate moral behavior and virtue. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the movement’s founder, recognized that changing our ingrained habits to make us better people is extremely difficult, and his response to this recognition was not only on the level of theory but also on the level of behavior. Salanter suggested that Musar was not only a literature to be learned, but also a practical path to be followed. Engaging in Musar, he suggested, is a matter of engaging in extensive “stratagems” (tahbulot) that can “make a strong impression on the heart and give strength and power to one’s external limbs.” Engaging in Musar means using tactics that can bring discipline (musar) to our hearts, transforming our characters and so transforming our behavior. Engaging in Musar is engaging in practices that can help us to become better people.

What sorts of tactics can change our hearts in this manner? What are the practices of Musar? Salanter and his disciples suggested that there are a great many forms of behavior that can help us to become better people. Some of these practices of Musar are practices that are widely seen as obligatory for all Jews—studying Torah, engaging in the specific ritual and ethical behaviors that Jewish law demands, and acting with kindness toward other people. Formal halakhic obligations such as these are a key part of Musar practice but, Salanter argued, changing one’s nature for the better requires additional “stratagems” that are not found in standard codes of Jewish law.

Sandalter suggested that each individual must find whatever practices can help him or her to overcome the particular character traits with which he or she struggles. He and his disciples also pointed to certain specific practices that they saw as generally effective, which included: repeating words of Torah with a melody and so seeking to bring them into one’s heart; visualizing both the way that things are and the way that things could be; looking at oneself and putting one’s moral struggles down in
writing; engaging in serious conversation with others about how to live one’s life; and engaging in deeds of lovingkindness and so instilling habits of love within one’s heart.

When I say that Conservative movement practice should be guided by such a model of Musar practice, I do not mean that we must engage in the precise practices endorsed by Israel Salanter and his students. I mean that the Musar movement teaches us to think broadly about the behaviors that God might require of us. We should adopt the model of practice that the Musar movement provides: we should see ourselves as obligated not only to engage in practices that can be codified, but also in whatever Musar practices can help us to emulate God’s goodness—to become better, wiser, more loving people. It is a halakhic obligation for all people to walk in God’s ways (v’halakhta) as best we can,\(^{11}\) and we can learn from the Musar movement that each of us has a derivative halakhic obligation to engage in the practices that help us in achieving that goal.\(^{12}\)

In advocating for spiritual practices beyond what is conventional, I am suggesting that Conservative Jews should be observing not only what “the law” requires but also practices that go beyond the law. Jeremy Kalmanof-sky, critiquing Stone’s proposal that Musar should guide the Conservative movement, has suggested that it makes little sense to encourage this sort of supererogation. It’s hard enough to get Jews to observe basic practices like Shabbat, he points out; how much harder would it be to get Jews to journal about their small moral shortcomings.\(^{13}\) I would note, however, that there are many Jews who do not observe Shabbat at all but who do have a serious, introspective journaling practice. They may not think of their journaling practice as a Jewish practice, let alone a way to help them fulfill the mitzvah of walking in God’s ways. Taking the idea of Musar practice seriously can help us—and them—to recognize their practice as a serious Jewish endeavor.

Stone has, indeed, emphasized the importance of Musar practice elsewhere in his writing and in his teaching.\(^{14}\) In this essay, I will build on the vision of practice that he and others have offered, seeking to show the expansive nature of the practice of Musar. Drawing on my studies of the early generations of the Musar movement, I will survey some major areas of Musar practice that we should take seriously—both practices that are
conventionally understood to be normative and some of the additional behaviors that can help to guide us toward moral goodness. Indeed, as I will indicate, a wide range of behaviors can function as part of a “Musar practice,” insofar as such behaviors help to provide moral discipline (musar) in our lives. We all engage in a wide range of behaviors that help to shape us into better people, and we should recognize that these are forms of Musar, behaviors that help us to walk in God’s ways.

Text Study

By all accounts, Jews are obligated to study Torah, and the Talmud describes the study of Torah as k’neged kullam, as underlying everything.\textsuperscript{15} It is certainly true that, in the practice of Musar, study underlies everything. For one thing, when we are working on becoming better people, we need to spend time immersed in our tradition of moral wisdom, studying models of what good people are like and applying them to our lives. Such models are often found in stories—in \textit{aggadah}. As Alasdair MacIntyre has written, “the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories,”\textsuperscript{16} and, as we have an obligation to continually pursue our moral education, we have an obligation to immerse ourselves in stories. Echoing a classical rabbinic notion, the Musar movement therefore indicated that we have a halakhic obligation to study \textit{aggadah}. The narratives of Torah and rabbinic literature, studied and considered critically, can teach us much about which character traits should be emulated and which character traits should be avoided.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to portraying human beings, whose goodness and whose flaws may be deeply instructive, \textit{aggadah} also provides models of God’s perfect goodness. The ultimate purpose of our lives, according to the Musar tradition, is to strive toward emulating God’s ways—ways of complete goodness, compassion, justice, and love—and these ways can be learned through the thoughtful study of theology and other forms of \textit{aggadah}. “If it is your desire to know the One who spoke the world into being,” teaches the \textit{Sifrei}, “study \textit{aggadah}, because from this you will know the One who spoke the world into being, and you will cleave to God’s ways.”\textsuperscript{18} The study of \textit{aggadah} can bring a person toward a vision of God’s goodness and, thus, toward goodness in one’s own life.
But the study of **aggadah** should never be sundered from the study of **halakhah**, of normative practice; the Musar movement also saw halakhic study as essential to Musar practice.\(^{19}\) To study **halakhah** is to study one’s legal requirements as well as moral principles and the virtues at which they aim. Salanter emphasized that a person should give particular attention to the laws relevant to whatever area of life with which one is struggling: if one is struggling with arrogance, one should study the Torah’s teachings on arrogance; if one is struggling with upright behavior in business, one should study the laws pertaining to business affairs.\(^{20}\)

In focusing one’s studies on particular moral struggles, the medieval and early modern literature known as Musar literature—moral writing that was deeply important to the modern Musar movement—can be particularly helpful. A good deal of that literature is organized according to various character traits, gathering together the Jewish tradition’s best halakhic and aggadic insights on each trait.\(^{21}\) The tendency of the Musar movement was to encourage focusing on one trait at a time (perhaps moving on to a new trait every week or every month—or every year), thus creating an incremental and manageable approach to moral change; if one is taking this approach, the more organized works of Musar literature can be tremendously helpful. If one is working on the trait of humility, for example, one can immerse oneself in the literature on humility through the study of the relevant chapters in the Musar canon.

We may begin by learning from within our tradition; but, of course, it’s not just the study of traditional Jewish literature that can help us to improve our moral character. We can learn to be better people from a wide range of literature. As Maimonides knew, studying ancient Greek philosophy could be an edifying endeavor, an insight that was (very cautiously) endorsed in the nineteenth-century Musar movement by Salanter’s disciple Rabbi Simḥah Zissel (Broida) Ziv.\(^{22}\) So too, many modern Jews have discovered, reading novels, poetry, and other literature from a wide range of cultures can be deeply important to our ongoing moral development. Empirical scholarship regarding the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities can also play an important role in our development—particularly, as Rabbi Martin S. Cohen has put it, in helping us to develop the essential virtue of “spiritual integrity.”\(^{23}\) Insofar as various forms of study can help people to walk in God’s ways, they should certainly be considered forms of Musar practice.
Music

But intellectual study, the Musar movement consistently emphasized, is insufficient. With this insight, it distinguished itself from the mainstream Orthodox view in nineteenth-century Lithuania, which held that conventional Torah study was in itself sufficient for moral development. From that perspective, so long as you were studying—and, to be more precise, studying Talmud—you would be assured of being a good person.

Salanter reacted against this idea in a number of ways, including by suggesting that “intellectual study” was only one form of “Torah study.” Intellectual study, he suggested, was necessary for learning information—laws, principles, virtues—as well as for sharpening the powers of human reason. But once we have learned a moral truth, we need to engage in another sort of study, designed to impress that truth in our hearts—to make it a part of our very being. To do this may require any number of Musar practices, including what Salanter called limmud b’hitpa·alut, “emotional study” or “impassioned study”—studying in such a way that deeply arouses the emotions. Emotional study, as Salanter conceived it, typically involved selecting a verse or phrase and chanting it out loud, to a melody, over and over again, sometimes while moving one’s body as well. The idea was that internalizing a concept requires vocal repetition “until it becomes engraved on the tablet of one’s heart, and is a symbol before one’s eyes, when one walks outside and when one lies on one’s bed; and the statement rings in one’s ears like a bell and will not depart from one’s memory.”

The melodies often used for the study of Talmud were too commonplace and insufficiently emotional for serious Musar practice, in Salanter’s view. He preferred singing with “a sad, mournful voice” that would penetrate one’s heart, arouse one’s dissatisfaction with one’s present spiritual condition, and fill one with reverence and longing for God. Whatever melodies are used, Salanter recognized that music can affect one’s inner life more deeply than many other modes of study and communication. Music is well-suited to leave an impression on the subconscious mind, to influence the “innermost, hidden recesses of the human psyche.” Music can be a powerful tool in building moral character because it easily stays in our minds and lingers in our subconscious.
There are many ways in which our behavior can be guided by this insight. For one thing, contemporary practitioners of Musar have taken up Salanter’s legacy by engaging in regular routines of Musar chanting: dedicating time each day to chanting a phrase pertinent to the character trait that one is working on.\textsuperscript{31} Allowing melodies used in prayer contexts to affect one’s soul can also be a powerful Musar practice, one which is experienced in synagogues across the world on a daily basis. More generally, making or listening to music in any number of contexts, and allowing it to penetrate one’s heart, can be a form of Musar. Whether it is indeed a form of Musar, an art that directs the soul toward better places, may depend on the messages communicated by the music or, if accompanied by words, on the message of those words. As Plato famously argued, and as the leaders of the Musar movement well understood, there is nothing inherently good about music, and music can be a distraction or a moral danger as well as a moral good.\textsuperscript{32} But music surely can encourage mindfulness as well as mindlessness. When it does help to heal us, transforming us for the better, it is a form of Musar.

Visualization

The Musar movement taught that spiritual insights should be brought into one’s heart through the use of all of one’s senses. Along with advocating the use of music, engaging our emotions through sound, Salanter and his disciples also advocated the meditative practice of visualizing images (\textit{tziyyurim}) before one’s eyes. Simply focusing on an idea can be a significant form of meditation, Simḥah Zissel Ziv explained, but imagining something that one can see before one’s eyes is much more effective.\textsuperscript{33} We are embodied creatures, built to respond to what our senses perceive, and so we are most likely to take up the ideals of the Torah when we make them accessible to our senses in a concrete way.\textsuperscript{34} Like music, powerful mental images can engage our consciousness in a profound way, taking root in our subconscious and influencing our behavior.

Simḥah Zissel Ziv was the Musar movement’s most forceful advocate of harnessing the power of visualization. He recommended, for example: keeping in mind the suffering of others by keeping images of their suffering before one’s eyes;\textsuperscript{35} visualizing parables that can help to inspire good
behavior; \(^3^6\) imagining the consequences of one’s behavior and the way that others would judge one’s behavior; \(^3^7\) bringing to mind mental images of the rewards promised for good or the punishments promised for evil; \(^3^8\) and seeing an image of other people’s good qualities before one’s eyes (especially when one is inclined to be angry at them). \(^3^9\) There are many other images that we could take from the tradition; and each of us can surely think of particular visualizations that could help us to become better people.

Like music, though, the visual imagination can also be a morally destructive force; to make this point, Simḥah Zissel cites a midrash where Satan conjures up deceptive mental images to lead Israel astray. \(^4^0\) But, when one’s imagination is guided by reason, it can be an extremely important moral force. Being able to imagine things that are not before one’s eyes is extremely important for the development of empathy and for making good moral judgments, among other things. The work that any of us does to build our capacity to visualize what is not before our eyes—whether through meditative exercises, through engaging with visual or performing arts, or simply through focusing our minds on the suffering of others—can be deeply significant Musar work.

**Introspection and Journaling**

The above forms of Musar practice seek to make impressions upon one’s character—often a matter of taking insights of which we are conscious and bringing them into our unconscious. Another sort of Musar practice involves considering one’s character and exploring its tendencies—often a matter of taking what is unconscious and bringing it to consciousness. \(^4^1\)

The Musar movement stressed the importance of introspective work, knowing that we cannot change ourselves for the better if we do not know what our stumbling blocks are. We need to become aware of the sicknesses of our soul, Simḥah Zissel Ziv contended, if we want to be able to heal them and to walk in God’s ways. \(^4^2\) He here echoed Maimonides, who ruled that one should, ideally, “inspect one’s moral habits continually, weigh one’s actions, and reflect upon the state of one’s soul every single day.” Our souls inevitably need improvement, Maimonides teaches; continual introspection and reflection can help us to spot the character traits that we need to repair. \(^4^3\)
Taking stock of one’s self, engaging in “self-accounting”—*heshbon ha-nefesh*, to use the Hebrew term popularized by Judah ibn Tibbon’s translation of Bahya ibn Pakuda’s writings—is not just a *mitzvah* to be carried out on Yom Kippur; it is a constant obligation. As Bahya put it: “Self-accounting is obligatory for a person (in accordance with one’s rational capacities and one’s power of recognition) at all times, with every blink of the eye, and, if possible, with every breath one takes.” Simḥah Zissel followed this ruling, seeing it as a “clear *halakah*” that “every action that a person does needs to involve accounting.” Introspection, in this view, is a requirement of the Torah. The reflection that people engage in during the course of their daily activities—whether while working, while driving home, while sitting in the synagogue, or at any other moments—can surely help to fulfill that requirement.

Various figures in the Musar movement advocated particular introspective practices: for instance, taking time by oneself for focused meditation. The introspective meditative practices that have been advocated by a number of contemporary rabbis are, assuredly, forms of Musar. Taking time each day to sit in silence and simply noticing the way that one’s mind wanders can teach one a tremendous amount about one’s spiritual condition.

Journaling is another practice that can teach us a good deal about ourselves. Making notes about one’s daily activities, and identifying which character traits need attention, is a practice that was popularized among modern Jews by Menaḥem Mendel Lefin’s *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, a book that advocated following the journaling practice described in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography. Franklin’s method was something he thought could help him in his “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection”: he made a mark in his book whenever he failed to uphold the moral virtue upon which he was focusing his attention. Lefin, a Polish rabbi and advocate of the Haskalah, copied Franklin’s method in his own book, which was later popularized by Israel Salanter and the Musar movement.

Such a system of marking faults was praised highly by Lefin and Franklin, and it surely has its benefits, but actually writing in a journal can be a more profound Musar practice. As leaders of the Musar movement noted, writing down how one has acted in the course of any given day can allow a person to see one’s character more clearly. Writing is a form of
memory, allowing us to preserve the words, thoughts, and deeds that we are inclined to forget. We often don’t remember the ways that we speak badly about others, or the jealous feelings that slip in and out of our hearts, or the way we have ignored someone whom we could have helped. Reviewing our behavior and putting it in writing allows us to keep it in mind, and to come to know ourselves better. If we are working on a particular character trait, journaling can uncover how that trait plays out in our lives and can allow us to see both our weaknesses and our strengths. More generally, journaling can help to illuminate the path of our lives and to point out how we might move forward. And a wide variety of particular writing exercises can help us to be more reflective, creative, and morally sensitive, serving as an important form of Musar practice.52

Conversation

Solitary meditation and private journaling can teach us a good deal about ourselves, but they have severe limits: they tend not to produce feedback beyond what our own minds can conceive. Unfortunately, we easily deceive ourselves, rationalize our moral struggles, and often either treat ourselves too harshly when we should be more gentle or treat ourselves gently when we should be more harsh. Israel Salanter, in articulating his early vision of Musar practice, suggested the primary problem with introspection is that “most of the time, the human being is mistaken about himself and does not recognize his faults and his negative character traits.” The solution, he writes, is as Pirkei Avot advises: a person must “acquire a friend”—someone “who will tell him his faults.”53 True friends offer thoughtful advice and criticism, helping to guide us toward God. Our moral improvement depends upon conversations with such friends.

Can conversations with our friends really be a sacred practice? On the one hand, the early leaders of the Musar movement warned about the moral dangers of conversation. Conversation was sometimes condemned as an idle, distracting form of pleasure; even more often, it was condemned for leading to the terrible sin of speaking negatively about others. “Solitude is better,” Salanter wrote, “for then one may certainly be saved from this grave and ubiquitous sin.” On the other hand, Salanter knew, as we saw above, that conversation can be a source of great good. If we can focus our speech prop-
erly, and develop friendships for the sake of heaven, then, surely, Salanter concludes, “friendship [hit-habb’rut] is better than solitude [hitbod’dut].”

The Musar movement saw such conversations between individual friends as a significant part of Musar practice; it also encouraged focused conversation between students and teachers; and it also advocated group conversation, where students could come together and explore their spiritual conditions. In the Musar movement, the institution of the va-ad musar—the “Musar group”—was designed to be a forum in which a group of Jews could help each other work through their moral struggles. A Musar group, at its best, can encourage participants to honestly share their experiences and to listen receptively to constructive criticism (tokheihah) and suggestions that are offered in response. Thoughtfully and lovingly pointing out the shortcomings of others can make an important contribution; on the other hand, as the Musar movement cautioned, criticism can be morally pernicious, if it is not offered with extreme sensitivity and love. Accordingly, helping people to see their strengths is often better than pointing out their faults.

There are many ways in which contemporary Jews engage in Musar work through conversation. Some of these are in more formalized settings, like the Musar groups established under the direction of Ira Stone’s Mussar Leadership Programs or Alan Morinis’s Mussar Institute. Members of such groups generally commit to focusing on the same character traits at the same time, and they meet regularly to explore how these traits play out in their lives and how they can be improved; the same sort of work may take place among study partners who commit to engaging in Musar together. Structured Musar work is also increasingly happening at seminaries, especially through chaplaincy training programs, in which small groups of students meet for ongoing reflection on how they care for people in need.

But similar conversations that lead to moral improvement often take place outside of such formalized contexts, and these, too, should be recognized as a form of Musar practice. Conversations among friends that help us to sort through our pasts, to understand our present conditions, and to envision our future journeys, are assuredly forms of Musar for our souls. The simple act of listening to the voices of others, as well, may help to shape us to be better people. So too, when teachers help us to confront the ways in which we resist change, when colleagues point out our strengths and help us to develop them, and when spouses keep us accountable, this is
Musar work. Such work frequently happens in rabbis’ offices, on therapists’ couches, and in Rosh Ḥodesh groups; it also happens in coffee shops, in bars, at dinner tables, and in countless other settings. Conversations that help us to walk in God’s ways are a key form of Musar practice that we should encourage and nurture.

Prayer

Putting one’s words into writing can be a powerful Musar practice; sharing one’s words with other people can be a powerful Musar practice; so too, sharing one’s words with God can be a powerful Musar practice. The Musar movement recognized not just the moral goodness of statutory prayer, but also the moral work that may occur when one addresses God with one’s own words. It emphasized, for example, the importance of the positive commandment verbally to confess one’s shortcomings to God, and saw how such a requirement forces introspection and moral consideration. There is much Musar work that can be accomplished through such confession, as well as through other sorts of conversations with God that focus on one’s moral situation.

Praying with the words of the liturgy, too, is a form of Musar practice. Reflecting on statutory prayer, Simḥah Zissel Ziv wrote that “prayer is Musar, disciplining the heart to serve God.” Prayer does not serve to remind God of anything, he noted, “for God does not need a reminder,” but its words remind us of things that we easily forget—above all, in Simḥah Zissel’s view, of our dependence on God’s goodness. Prayer also offers us a vision of that goodness, and of all the particular moral attributes that reach their ideal in God; such a vision helps to bring clarity to our minds, helping us to “distinguish between good and evil,” and prodding us to do God’s work in the world. Above all, as the liturgy focuses on God’s hopes for the world, prayer helps to re-orient our vision by teaching us to see the world from God’s perspective; as Simḥah Zissel pointed out, it combats our tendency to focus on our own interests, “to seek to alleviate one’s own pain rather than the pain of the Most High.” And, as the liturgy offers praise in response to God’s blessings, it “habituates us to recognize God’s goodness” and to become more grateful people. With proper intention, prayer may contribute toward tikkun—that is, toward the mending of human hearts.
Prayer ideally incorporates some of the practices mentioned above: it facilitates visualizations and it incorporates melodies that arouse the emotions. Even without melody, though, prayer can provide the sort of emotional arousal linked above with music. Putting time and effort into prayer can deeply affect the unconscious mind; it was taught in the Kelm school of the Musar movement that a student “should lengthen his prayers and pray contemplatively in the way of Musar—so his ears hear what his mouth is saying, and his heart understands, and he labors for the possibility that it makes an impression within him.”68 Engaged prayer has the potential to improve our characters; it can be a Musar practice that helps us to become more grateful, more clear-minded, more compassionate people.69

**Mitzvot Bein Adam La-makom**

Statutory prayer is a particular example within a larger category of obligations—*mitzvot bein adam la-makom*, the commandments that pertain to a person’s relationship with God, as distinguished from commandments that pertain to a person’s relationship with other people. As Maimonides explained, this category of commandments includes all those “whose purpose it is to bring about the achievement of a certain moral quality or of an opinion or the rightness of actions, which only concerns the individual personally and that person’s becoming more perfect.”70 These so-called “ritual” *mitzvot* are *mitzvot* that should make people into better people; they should instill moral and intellectual virtue, rather than aiming directly at regulating social life. But, as Maimonides goes on to indicate, they do typically influence social interactions. These commandments should shape our character for the better—functioning as a form of Musar—and, insofar as they do, they improve our behavior with others.

Ira Stone builds on this sort of understanding in urging the Conservative movement to take up the legacy of the Musar movement. “We understand,” he writes, “that the obligations that we take on, even the ritual obligations . . . are the stuff by which we fashion our humanity. It is the only answer to oppression, lawlessness, ruthlessness, and evil that is available to us.”71 Jeremy Kalmanofsky, responding to Stone, objects to such language, which too easily reduces all of Jewish life to ethics. Not every ritual obligation in the
Torah is ethical, he argues; for example, ethical grounds do not suffice to justify circumcision, “our celebratory ritual wounding of our infant sons’ genitals,” which hardly seems “ethical” at first glance.72

The Musar movement, unsurprisingly, did see circumcision as a ritual designed to shape our moral character. Simḥah Zissel Ziv argued that the ritual of circumcision should teach us to distance ourselves from the self-indulgent pursuit of sexual pleasure, which distances us from God. To drive this message home into the hearts of lustful men, he submitted, it is not enough to just teach the idea of sexual self-control; circumcision provides men with a clear symbol, a visual image that they see every day, designed to instill the idea more deeply into their character.73 There are other ways in which we might understand the moral significance of circumcision, and we should not ignore the multi-faceted meanings that all rituals have,74 but interpretations such as this can provide a model for how we can see ritual commandments as providing Musar, as helping to make us into better people.

Kalmanofsky is correct that many commandments lack clear, direct, ethical utility. But even when their meaning cannot be articulated, all of them can help to instill moral virtues in us—whether the virtue of compassion or the virtue of restraint, whether the virtue of order or the virtue of equanimity, whether the virtue of loving humanity or loving Israel or loving God. Even when some ritual details might seem arbitrary, seeing them as forms of Musar can help us to see how they can provide discipline for our souls. “The commandments were given only to purify human beings,” as the midrash puts it, and each commandment can help in this process.75 “Every commandment performed,” Israel Salanter taught, “impresses its mark upon the person.”76 While a given commandment may have no immediate utility, the traces that it leaves on our hearts can be of great ethical significance.

**Mitzvot Bein Adam La-haveiro**

The above practices are not often thought of as “ethical” practices; they are, rather, practices that can be a means to ethical behavior, helping us to do good deeds. But engaging in ethical behavior directly, doing good deeds, is also a practice that helps to discipline our hearts and prompts us to do further good deeds.77 Doing good deeds helps to build habits of goodness
within us. Engaging in moral behavior is an end in itself, but it is also a practice of Musar.

All of the mitzvot bein adam la-haveiro, the commandments that we are obligated to do for one another, are practices of Musar. Giving charity to others is good in itself, and it also trains us to become more generous and more compassionate people. Refraining from speaking badly of others is good in itself, and it trains us to be more morally sensitive people. Comforting the mourner is good in itself, and, like other “deeds of lovingkindness,” it helps to train us to be more attentive to people in need and to instill the virtue of love into our hearts. Fulfilling any such commandments “impresses its mark upon the person”—especially when we fulfill them repeatedly.78

Doing good deeds helps to improve our character. This is true of deeds that are listed in codes of Jewish law, and it is also true of other deeds that we recognize as morally good. Spending time with those who are home-bound can be part of the work of Musar; smiling at strangers we pass on the street can be part of the work of Musar; playing a game with our children, or taking our dogs for walks, or taking out the trash rather than waiting for someone else to do it—these can all be part of the work of Musar.

Other Practices

Text study, music, visualization, introspection, conversation, prayer, ritual mitzvot, and good deeds can all be practices of Musar, practices that help us to walk in God’s ways. But such a list of practices is hardly exhaustive. The methods of Musar, as Israel Salanter pointed out, are not easily defined. Every person needs to find the “stratagems” that can work for him or her, which will inevitably depend on his or her own nature and character.79 The Musar movement encouraged taking on specific “assignments” (kabbalot), particular activities often tailored to our particular moral situation.

To become better people, all of us need to work on particular character traits, and countless practices can help us develop any given character trait. Making one’s bed every morning can be an effective Musar practice,
encouraging our commitment to order; eating breakfast with real mindfulness can be an effective Musar practice, encouraging our awareness and our gratitude; washing the dishes can be an effective Musar practice, encouraging our alacrity, our cleanliness, and our love for those with whom we share space. For some of us, making efforts to speak less can be an important Musar practice; for some of us, making efforts to speak more can be an important Musar practice. For some of us, spending less time reading the news can be an important Musar practice; for some of us, spending more time reading the news can be an important Musar practice. 80 We can all come up with many other activities that could function as Musar practices, and, if we work with a partner or group, we can receive helpful suggestions and “assignments” from others.

Beyond such isolated practices, many hobbies and many vocations can serve as forms of Musar. We might especially learn from Simḥah Zissel Ziv’s illustrations of how the work we do in seeking our livelihoods can be an important aspect of Musar. Providing goods that contribute to the well-being of others, he noted, can help us to care for others. 81 So too, dealing honestly and respectfully with one’s customers can help to instill love in one’s heart.82 And particular occupations can nurture particular virtues: as Simḥah Zissel noted, the daily work that Moses did in shepherding Jethro’s flocks taught him a deep sense of humility and compassion, and these virtues made him fit to receive the Torah.83 Our daily labor in the world can have a corrosive effect on our characters (and for some it may have a merely neutral effect on our characters), but if we discover how it can change us for the good, our work can guide us toward walking in God’s ways.

* * *

The Conservative movement likes to see itself as a “halakhic movement” committed to Jewish law and as an intellectual movement committed to the study of Torah in the broadest sense. But although we should continue to emphasize that abiding by the law and studying Torah can help to shape us into better people, we should nevertheless not let this legal and intellectual focus cause us to forget the variety of Musar practices with which the Jewish people do and should engage. Oriented as it is by a moral vision—an
ethical “aggadah”—the Conservative movement would do well to respect and encourage the wide variety of paths toward moral goodness.

I have sought to illustrate some of these paths, practices that were encouraged by the nineteenth-century Musar movement. As many in that movement knew, these sorts of practices are not inherently morally good. On the contrary, text study can be a source of arrogance, music can be pernicious, visualization can be a source of distraction, introspection can lead to mistaken conclusions, conversation can promote hatred rather than love, and many of these sorts of activities can become sources of personal pleasure that take us away from our moral responsibilities. But such activities can also be profound forms of spiritual discipline that bring us closer to God. As we engage in Musar, vigilance is required to ensure that our practice is actually beneficial; the support of a partner or a group, here, is invaluable.

Such Musar work is not just an activity for a pious elite. In fact, we all, almost inevitably, engage in some form of Musar practice on a daily basis, though we probably do not recognize it as such. Recognizing even small examples of Musar in our lives can help us to take our efforts seriously and help us to develop more regular, more disciplined, and more effective patterns of behavior. Our encounter with the wider tradition of engaging in Musar, moreover, can help us to see what other sorts of practices we might adopt, and exploring Jewish reflections on these practices can build our appreciation of Jewish teaching on how to behave.

The Musar movement can deepen our sense of halakhah—broadly speaking, our tradition of how we should behave—through showing us our obligation to engage in the practices that best help us to walk in God’s ways. The remedies that can heal our fractured souls include the commandments that are explicit on the pages of the Torah, practices that unite us as a people; but they also include practices that are not explicit, and which must often be tailored to our individual natures. Such additional practices, Salanter’s student Rabbi Isaac Blazer indicated, should be catalogued and studied: just as pharmacologists compile the “medications for treatment of physical disease,” sages of Musar have sought to compile “medications and remedies for illnesses of the soul.” This essay has sought to draw on some of their efforts, and I hope that it will stimulate us to consider the many
ways in which our behavior can improve our character, and so bring us closer to God.

NOTES


3. Regarding the focus on ethics in modern Jewish thought, and the continued insistence by non-Orthodox Jews that Judaism must above all exemplify ethical excellence, see Eugene Borowitz, “The Pivotal Issue in a Century’s Jewish Thought,” Conservative Judaism 55:4 (Summer, 2003), pp. 11–15. A number of the responses to Stone’s proposal in Conservative Judaism 58:2–3 agreed that the Conservative movement’s “aggadah” should privilege our ethical responsibilities; note especially the contributions by Judith Hauptman and Judd Kruger Levingston.


7. For the many modern Jews who, following Spinoza and Mendelssohn, think that Judaism only requires certain external behaviors, the Musar movement might also seem to have been innovative by stressing the internal dimension of our lives. Although the Musar movement did emphasize the importance of inner virtue with particular force, such an understanding was not in my opinion a true innovation.

8. Along with the behavioral dimension, there is of course an “aggadah” here, a narrative describing how human beings resist change and easily give in to our evil inclinations. The Conservative movement would do well to adopt such a picture, rather than adopting, say, a naïve modernist faith in human goodness. But, as I have
suggested, *aggadot* taught by the Musar movement can easily be found in many other sources, and we need not adopt Salanter’s particular way of depicting our human struggle.


11. *V’halakhta bi-d’rakhav*, you shall walk in God’s ways, is the commandment given in Deuteronomy 28:9. For the explanation of the commandment, see Maimonides, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, commandment no. 8, and *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Dei·ot 1:6.

12. On the obligatory nature of Musar, see Salanter, “Or Yisra·el,” p. 44, article 3; Isaac Blazer, “Sha·arei Or,” in *Or Yisra·el*, pp. 31–32, article 8. The section from Salanter notes that the obligation to engage in Musar is equally incumbent upon men and women.


15. *M Pei·ah* 1:1; *BT* Shabbat 127a.


17. See Ziv, *Hokhmah U-Musar*, vol. 1, pp. 8–9, regarding the importance of simple stories that people—especially philosophers—tend to scorn.


24. On the ways in which study can sharpen the mind, see Salanter, “Or Yisrael,” pp. 78–79.

25. The latter is the suggestion of Goldberg in his Israel Salanter, cf., e.g., p. 139.


27. Blazer, “Shaarei Or,” p. 33. The word “symbol” here translates the Hebrew totafot. Blazer uses the plural form, which is the only form of the noun found in Scripture, e.g., at Exodus 13:1 or Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18.

28. Ibid., p. 32.

29. Ibid., p. 33.


31. See the recommendations of Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Musar (Boston: Trumpeter, 2007), pp. 32 and 269; and Stone, A Responsible Life, pp. 82–83.


34. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 66.

35. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 2–10 and 14; many of these texts are translated by Ira Stone in the appendix of A Responsible Life.

36. See e.g., Ziv, Hokhmah U-musar, vol. 2, pp. 22–23, where Simḥah Zissel invokes the image of a successful shopkeeper who is constantly restocking his shelves with new inventory—just as a person should constantly restock his or her spiritual resources.

37. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 9, following BT B’rakhot 28b.


39. Kitvei Ha-sabba Mi-kelm: Pinkas Ha-kabbalot (Bnei Brak: Siftei Ḥakhamim, Va-ad L’hafatzat Torah U-musar, 1984), p. 27; regarding the importance of this exercise at a time of anger, see the suggestion of Simḥah Zissel’s student Reuven Dov Dessler in Ha-sabba Mi-kelm, p. 193.


41. Alan Morinis makes this distinction in Everyday Holiness, p. 30.


51. Note the example of the Musar master Gershon Miadnik, in *Sefer Ha-zikkaron: Beit Kelm* (Bnei Brak: Siftei Ḥakhamim, Va·ad L’hafatzat Torah U-musar, 2002), p. 418.

52. The work of Merle Feld on writing as a spiritual practice has been especially important in this regard. See Merle Feld, *A Spiritual Life: Exploring the Heart and Jewish Tradition*, rev. ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).


54. Both quotes: Salanter, *Even Yisra·el*, p. 35; cf. the words of Salanter’s teacher, Yosef Zundel, printed in *Pinkas Ha-kabbalot*, p. 176.

55. Regarding the student-teacher relationship in the early Musar movement, see Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, p. 234; regarding Musar work in a group context, see Etkes, p. 237.

56. Regarding the institutionalization of the *va·ad musar* by a later Musar movement leader, influenced by models from the Jewish labor movement, see David E. Fishman, “Musar and Modernity: The Case of Novaredok,” *Modern Judaism* 8:1 (1988), pp. 41–64.


58. See *Sefer Ha-zikkaron*, p. 249.


60. Chaplaincy training conducted under the auspices of the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education has done a good deal to encourage this sort of Musar work.
(though, of course, not using the term “musar”). For a model of this in a Jewish seminary context, note the work of the Center for Pastoral Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary under the direction of Rabbi Mychal Springer. For another model of Musar work in a seminary context, note the program in Musar run by Rabbi Ira Stone at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

62. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 15 and 126.
63. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 10; see also vol. 2, p. 25.
64. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 4.
66. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 11.
67. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 15.
68. Pinkas Ha-kabbalot, p. 137.
69. For an expanded Musar approach to prayer, see Stone, A Responsible Life, pp. 121–141. For a summary of how prayer can impact our moral character, see Elliot N. Dorff, “The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism,” in Walking with Justice, eds. Bradley Shavit Artson and Deborah Silver (Bel Air, CA: Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, 2008), p. 32. For a longer exploration of this theme, see Max Kadushin, Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

71. Stone, “The Aggadah of the Conservative Movement,” pp. 14–15. Stone prefers to describe such “ritual” obligations as “interruptive” (as opposed to so-called “ethical” obligations, which he describes as “instantiative”), as explained in his new edition of Mesillat Yesharim (see above, note 21).
75. B’reishit Rabbah 44:1 and many other places in the literature.
77. This point has been reinforced by many thinkers, including medieval philosophers like Maimonides and contemporary philosophers like Lenn Goodman.
78. See Ethical Writings of Maimonides, trans. Weiss and Butterworth, p. 68 (from the “Eight Chapters,” chapter 4).
79. See Goldberg, Israel Salanter, p. 46; Etkes, Rabbi Israel Salanter, pp. 106–107.
80. As Jeremy Kalmanofsky points out in his response to Ira Stone, the leaders of the early Musar movement would have consistently advised the former; they saw modern newspapers as spiritually dangerous, focusing on the exploits of human beings while ignoring the goodness of God. See Ziv, Hokhmah U-musar, vol. 2,
p. 23. But, as many of us know, being in touch with what happens in the world can be a deeply moral endeavor.

81. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 95.
82. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 6–8.
83. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 8–9; see also Sh’mot Rabbah 2:2. For further discussion, see my essay, “Jewish Virtue Ethics and Compassion for Animals: A Model from the Musar Movement,” CrossCurrents 61:2 (2011), pp. 211–214.

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