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Mussar and the Renewal of Judaism

Martin Zwick
Portland State University, zwick@pdx.edu

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Abstract

In its neglect of *Mussar*, Judaism has been missing a big opportunity. No other component of Jewish thought and practice -- neither *Halachic* observance, nor mysticism or *Chasidut*, nor commitment to Israel, nor Jewish culture, nor action for social justice – can serve as well as *Mussar* as a vital center of a renewed Judaism and a unifying factor that can appeal to every kind of Jew.

Imagine a group

Imagine a group of about 10 people, a *minyan*, gathering together every week to discuss their spiritual/psychological/moral work. The group is dedicated to *tikkun midot*, to the refinement of character traits, and to *mitsvot* having a clear psychological and moral meaning. At the weekly meeting, each person talks about the specific efforts he or she has made during the week and the experiences which accompanied or followed these efforts. Sometimes the leader of the group gives an exercise which everyone attempts during the week. This provides a common theme and builds a foundation of common experience. Over the long term, however, each member of the group develops his or her own individual line of practice, corresponding to personal needs, hopes, and life situation. No religious belief is required for participation in this undertaking, only a willingness to "work on oneself." The focus is experiential. Intellectual talk, pieties, and discussions of doctrine are discouraged unless they support concrete efforts. "Encounters" between individuals are generally avoided but not excluded. Everyone's work is his or her own, but each person's practice supports the practice of everyone else. What a person chooses to reveal or conceal is a personal choice which is respected.

This is a *Mussar* group, or – to be honest here – an idealization of one, but something *like* this was instituted by Rabbi Israel Salanter who launched the *Mussar* movement in the late 19th century, and something *like* this could characterize a *Mussar* group today or in the future. Salantar drew on a stream of psychological-moral-spiritual teachings in Judaism which dates back to *Pirke Avot* and early Jewish wisdom literature, and is embodied in the ethical commentaries of Maimonides and the mystical teachings of Luzzato. This tradition continues today in popular Mussar writers such as Zelig Pliskin and Alan Morinis. Mussar overlaps with *Halacha*, but has a different character. Absent in it is a concern for ritual or law or belief; instead its focus is the refinement of character. For example, *Avot* declares that the mighty are those who conquer their *yetser*, their impulses, such as the impulse of anger. It is one thing to acknowledge that this would constitute mightiness; it is quite another thing to actually have such might. Repeating this homily or adorning it with commentary does not accomplish this conquest. The point is *how* to achieve it, or more precisely, how even to *try* to achieve it. In a *Mussar* group, members might undertake such an attempt. They might, for example, experiment with the non-expression of anger, or try to catch the earliest onset of anger or its most subtle manifestation, or try to see the attitudes they have that justify its uncontrolled expression. Or, a theme might be the commandment to love another as

Email: mazwick@gmail.com

oneself. The interest of members of a *Mussar* group would be in *how* one can actually attempt to follow this commandment, and what happens when one tries to do so? The Torah enjoins "*Lo titor*": do not bear a grudge. The aim of members of a Mussar group might be to see their own "internal accounts," and to voluntarily sacrifice their attachment to these accounts.

There are relatively few *Mussar* groups in existence today, or at least one hears little about them. In some Orthodox schools, young students are taught *Mussar*, but this is different from the kind of adult group work just described, and *Mussar* for the young is not what Salantar originally had in mind. What he wanted was a new organizing principle for religious practice, not among the *lomdim*, the scholars, but among the *ba'aley batim*, the ordinary Jewish householders. This did not in fact occur, but Salantar's vision is no less critical today than it was in the late-19th century when he launched his undertaking. Salantar conceived of *Mussar* as a response to the challenge that traditional Judaism encountered in the *Haskala,* the movement for secular learning. Since then the challenge of modernity to tradition has greatly increased. Though as a response to *Haskala* and more generally to modernity, *Mussar* was not successful, it was at least a response, more creative than the strategy of insularity taken by the ultra-orthodox, and more principled than the acceptance of aspects of modernity that defines Modern Orthodoxy. For Judaism to thrive in the modern world, modernity can neither be rejected nor just accommodated; the spiritual resources within modernity must be recognized and utilized on behalf of tradition. In *Mussar* Salantar in fact did this but not explicitly. Wishing to protect Jewish society from its influences of modernity, he brought the naturalistic and psychological perspectives of the modernity of his time – the legacy of the Enlightenment – into the service of Jewish tradition.

The revival and development of *Mussar* is what Judaism needs today. In its neglect of *Mussar*, Judaism has been missing a big opportunity. No other component of Jewish thought and practice – neither *Halachic* observance, nor mysticism or *Chasidut*, nor commitment to Israel, nor Jewish culture, nor action for social justice – can serve as well as *Mussar* as a vital center of a renewed Judaism and a unifying factor which can appeal to every kind of Jew. This is a completely unfamiliar proposition, which may on first hearing sound utterly implausible. To make a case for this assertion is the purpose of this paper. Its first part argues that *Mussar* should – and could in principle – assume a central role in Judaism. Its second part considers what would be needed in practice for *Mussar* to play such a role.

Mussar should assume a central role

Mussar should and could play a central role in Judaism for several reasons:

- It is what is important.
- It can appeal to every kind of Jew.
- It is a grounded form of Jewish spirituality.
- It is both contemporary and traditional.
- It is both uniquely Jewish and universal.

Mussar is what is important

The goals of *Mussar* are what is important in Judaism, and what is important should be given priority. Every tradition has to get its priorities right, and have the courage to make these priorities explicit. The prophets denied the value of temple sacrifices if people did not act morally and if society was corrupt. When Hillel was asked to summarize Torah while standing on one foot, he said, "What you would not like done to you, do not do to others. For the rest, go and study." These are Judaism's real priorities, but these priorities are not acknowledged and explicitly affirmed today. Instead, the intricacies of *Halacha*, for example the complex details of *kashrut* or *Shabbat* prohibitions, accumulated over centuries, are today's temple sacrifices. To many of the Orthodox, the laws of *kashrut* are more important than the proper treatment of laborers, and certainly more obligatory than the conquest of *yetser*. Jewishness is graded by a person's observance of *Halacha*, but *mitsvot* and *Halachot* that relate to work on character and behavior are not as salient as those that relate to prayer and ritual practice. It would be an unusual *Halachically*-oriented rabbi today who would answer as Hillel answered.

It might be argued that the entire fabric of *Halacha* supports work on character, but one must still distinguish central from peripheral, what directly supports this work from what, to the best of our understanding, only does so marginally. Those aspects of Torah and *mitsvot* and prayer which sustain and guide work on character need to be accorded much greater weight than they are given today, and relative to this, some aspects of *Halacha* need to be downgraded in importance. The Talmud quotes God as saying, "Would that my people forget me, if only they would follow my ways." Which ways, followed despite the forgetting of God, would evoke an affirming *Dayenu* in both heaven and earth? The ways of *tikkun midot*, the struggle of perfecting character and its consequences in action.

Mussar can appeal to every kind of Jew

In *Mussar*, there is a Judaism that could be meaningful to every kind of Jew. Mussar can speak to the secular – even atheist – Jew and to the *Haredi*. It is a Judaism to which all Jews can subscribe, and not merely subscribe, but find compelling. Secular and *Haredi* could meet on the common ground of work on the rectification of character. In doing so, neither would need to compromise their convictions or commitments. In common *avoda* (work) on *midot*, secular and *Haredi* would gain – indeed, earn – respect for one another, and in such mutual respect, there is the potential for healing the deep divisions that exist within the Jewish people, especially in Israel. Mutual toleration is inadequate as a basis for the unity of *Klal Yisrael*; *Ahavat Yisrael* is also inadequate; even sharing a common fate is inadequate. If there is to be hope that the scorn and incomprehension that afflicts relations between Orthodox and secular could be dissipated and replaced with respect and understanding, such hope might be realized through shared *Mussar* work.

There is nothing that will appeal to every Jew, but *Mussar* can appeal to every *kind* of Jew, and only in what can speak to every kind of Jew is the vision of "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" conceivable. One will never persuade every kind of Jew to

observe *Shabbat* or put on *tfillin* to hasten the coming of the Messiah, but one might attract every kind of Jew to the challenge of work on *middot*.

Mussar also bypasses a major source of tension between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox, namely the role of women. In contemporary Orthodoxy, *Mussar* is a sphere of activity in which the activity of women is relatively unproblematic. Ironically, this is a reflection of the marginality of *Mussar* within *Halachic* tradition, but it is precisely this marginality which leaves *Mussar* unencumbered by the vast accumulations of *Halacha*. This marginality is an opportunity. In the sphere of *Mussar*, men and women can participate as equals.

Mussar is necessary for Jewish social activism. When activism becomes distorted and fails or produces effects opposite to those intended, it is often the consequence of the character limitations of the activists rather than of the strength of opposition to social justice. Work on *middot* is necessary – though not sufficient – for *tikkun olam*.

Mussar is a form of Jewish spirituality

Externally, *Mussar* is about being responsible, acting ethically, being a *mensch*. But there is a problem in this: trying to be good is boring – both to oneself and to others. What is needed, as William James put it, is "the moral equivalent of war." A *Mussar* only about ethics will not inspire. It might even be ethically stultifying and thus counterproductive. Pure Kant is oppressive; one needs at least a dash of Spinoza, if not Nietzsche.

Mussar is actually about more than being good. To use imagery from Exodus, work on character is reaching for freedom, liberation from *Mitsra'im*. Everyone must not only imagine having been liberated from Egypt, but must actually leave Egypt. Freedom is the precondition for receiving *Torah*, though *Torah* also provides instructions for achieving freedom. Freedom internally *is* freedom from bondage to inner impulses (*yetser*) and to outer influences, not only for the sake of our behavior towards the other, overemphasized by Levinas, but for ourselves. Being good is impossible without being free, and being free is sacred in and of itself; it is an inherent aspect of holiness. And in the search for freedom *Mussar* can also be enhanced by the spiritual ideas and values of modernity.

Becoming free requires self-knowledge. As Salantar argued, this can be supported by study but cannot be gained by study – or ritual practice. It can be acquired only through a personal struggle that by reaching towards heaven refines soul. *Avot* tells us that this struggle requires courage because its difficulty involves risk and sacrifice, but as some of our sages maintained, it is for *this* purpose that *Torah* was given. Spinoza writes, "All things excellent are difficult as they are rare." While Spinoza denied much of Jewish belief, his teaching on salvation was in the spirit of *Mussar*.

Jewish spirituality is often associated with *Kabbalah* or *Chasidut*. Authentic *Kabbalah* is mostly inaccessible, but Zalman Schachter and Schlomo Carlebach pried *Chasidut* from sectarian hands and with it launched the religious but non-Orthodox movement of Jewish

Renewal. If *Chabad* can get over its messianic *meshugaas*, its very attractive *Ahavat Yisrael* might still further expand its impact. But *Chasidut* alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by *Mussar*, the spiritual flower of the *Mitnagdic* tradition. Yin requires Yang. *Mussar* is *Gevurah* to the *Chesed* of *Chasidut*.

Mussar is inner and outer practice. Outwardly, it concerns external behavior, in which the commandment to love God with all one's heart and might becomes the injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself. This extends from interpersonal relations to the collective social order. Inwardly, the arrow is reversed: the commandment to love one's neighbor becomes the injunction to love God, that is, to act "for the sake of Heaven"; in secular language, to be true to the highest aspect of oneself, to the highest human possibilities. In its cultivation of the capacity for action that is simultaneously inward and outward, *Mussar* is a Jewish esotericism of ethics.

Mussar is both contemporary and traditional

Mussar can be thoroughly modern and compatible with science and humanism, while at the same time being distinctively and traditionally Jewish. In the encounter of tradition with modernity, what is needed is not merely reconciliation, but the possibility of a truly productive union. Modernity cannot just be a basis for discarding elements of tradition, or for shallow innovation or tactical compromise. In all such maneuvers, modernity brings nothing *of its own* to the table – though it might contribute to the dinner negatively by whisking away some stale or unappetizing dishes. But modernity actually has some nourishing dishes that it can bring to the table, not merely appetizers or deserts, but main dishes, such as methods of psychotherapy, advances in psychiatry and neuroscience, approaches to the spiritual via transpersonal psychology, etc. Freud and Salanter, or their heirs, could be brought into dialog to the benefit of both. (Perhaps a creative playwright with Shaw's talents could put these two together on stage.) The spiritual and the psychological are interdependent, and much could be gained from the interaction of ancient traditions of the spiritual and modern traditions of the psychological.

To use a different metaphor: what we have today between Judaism and modernity is resigned cohabitation, uninspired compromise, endless bickering, if not actual divorce. What is needed by this couple is actual *mating* from which vigorous and fertile offspring might issue. In none of the denominations or movements within Judaism is this mating taking place, but *Mussar* may be the aspect of Judaism most compatible with such a productive union.

Mussar is uniquely Jewish and universal

It is a distinctive feature of the current era that all of the spiritual traditions in the world are now in dialog with one another. Judaism has new interactions with Eastern traditions, analogous to those enriching – and also challenging – encounters it had in the past with Greco-Roman culture, Islam, and European Christianity and the Enlightenment. Many young Israelis, after their military service, spend time in India and other parts of Asia, and come back to Israel with an interest in the relationship between Judaism and eastern religions. A surprisingly large fraction of Buddhist teachers today are Jews, and Jewish involvement in Buddhism partly accounts for the emergence of meditation as part of

Jewish spiritual practice. While meditation is not directly central to *Mussar*, it is a a critical supporting element of any work on *tikkun midot*.

A possible interaction of Judaism with Confucianism might occur in the not-too-distant future. Such an interaction could develop after Confucianism is revived in China, which is very likely to occur after the inevitable collapse and disappearance of China's official communist ideology. Eventually the Chinese people will surely reclaim their own Axial traditions as the basis of culture. There is a small but growing interest in China today in Judaism and Jewish people and history, and Confucianism has many points of contact with *Mussar*. Confucianism has doctrines similar to those of *kibbush ha'yetser* and *tikkun ha'yetser* and practices similar to *cheshbon ha'nefesh*. Ethics is as central to Confucianism as it is to Judaism.

Mussar is a tradition within Judaism in which interactions with other religious traditions could proceed creatively without raising inter-faith difficulties. "In this age," Heschel wrote, "religious pluralism is the will of God." So, not only is *Mussar* uniquely adapted for engagement with secular modernity, it is also uniquely adapted for the interactions of Judaism with other religious traditions, interactions which are increasingly occurring in modernity and post-modernity. *Mussar* has both a venerable past and a recent flowering which is quintessentially Jewish, but it is also universal, and so is a area of potentially fruitful dialog with other traditions.

What is needed for *Mussar* to play such a central role

Unfortunately, it would not actually be easy for *Mussar*, in its original form, to play this kind of important role in Judaism. There are impediments to its playing such a role, and requirements that would need to be satisfied for this to be possible. These difficulties are not insuperable. Some of them are the following:

- *Mussar* doctrine itself needs *tikkun*, expansion, and clarification.
- Its public development requires independent *Mussar* institutions.
- Charismatic and principled teachers are needed.

Mussar doctrine itself needs *tikkun*, expansion, and clarification

The legacy of Salantar is in need of *tikkun* because it is flawed in several ways: (1) its overemphasis on *Yir'at Hashem*, fear of God; (2) its negative attitudes towards the body; (3) its weak links to other transformative practices in Judaism; (4) its abandonment of Salantar's original aim of serving *ba'aley batim* – adult 'householders,' in favor of a focus on schoolchildren, especially adolescents; (5) its negative attitudes towards the *Haskalah*.

Salantar stressed the fear of divine punishment as motivation for work on character, but this emphasis, in the modern era, does not have either intellectual credibility or moral respectability. *Yir'at Hashem* remains a religious principle of great value, but it means – or could mean – something different than divine punishment for *Halachic* infractions. In the context of *Mussar*, it means – or could mean – the fear of failure to develop, to

perfect oneself, the fear of remaining forever at the same level of imperfection, the fear of never becoming a *mensch*.

Salantar also regarded the suppression of physical impulses as one of the greatest challenges of *Mussar*. The impulses of the body of course need to be controlled, but a negative attitude towards the body is an error. One must hold instead with the views of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, who recognized in the physical labor of the early (and secular) Zionist pioneers a form of sacred service. Actually, Salantar himself had great respect for the body as a necessary physical support for any form of *avodah*; his doctor said that Salantar was his best patient because he regarded the responsible care of his own body as *Halachically* mandated.

The practical orientation of *Mussar* reflects its groundedness in ordinary human life, which is one of its virtues. Salantar was distant from the mysticism of *Kabbalah* and the ecstasy of *Chasidut*, and this distance has helped maintain *Mussar* as a distinct tradition within Judaism. And yet, since every separation must be balanced by integration, *Mussar* needs a connection with the more mystical and emotional traditions within Judaism. To a certain extent, a connection with Kabbalah is already established in the uses by *Mussar* of the Kabbalist hierarchy of the soul of *ruach*, *nefesh*, and *neshama*. There needs also to be a link with the newly emerging practices of Jewish meditation. Any esotericism, i.e., any psychological-spiritual work that is simultaneously internal and hidden and also external and manifest, gains deep support from meditative practice.

The doctrine of Mussar was originally intended as a voluntary activity for mature adults, *ba'aley batim*, who have families and jobs. It was not oriented towards children, but that is where it came to experience its greatest growth and vitality – in the *yeshivot* of Kelm, Novaradok, and other locales. Today, a number of yeshivot have *Mussar mashgichim* (mentors, counselors). Yet, for adolescents, the overwhelming power of sexual development, the seductive lure of esotericism, and the irresistible pressure of the peer group is a volatile and explosive mix. *Mussar* should not be a way to get teenagers to suppress their bodily impulses. It should remain a practice for adults, as Salantar originally conceived it. Indeed, one might impose the same requirement conventionally established for the study of *Kabbalah*: *Mussar* should only be undertaken by adults over 40. This is just rhetoric, but the point here is that young persons, in their teens, even in their 20s, are probably not at the ideal age for *Mussar* practice.

Mussar doctrine needs to confront and *utilize* modern psychological theory. Each has much to learn from the other, but the relationship between the spiritual and psychological is complex and not free of hazard. It would be interesting to see what would develop from an encounter of *Mussar* with various schools of psychology (gestalt, transpersonal, behavioral, etc.). More generally, ideas and methods of modernity about psychological, moral, and spiritual development should, where appropriate, be integrated with traditional *Mussar* ideas and methods. Salantar developed *Mussar* as a weapon against *Haskalah*, but he himself utilized worldly learning in developing his ideas and methods. Rather than being a closed tradition that protects Jewish identity by sealing Jews inside its ten cubits, *Mussar* could nourish Jewish identity by the opposite approach – by

appropriating and integrating deep truths about the psyche that modernity offers, and even truths that other traditions have to offer. *Mussar* theorists and practitioners should have the confidence – the *bitachon* – that the Jewish character of *Mussar* will be strengthened and intensified from this encounter, not weakened or diluted.

The public development of *Mussar* requires independent institutions

Social movements need supporting institutions. For *Mussar* to gain recognition as a distinct tradition within Judaism, it needs distinct institutions that are independent of other religious or community organizations. If *Mussar* is only one component of a multi-purpose religious program, it will add meaning and vitality to the program, but it will not help establish a common ground for all kinds of Jews. For example, *Mussar* taught as part of Orthodox outreach to secular Jews will be subordinated – either explicitly or implicitly – to the goal of proselytizing. Such use of *Mussar* is a welcome development, and adds to the public appreciation of *Mussar*, but it still serves a different agenda. The purpose of a *Mussar* institution should not be to entice people to become *ba'aley tshuvah*, but to establish a common and deep core of Jewishness in every different kind of Jew.

What would a Mussar institution be like? One possible composition of its faculty might be the following. At least half of the senior staff should be rabbis and scholars who practice or study *Mussar*. Another third of the senior staff might, however, come from the secular fields of psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, philosophy, and the like. An additional sixth of the senior staff might come from other religious traditions. In this multi-disciplinary faculty, there would be the opportunity for productive interaction between *Mussar* and modernity and between Judaism and other religious traditions. Although the largest group would consist of dedicated *Mussar* practitioners and scholars, the secular group would not be mere enrichment; tradition and modernity would meet on equal terms. A minimum number of senior staff might be about seven or eight, six having long term (several year) appointments, plus one or two short term visitors. Six permanent faculty is adequate for critical mass, but this would mean only three *Mussar* specialists, two secular faculty, and one person from another tradition; double this would of course be more effective. Ideally there would be three such institutions, one in Israel, one in the United States, and one in Europe, with strong interactions between the three; as the Talmudic saying goes, a triple-stranded bond is not easily broken.

Money to create these institutions would need to come from farsightful donors who understood the potential of *Mussar* for reclaiming the ethical/moral/spiritual priorities of Judaism and healing the great rift that now divides the religious and the secular.

Charismatic and principled teachers are needed

Spiritual practice requires spiritual leaders, who must be charismatic to gain followers and principled to be worthy of being followed. In the spiritual arena everything depends on the quality of the people who are involved. If they are not inspired and responsible,

the enterprise will fail. For *Mussar* to have a strong impact on Judaism and Jewry, there needs to be one or more major figures in its leadership. It isn't possible to guarantee the emergence of such figures – funding itself cannot produce leaders and institutions usually inhibit their emergence – but it is possible to create conditions that allow for and perhaps even foster such emergence. If an institutional framework is established which maintains a high level of spiritual practice and intellectual inquiry, and if this framework succeeds in generating significant interest in *Mussar* in the Jewish public, leaders will surely arise or will migrate from other realms of Jewish life to take their places in this old yet new and vital Jewish project.

But this is not to say that a figure of the stature of the *Ba'al Shem Tov* is needed, or in general that this can be a top-down undertaking. The success of this endeavor depends on a bottom-up revival of interest among Jews in this important but still relatively unknown tradition within Judaism. There are indications that such a revival of interest is in fact occuring today. Having major *Mussar* institutions in America, Israel, and Europe would accelerate and solidify this revival.

Afterthought

> "For want of vision, the people perish."
>
> "If you wish it, it is no legend."

A manifesto, by definition, must be expressed with conviction, but in the real world nothing significant is certain. One could rephrase what is argued above in terms of a sequence of questions: Is this analysis about the potential importance of *Mussar* for a renewal of Judaism in fact correct? If it is correct, is the realization of this program actually feasible? If it is feasible, will the people who have the capacity to realize this program decide to try to do so? If they try, will they succeed?

Mussar was not exactly scorned over the ages, but it never occupied a salient position within Judaism. It could, however, today become a cornerstone of a Judaism rebuilt. If not now, when?