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Abstract

This paper is an introductory comparative look at teachings of two spiritual figures in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Russia: Rav Yoseph Yozel (Horowitz) and George Gurdjieff. Yozel founded the Novarodok school of Mussar; Gurdjieff founded the spiritual tradition known as "the Work" or "Fourth Way." There are of course great differences between the Jewish tradition of Mussar, whose literature dates back to the Mishnah but which as a social movement was launched by Rabbi Israel Salantar in the late 19th century, and the Work, with its affinities to Eastern Christianity, Buddhism, and Sufism but with no apparent connection to Judaism. Still, some similarities are to be expected between spiritual disciplines. This paper touches on some similarities of spiritual exercises in the Mussar school of Novarodok (and secondarily in later Mussar teachings) and in the Gurdjieff Work, similarities that are interesting given the sharp differences in their Jewish and non-Jewish contexts.

Key words

Mussar, Yoseph Yozel Horwitz, The Work, Gurdjieff, work on oneself, spiritual exercises, peules, esotericism, revolutionary Russia

Introduction

Among the numerous spiritual teachers in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary Russia were Rav Yoseph Yozel Horowitz (1847-1919), whose students established Mussar yeshivas in Belarus, Ukraine, and even briefly in Moscow itself, and George Gurdjieff (1866-1949), who visited Moscow around 1912, when he was beginning his teaching mission. Yozel and Gurdjieff were never in the same place at the same time, but if their paths could have crossed and led to conversation, they would have found that despite their great differences, they had a lot in common.

Mussar (also spelled Musar), as a social movement within eastern European Jewry launched by Rav Israel Salantar (1809-1883), focused on the psychological-moral dimension of Jewish religious observance. Specifically, it aimed at the rectification of *middot*, character traits, in part as a way of strengthening the capacity of Jews to be Torah-observant and resist the allure of the *Haskalah* or the radical political movements of the time. The Novarodok (also spelled Novardok and Novaredok) school of Mussar launched by Rav Yozel was the most radical stream of this tradition.

The spiritual discipline taught by Gurdjieff commonly referred to as “the Work” is an esoteric tradition of inner work on oneself, aimed at the cultivation and expansion of consciousness, and centered in the practices of self-remembering and self-observation. It has affinities to Buddhism, Sufism, and Eastern Christianity, but no apparent connection to Judaism.

A thorough study of the similarities and differences between Jewish Mussar and the Gurdjieff Work is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here is on experiential aspects of these two traditions, specifically on a few spiritual exercises undertaken by followers. The approach here is thematic, not historical, so while the paper emphasizes exercises practiced in Novarodok yeshivas in the early 20th century, it also mentions other Mussar exercises – and also Work exercises – not restricted to these dates and locales.

Exercises

One of the aims of Novardok Mussar practice was strengthening of the character trait (*middah*), of *bitachon*, confidence or trust in God’s assistance in meeting the challenges that one confronts in religious observance and, more generally, in life. Here is an excerpt from Levin’s (1996) account of a Mussar exercise of this sort.

> Around Chanuka was the time for practicing complete and total reliance on God. Students would get a one way ticket to a distant destination with not a penny in their pockets. From there they endeavored to make their way back without asking anyone for help. Gaunt, pale, silent men that never asked for assistance were a common sight in Lithuanian towns and villages and kindhearted householders knew enough to offer them food and lodgings. (16-17)

If one has *bitachon*, one is not stymied by anxiety or worry. One has a kind of freedom, and while enhancing one’s freedom is not normally regarded as a goal of religious observance, it helps one to be able to perform *mitsvot* in the midst of social pressures and turbulent life situations.

Gurdjieff in effect gave a *bitachon* exercise to his student, Olga de Hartmann. He sent her off on an expedition to reclaim some objects left in a distant city. He also gave her a pill that she should take if she faced some emergency. I say “in effect” since while Gurdjieff often gave his students specific exercises, his sending Madame de Hartmann on this trip was not cast explicitly as an exercise. Also, the *bitachon* he was striving to instill in her was not confidence in heavenly assistance, but in her own capacity to face and overcome difficulty, although one might view the pill he gave her as a promise of extraordinary assistance should she find herself in need of it. Here is what Thomas de Hartmann wrote (1964: 124) about Gurdjieff sending his wife on this adventure:

> Mr Gurdjieff immediately decided that someone had to go to Essentuki to get what was left of our things and also to try to find the carpets he had stored there. A man could not go, because he would certainly be seized by either the White or the Red Army. It had to be one of our women, and Mr Gurdjieff decided that my wife was the only one who would be able to accomplish such a task.

And here is what Olga de Hartmann wrote (130) upon her return from this adventure:

> For Mr Gurdjieff, certainly, the carpets were not important, nor were our belongings to us. They were just a pretext to have me thrown alone into life, to see how I could manage in conditions far more difficult than anyone, even Mr Gurdjieff, could imagine in advance. And most important of all was to see whether we both could accept such a task and deal with it.

Gurdjieff wanted to instill *bitachon* in Madame de Hartmann. It appears that in those days sending people on a train trip was an ideal way to pose challenges to an acolyte.

A second type of Mussar exercise aimed at achieving freedom from concern with the opinion of others about oneself. Levin (18) writes,

> Before Purim they practiced boldness of spirit and disregard for ridicule for "Mordechai did not rise nor tremble" (Esther 5:9). A student would repeatedly go to a hardware store and ask for flour or to a grocery and ask for nails. Some entered strangers' homes on the Shabbos afternoon and asked for bread for their third Sabbath meal, for this was described in the Musar work, *Yesod Hatshuva*, as an act of courage. Some students paraded down the city streets in muddy and tattered clothing. In this fashion they trained themselves not to fear ridicule. Some Novarodokers generally wore poorly fitting apparel and at times made public spectacles of themselves, in order to teach themselves the inner fortitude and courage to stand in opposition to the whole world, if necessary, and to pursue their goals without flinching.

Exercises such as the Chanukah exercise and the Purim exercise were referred to as *peules*. Fishman (1988: 48) writes

> A *peule* was an exercise or operation undertaken by the individual student to improve his character. It was designed to uproot a specific moral defect of which the student was aware and involved the repeated performance of acts which embodied the opposite virtue in the extreme. Since pride, arrogance, and the quest for social esteem were considered the ubiquitous vices of yeshiva-students, they were the object of most *peules*. Asking a druggist for nails (or for butter), or walking down the street dressed in a repulsive, ridiculous manner, were *peules* for uprooting pride and the drive for social prestige and instilling in their place humility and an indifference toward honor.

The exercise of deliberately putting oneself in embarrassing situations is one also found in the Gurdjieff tradition. An acquaintance (Casteel 2021) with extensive personal experience in Work groups informed me that this exercise is given in groups. He cited the example of a group member who went into a copy shop that had a sign in the window that said “Reproduction services,” and asked for help in getting pregnant. This exercise may have been given in early Work groups as well, since Gurdjieff greatly emphasized the harmfulness of what he called “internal considering.” Ouspensky (1949) writes about this mental habit,

> Later on I understood what G. called [internal] "considering," and realized what an enormous place it occupies in life and how much it gives rise to. G. called "considering" that attitude which creates inner slavery, inner dependence. (23)

> On the most prevalent occasions a man is identified with what others think about him, how they treat him, what attitude they show towards him. He always thinks that people do not value him enough, are not sufficiently polite and courteous. All this torments him, makes him think and suspect and lose an immense amount of energy on guesswork, on suppositions, develops in him a distrustful and hostile attitude towards people…what somebody thought of him, what somebody said of him—all this acquires for him an immense significance. (151)

The Mussar Purim exercise did not aim at cultivating *indifference* towards others. While striving not to be concerned about what others thought of them, Mussarniks were urged to be greatly concerned about how they could help meet the needs of others. One of Rav Yozel's sayings (Levin: 130) made a clear distinction between these types of concern:

> One must accustom oneself not to reflect on other people at any time except when one considers how best to benefit them.

Gurdjieff also contrasted "internal considering" with "external considering," which corresponds closely though not exactly to Rav Yozel's distinction. Ouspensky (153) writes about this practice as follows.

> The opposite of internal considering and what is in part a means of fighting against it is external considering. External considering is based upon an entirely different relationship towards people than internal considering. It is adaptation towards people, to their understanding, to their requirements. By considering externally a man does that which makes life easy for other people and for himself.

Gurdjieff's instructions were identical with those of Rav Yozel: never to engage in internal considering – how one is seen by others – but always to engage in external considering, how to benefit others, and perhaps also oneself. Of course to the extent that one is motivated by possible benefit to oneself, a Mussar evaluation of an act of external considering would regard it *lo lishma*, not properly motivated. But, pace Levinas, self-interest is not alien to Jewish ethics.

I titled this short essay "Mussar and Esotericism in Revolutionary Russia" using "esotericism" to refer to the Gurdjieff Work. But the idea of esotericism applies just as well to Mussar. The Purim exercise and its Work equivalent, for example, require an inner intentionality that is invisible on the outside. While the word "esoteric" is normally taken to mean a doctrine that is kept secret from outsiders, a deeper use of this word refers to such private inner activity. A person committed to the practice of such exercises has an ongoing conscious and intentional inner life, given higher priority than the person's outer life. In the Gurdjieff literature this practice is often referred to as "work on

oneself." Not surprisingly, this phrase appears frequently in the biography (Weintraub 2020) of Rav Yozel. Work on oneself was not done in a solitary way, but in groups. Mussar groups were called *va'adim*; Gurdjieff once referred to groups who pursued his teachings as "special clubs."

Other Mussar practices supplemented the Chanukah and Purim exercises. Fishman (48) writes,

> The performance of these acts constituted the core of Novaredok's program of character development. *Peules* were carefully planned, conscientiously repeated, and scrutinized after the fact for their personal impact. *Va'ad* meetings frequently reviewed the *peules* performed by members, and debated their efficacy and/or harmful "side effects."

The Chanukah and Purim exercises were aimed at acquiring freedom from fears and habits, from the expectations and judgments of others, and from the demand of ego for self-esteem and the esteem of others. There is another type of spiritual exercise that also can be seen as aiming at enhancing personal freedom that does not, however, require special circumstances at all. These are practices which in contemporary Buddhist terminology one might call "mindfulness" exercises. They deal with our immediate reactions to the stream of impressions we constantly receive from our internal and external worlds. Our lack of freedom is rooted in being dominated by these ultra-rapid reactions. If we can see them immediately as they arise, we see this slavery and gradually over time can become freer from it. Levin (129) quotes Yozel as observing,

> A person often allows his mind to become an open inn. People and ideas come and go, leaving behind thoughts and impressions, while the owner stands there at the door in astonishment and does not know his own soul.

Although this quote by Yozel shows that he was aware of the power of the owner's thoughts and impressions, I have not encountered evidence that among the Novarodok *peules* there was the exercise of trying to pay attention to these thoughts and impressions and observe them as an ongoing practice. However, one does find this practice explicitly in the later Mussar teachings of Wolbe (1914-2005), who advocated *hitlamdut*, literally self-study (1966, 1986). This entailed observing one's internal state and external behavior in any situation with an attitude of curiosity and wish to learn, not only situations involving *mitsvot* but also situations unconnected with any formal religious observance, and even situations far from routine. Wolbe even suggested that a person facing approaching death might adopt the stance of *hitlamdut* towards his own situation. And Wolbe's teaching was not solely directed internally. In keeping with Yozel's quote along these lines mentioned above, Wolbe's *hitlamdut* exercises included one of trying to directly see what is needed by another person.

Similarly, Gurdjieff gave great emphasis on inner work connected to the taking in of impressions. Very similarly to the above quote from Yozel, Ouspensky writes (188),

> …we do not feel ourselves, are not aware of ourselves at the moment of a perception, of an emotion, of a thought or of an action.

Mindfulness efforts to gain such awareness are central to the Work and are referred to as "self-remembering" and "self-observation." Self-remembering is the practice of divided attention in which one directs some attention inwardly while also maintaining outward attention to one's external actions and to the environment. Self-observation is a more intentionally planned self-study in which one tries to directly observe thoughts, feelings, and actions in particular situations. *Hitlamdut* resembles self-observation and invariably also generates self-remembering.

Summary

Spiritual traditions generally offer their followers exercises to bring them to new experiences. I have emphasized the enhancement of personal freedom that these exercises and experiences can foster. Garb (2009: 82-83, 2015: 74) has stressed that these practices foster individuality and even verge on being anomic. Personal freedom, individuality, and independence from authority are obviously connected.

There is certainly much more to be said about the practical aspects of Mussar and Work spirituality; about the doctrines that guide practical work; about how self-study can be a kind of "inner science" (Zwick 2010) in which the experimenter, experimental apparatus, and the phenomena being investigated are the spiritual seeker him- or herself; about the charismatic personalities of Yozel and Gurdjieff and about the revolutionary situation that these two teachers found themselves in Russia and also the similarities between revolutionary circles and esoteric circles. This paper is just a preliminary reconnaissance.

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