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Transforming Ethical Behavior: The Musar Movement and the Care of the Self

Because that people has approached Me
with its mouth,
And honored Me with its lips,
But has kept its heart far from me,
And its worship of me has been
A commandment of men, learned by rote –
Truly, I shall further baffle that people
With bafflement upon bafflement;
And the wisdom of its wise shall fail;
And the prudence of its prudent shall vanish.

Isaiah 29:13

R. Israel ben Ze'ev Wolf Lipkin, better known as Israel Salanter (1810–1883), was born in Zhogory, Lithuania. He studied under the ethicist R. Yosef Zundel, whose teacher had been the Vilna Gaon. As a young man, Salanter observed that many Jews were punctilious in ritual but not in ethical observance – that “tradition” had become inertia and habit, routine and indifference, and mechanical performance and unself-consciousness. Regarding the Torah as the source of virtuous human relationships, he believed *all* the mitzvot were equally important. He found inspiration in the humble and ethical behavior of Zundel and the Vilna Gaon, and modeled himself after them. He became the principal founder and architect of the Musar Movement, which radiated from Lithuania, Poland, and Russia in the 19th century to much of the Ashkenazi Jewish world in the 20th.¹ *Musar*, the Hebrew name for the movement, derives from Proverbs, and means ethics, while also connoting discipline, instruction, and conduct.² Salanter, who opposed emancipation at the price of assim-

¹ While Musar, as a movement, might be moribund, it is anything but as a practice. Recently, if ironically, it has become particularly popular in Reform Judaism.

² The relevant verses from Prov. 2:1–4 read: “For learning wisdom and discipline; / For understanding words of discernment; / For acquiring the discipline for success, / Righteousness, justice, and equity; / For endowing the simple with shrewdness, / The young with knowledge and foresight.” Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the NJPS (*New Jewish Publication Society TANAKH*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).

lation, believed in the Haskalah (i.e., Jewish Enlightenment)³ from within (free choice) rather than from without (coercion and deception). Not principally a writer but rather an original and creative teacher, Salanter became the Rosh yeshiva of the innovative Slobodka yeshiva, where intense Talmudic instruction was combined with study, led by a mashgiach (ethical tutor), of the neglected body of work, *Sifrut ha-Musar* or ethical literature.

His modest body of musar writings, composed during his prime years, predated the intense later battle between the traditionalists and the Haskalah in Eastern Europe, as presented by some maskilim as an opposition so entrenched as to have fundamentally informed – and distorted – our understanding of Ashkenazi Jewish culture in the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries until more recent times. Salanter was, however, witness to certain earlier developments that destabilized established rabbinic practice and Jewish society. Following the “truce” between the rationalistic Mitnagdim and the charismatic Hasidim, rabbinic Judaism had become increasingly calcified, pedantic, and narrow, while Hasidism, which had once celebrated the common man and promoted “positive and optimistic understanding of the spiritual capabilities of every person,”⁴ had become a domain of “impenetrable gloom, boundless credulity, and a passion for deifying men.”⁵ This state of affairs reflected, in part, the demoralization and destabilization occasioned by the harsh anti-Semitic policies of Tsar Nicholas I, which included the loss of political autonomy (1845), the establishment of “pro-assimilation” schools (headed by Christians and Jews), decades-long military conscription (1874), and, under Tsar Alexander II, the May Laws (1888), which prohibited Jews from purchasing real property and from conducting business on Sundays or Christian holidays. These laws caused great economic hardship and urban overcrowding, and ultimately resulted in the decline of the Haskalah, the rise of Zionism⁶ (in organizations such as *Hovevei Zion*), and the split among the Reform (which occurred earlier), Conservative, and Orthodox “movements.”

Therefore, the inspiration and context for Salanter’s works, which included the influential *Iggeres ha-Musar* or *Treatise on Musar* (1856), articles in the journal *Tevunah*, and pieces later collected by his students in *Imrei Binah* (1878), sprang, for the most part, not from the conflicts of modernity but, rather from kabbalism, the earlier ex-

³ The Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that lasted from the 1770s to the 1880s, and that began in Western Europe and spread to Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Assimilation was the price of integration. It stressed rationality and, ultimately, founded Zionism and Reform Judaism.

⁴ Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Lithuania and Poland in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 175.

⁵ Samuel Lester Eckman, *The History of the Musar Movement: 1840–1945* (New York: Shengold Pubs., 1975), 10.

⁶ But see Gershon David Hundert, who cautions against the mistakes of teleology and linearity, and who locates the beginnings of Jewish national consciousness and identity (beyond the certitude that they were the Chosen People) to anti-Semitic Church policies (Hundert, *Jews in Lithuania and Poland*, 78) and Shabbetai Tzvi, who also advocated for return to Erets Israel.

ample of his teachers and, ultimately, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797). Although the Vilna Gaon opposed the Hasidim – likely for their populist exuberance, which too closely resembled that of the fated followers of the false messiahs Shabbetai Tzvi and Jacob Frank – he enthusiastically supported the study of *Sifrut ha-Musar*. Indeed, Salanter and, in his fashion, the Vilna Gaon, can be seen as part of an innovative and open traditional Judaism. As Eliyahu Stern argues, the Vilna Gaon should not be seen as a “traditionalist” defender of the past, but actually a modern Jew who helped usher in the modern era in Jewish history. Earlier contentions about tradition and traditionalism fail, Stern asserts, “to explain the experience of the overwhelming majority of 18th and 19th-century Eastern European Jews who did not spend their days either combating the Western European secular pursuit of science, philosophy, and mathematics or holding onto the same political and social structures of their 16th and 17th century ancestors.”⁷ Much like some members of the Haskalah, who sought not to attack the foundations of traditional Judaism but rather to preserve and understand them in new fashions, and do a modernist reading of Judaism that supported traditional modes of life, Salanter’s writings and teachings represent a robust, resourceful, and indigenous traditionalist response to modernity and the Haskalah, to which, arguably, he belonged.⁸ Hence, while Salanter, an Orthodox rabbi, believed in strict observance of ritualistic halakhah, he also thought that Judaism had become unthinking, reflexive, and uncreative, and needed an innovative infusion of *earlier* tradition involving a balance between Talmudic and musar instruction.

Toward the end of reviving musar learning, Salanter arranged, in 1846, for the republication of three classics of *Sifrut ha-Musar*: Solomon ibn Gabirol’s *Improvement of the Moral Qualities* (1040), Menechem Mendel Lefin’s *Kheshbon ha-Nefesh* or *Accounting of the Soul* (1740), and, in particular, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s *Mesillat Yesharim* or *Path of the Righteous* (1740).⁹ Like Salanter, Luzzatto combined scrupulous performance of ritualistic halakhah with musar and kabbalistic ideas, especially the concept that the actions of Israel, particularly if performed with the proper *kavanah* or intention, have a secret influence on the battle between good and evil. *Mesillat Yesharim* builds on a Baraita in the name of Pinchas ben Yair¹⁰ and, intended to perfect human character, traverses, step by step, an array of virtues from watchfulness to holiness, and explains each step, its elements, its modes of acquisition, and the obstacles to achieving each particular virtue. Luzzatto regarded the faculty of empathy as the gift of Torah,

⁷ Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 7.

⁸ See Ira F. Stone, “Mussar Ethics and Other Nineteenth Century Jewish Ethical Theories,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. by Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan K. Crane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 119. Stone defines traditionalism as “response that absorbs and transforms modernity and reimagines it as if it were a seamless continuation of traditional Judaism”.

⁹ These are but three (prominent) examples of the wise body of *Sifrut ha-Musar*, the study of which by scholars has been quite neglected.

¹⁰ Oral law that is not a part of the Mishnah.

and the Divine as the source of love and compassion. In his *musar* teachings, Luzzatto develops the mishnaic idea of the world as a corridor to *olam ha-ba* (the world to come). Indeed, after reading this volume, the Vilna Gaon, who was Luzzatto's contemporary and also a kabbalist, noted that the eight chapters contained not one single superfluous word – the highest praise one sage can traditionally give to another.

What is the place of *Sifrut ha-Musar* within the overall system of Jewish halakhah, and why had *musar* been so neglected? Jewish law is both universalistic (“Thou shalt not murder”) and particularistic (“Thou shalt observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread”). However, the emphasis falls on law in relationship to Jewish identity, as it is lighting Hanukkah candles, wearing a tallit, kippa and tefillin, and reciting kaddish for the dead, for instance, that gives one a specifically Jewish identity – not obeying precepts such as “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger” or “Thou shalt do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” While these ethical precepts derive from Judaism, and often determine whether or not someone is held to be a “good” (or “bad”) Jew, they are no longer specifically Jewish, but are part and parcel of Abrahamic religions and universal standards of ethical behavior broadly considered.¹¹ This same division is evident in the Hebrew Bible, as the Torah focuses on the laws, while the Kethuvim, particularly in Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophets, on ethics. Apart from ethnicity, then, abiding by the particularistic halakhah of Judaism makes a person *Jewish*. However, Judaism *needs* ethics (and ethical universals) because the law, which deals with action, does not suffice to regulate human life. Ethics or *musar* comprises the domain of motive, emotion, feeling, and *belief*, and is critical because, as Nachmanides tartly observed, one can obey all the laws and be a scoundrel authorized by Torah – a *naval bi-reshut ha-Torah*.

Indeed, both Maimonides and Nachmanides recognize the imperative character of supra-legal conduct. Law accomplishes many ends, including preserving society from chaos, but does not serve the purpose of achieving ideal goals such as the exemplary ethical behavior for which human beings are judged on an ordinary basis. For example, *seder nezikim* or the order of damages in the Talmud, as observed in analogous fashion in British-American civil law in, for instance, the verbal torts of defamation, slander, and false light,¹² do not regulate the most common forms of injurious speech, or ad-

¹¹ But see the Jewish philosopher and ethicist Hermann Cohen, who finds a unique and specific Jewish ethics in the notion of the *stranger*. Judaism, for Cohen, honors the uniqueness of each individual. Human creatures are created *be-tselem Elohim*, or in the image of God, but God relates to each person in her uniqueness – her stranger status or strangerliness. Also see Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 169, for contention that Judaism was the first body of thought to make an explicit connection between religious experience and ethical action. Unifying ethics and ontology, Soloveitchik states that Judaism stands for the objectification of the subjective religious experience represented by concrete deeds, psycho-physical acts, prayer, worship, and ritual.

¹² False light, as a tort of privacy, differs from defamation principally because whereas defamation pertains to unjust injury to the reputation of a private individual through actual deceit and malice, false light refers to the injury to feelings and dignity caused by placing factually true matters in such a “false light” as to create a fundamentally incorrect and injurious impression of the person.

dress matters such as invidious gossip, bullying, or tale-bearing – all of which can inflict enormous damages on victims, but none of which, except under special circumstances, rise to the level of *legal* or, in Judaism, halakhic jurisdiction.¹³ Finally, ethical principles such as imitating God or loving one's neighbor are transcendent universals that are beyond the letter of the law, or *lifnim meshurat ha-din*, for, as a legal system, halakhah does not recognize an ethic outside itself. *Din* refers to a specific command or fixed objective standard, whereas *lifnim* refers to the demands of specific circumstances that are specifically situated. Ethics concerns the relations between human beings, and corresponds to the rabbinic doctrine of *kevod ha-briyot*, or the honor of man.

Perhaps because of the strong corporeal or bodily bent of Judaism in the Middle Ages, which carried over into Eastern European Jewry, ethics were subsumed or demoted to a secondary place as a branch of aggadah, or the homiletic, non-legalistic, exegetical texts in the rabbinic literature, particularly as recorded in the Talmud and Midrash, which incorporates folklore, historical anecdotes, moral exhortations, and practical advice in various spheres from proper speech to medicine to business. In brief, if one wanted to exhort against, for instance, gossip, one told a story, usually concerning a rabbi, about the subject. Such aggadah included the tale of the man who gossiped about a rabbi, regretted his actions, and attempted to apologize to the rabbi. But the rabbi replied that the man should shake the feathers out of a pillow into the wind. Collecting them back would be the same as attempting to heal the injury done by his gossip about the rabbi, for the words had already flown throughout the world like feathers because of tale-bearing. Indeed, while the Talmud states that slanderers cannot be taken to court, but the rabbis state that, whoever who habitually speaks slander (*hotsaat shem ra*) acts as though he denies the existence of God (Babylonian Talmud, Arakhin 15b). The Rabbis also acknowledge that gossip is like the sins of idolatry and murder.¹⁴ Genesis Rabbah 8:23, moreover, states that, "What is spoken in Rome may kill in Syria."¹⁵

Incidental narratives and maxims may have edified, but they did not systematically focus on improving the middot, or character traits, from *within*, while moving away from the heteronomy, or action influenced by forces outside the individual, that has generally guided Jewish religious observance of halakhah.¹⁶ Moreover, diverting moral maxims could not answer the central question that Salanter posed about *Sifrut ha-Musar*: Why was there so much evil in the world despite the existence of so much litera-

¹³ There are two relevant issues here: 1) The First Amendment usually, if not always, trumps rights to privacy; and 2) most disagreeable speech does not qualify as a tort even if it is injurious.

¹⁴ The reason is that, in Talmudic law, there is redress only for injuries inflicted directly on another person, not, as in slander, where the harm, though it can be excessive, is done indirectly.

¹⁵ Genesis Rabbah 8:23. Quoted in Lester Samuel Eckman, *Revered by All: The Life and Works of Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan – Hafetz Hayyim* (New York City: Shengold Pub., 1974), 53.

¹⁶ It is notable that Immanuel Kant regarded heteronomy, which he opposed to autonomy, as unethical. Inasmuch as Kant criticized for their *a priori* assumptions of heteronomy all theories that located the ground of moral obligation or proper moral motivation in things such as self-love, sympathy, fear of divine punishment, or hope for divine reward, he criticized Mosaic Law.

ture on how to be good? His answer was to found a new movement in Judaism that used the resources of traditionalism to address the challenges of modernity and the Haskalah on the one hand and stultified and fossilized traditional rabbinic practice on the other. In essence, Salanter transferred ethics from the domain of personal “rational” choice, which had little discernible success in changing behavior, to the domain of subconscious psychological dynamics, which could deliver on the promise of transformation. Musar practice begins with introspection and self-inventory, and then *kheshbon ha-nefesh*, or accounting for the soul to determine merits and deficiencies in the individual. *Sifrut ha-Musar*, as taught by Salanter, does not constitute an earlier “branch” of the narcissistic psychobabble that characterizes the contemporary “self-help” book, with its superficial, pragmatic focus on narrow calculation, self-interest, and goal-oriented behaviors,¹⁷ but rather a profound exploration of the subconscious drives that inform *ethically* self-ignorant behaviors, such as selfishness, baseless hatred, cheating, laziness, indifference, immodesty, tale-bearing, disorder, and dishonesty, to name but a few.

The 1860s and 1870s were times of enormous transformation and invidious differentiation within Eastern European Jewry. An elite, along with a proletariat, developed in Jewish society, and fundamental values began to diverge. There had been a close link between Jewish economic leadership and the world of Talmudic scholarship, as study at the yeshiva brought economic success through propitious marriages to daughters from wealthy families. The traditional reasons for attending a yeshiva, which were hardly altogether spiritual, ethical, or idealistic, were: 1) improving social standing; 2) studying the Talmud, often using *pilpulistic*¹⁸ methods; 3) finding companions with similar aims; and 4) marrying a bride from a well-to-do family. In brief, the yeshivot perpetuated social distinctions down the generations. But with the Haskalah, and the opportunities for full citizenship for Jews in Europe, a new move to secular schools meant a new means of economic success and contact with non-Jewish people. This threatened the traditionalists but also, more important, led to the precipitous decline of the *batei midrash* — the schools for the *balebatim* or the ordinary members of the community — that, unlike most modern yeshivot, had no entrance examinations and admitted and admixed different levels of students all committed to the idea of Torah learning as the supreme achievement in Jewish life.

The supporters of the Musar Movement, perhaps unable to grasp the larger historical dynamics of the times, believed that unethical behavior had caused the decline in rabbinic Judaism and the traditional yeshivot. The proper study of musar would end the decline of traditional society threatened by social change, and, for Salanter, would use education to transform social values and revivify traditional Judaism. However, while the Rosh yeshiva remained an important and influential figure, the students’ discus-

¹⁷ See Wendy Kaminer, *I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1992), for a penetrating and witty interrogation of the self-help movement.

¹⁸ An intense analytical or “hair-splitting” method of Talmudic study used to reconcile contradictory or ambivalent readings of the text. This method stresses cleverness.

sions with each other were more important than their relationships with their teachers in shaping their characters and determining the content of study. Indeed, the Musar Movement, unlike the *Bund* (Jewish Labor Organization) and the *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion),¹⁹ did not espouse intervention in social questions, advocate making aliyah, or address issues of social organization, impoverishment, social wrongs, or the deprecations of anti-Semitism. Rather, Salanter believed that social injustice would end with the practice of musar – or adherence to those statutes related to behavior, to belief, and to the power to influence others – often through modeling. Salanter provided answers to traditionalists who were “sensitive to the critiques of their peers” and achieved success through the “fusion of approval that met the standards of contemporary thought with one that preserved traditional patterns of behavior.”²⁰

Not surprisingly, however, given historical conditions and the economic considerations involved in studying at a yeshiva, many students lacked commitment to musar ideals, and resented the time devoted to musar study, particularly since it lacked the prestige associated with the Talmud. Further, the Musar Movement met opposition from some quarters of the traditionalists and the Haskilim for not fitting into compartmentalized visions of “tradition” or “modernity.” However, the Musar Movement did not meet its opponents with ex-communication, persecution, accusation, or zeal – for all these Salanter perceived as positions of weakness and defensiveness that did not to solve but rather exacerbated fundamental impasses. Indeed, “heresy hunting,” as Hundert notes, signaled “a certain instability in traditional Jewish life”²¹ that had marked the conflicts between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim. As a result, the Musar Movement abandoned the idea of spreading widely and focused rather on small, receptive circles of individuals who would keep “sparks of musar” alive. Hence, Musar was not, like Hasidism, a mass popular movement that moved swiftly to capture hearts and that had broad appeal. Each individual had a unique relationship to the *midot* on which she had to focus, as, for example, some needed work on *khesed* and *rakhamim* but not other virtues, and vice versa. Hence, musar study was indivisibly *individualistic* in essential nature and was, according to R. Dov Katz, “pervaded by a serious and solemn reflection.”²² But while there was no rallying of the masses, and while the central tenet was to subject the consciousness to strict scrutiny, musar “encourage[d] certain societies and joint activities, [and] friendly association, gatherings, groupings.”²³ Individuals could encourage and educate one another, but the fundamental, irreducible component, given the uniqueness of each case, was intimate individual effort.

¹⁹ *Hovevei Zion* was an Eastern European precursor of the Zionism promulgated by Theodore Herzl beginning in 1897.

²⁰ See Shaul Stampfler, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning*, trans. Lindsay Taylor Guthartz (Oxford: Littleman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 260, 263.

²¹ Hundert, *Jews in Lithuania and Poland*, 183.

²² R. Dov Katz, *The Musar Movement: Its History, Leading Personalities, and Doctrines*, trans. Leonard Oschry (Tel Aviv: Orly Press, 1975), 1:79.

²³ *Ibid.*

While R. Dov Katz insists that there was no element of the new, but, rather, a return to traditional sources in the Musar Movement, Salanter, who wanted spiritual renewal, recognized that he needed modern scientific knowledge to innovate education. He therefore traveled to Germany and studied medicine, jurisprudence (to understand the theory of torts) and, significantly, Kantian philosophy, which supported his views that ethics were as important as ritualistic halakhah, and that the latter had to be performed voluntarily, with the proper *kavanah* to be effective and meaningful. Salanter sought to make Talmud study accessible to university students outside the yeshivot, and only taught the *sederim* (orders) of *nashim* (women) and *nezikin* (damages) in secular institutions. He thus incorporated the Talmud, which he regarded as crucial to understanding the achievements of Western civilization, into the general curriculum, and advocated teaching religious literature in the vernacular. And, to counteract the impression that Jewish students at batei midrash or yeshivot were slovenly, uncouth, and unkempt, Salanter stressed *derekh erets* – or clean, polite, refined behavior and self-presentation. When students, who represented the intelligentsia, returned home they brought back with them musar learning, values, and deportment.

In addition to his work in universities, principally in Germany, he and his fellow rabbis and followers established yeshivot at Khelm, Slobodka, Telshe, Łomża, and Navaradok (Navahrudek), and took care to appoint expert instructors. According to Samuel Lester Eckman, Salanter himself cultivated an intense mode of address “meant to affect the listeners deeply and to create in them the longing for a life of self-improvement.”²⁴ At Khelm yeshiva, systematic thinking in addition to musar training was held to break “childhood habit formation thought patterns.”²⁵ At Navaradock – as elsewhere – students studied in pairs or *havrutot* and each *havruta* or study partner helped the other clarify their learning and achieve more ethical self-consciousness through frank discussion. By working in pairs, Stampfer notes, students could avoid errors and arrive at truth more readily, as each student corrected or countered the misperceptions of the other. Students also gathered in a “boerse” (the German term for a stock exchange) – a form of discussion in which small groups of students explored their personal problems and shortcomings, and jointly sought methods of self-improvement.²⁶ They developed lifelong friendships of mutual support in the process, as well as lifelong commitments to ethical self-improvement. In order to achieve a balance between group and individual life, students also practiced *hitbodedut*, a form of Jewish prayer in one’s mother tongue performed in solitude, often in nature, and considered the authentic Jewish form of meditation.

Salanter innovated in learning musar by recognizing and addressing the subconscious psychological dimension involved in making – and breaking – habits and ethical behaviors. Eckman likens Salanter’s work to the logotherapy of Victor Frankl, who be-

²⁴ Eckman, *History of the Musar Movement*, 167.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

lieved that the human search for meaning²⁷ – rather than the will to pleasure, as Freud would have it – was the primary existential force, and, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he explained how his theories helped him to survive his experiences in the Holocaust. The ultimate goal of life motivate human beings to take on challenges and find meaning, even in suffering. There is no thing like a tension-free existence, and the tension in human beings directs them toward a meaningful purpose to be fulfilled. Salanter, like Frankl, mixed, pedagogically, the search for meaning with heightened emotional states – both meant to remake the individual voluntarily. While the Lithuanian Mitnagdim had been strictly rationalistic, Salanter believed in an integration of mind and heart, in regularly emotionally charged periods of study, and in long term or life-long study.

In his philosophy and practice of musar education, Salanter repeatedly stressed that study itself could not guarantee ethical behavior, for, if that were true, earlier musar literature would have succeeded in transforming human behavior, and the Jewish world would be free of strife, dissension, theft, backbiting, fraud, gossip, and other unethical behaviors. In particular, Salanter interrogated the considerable challenges involved in *learning* from *Sifrut ha-Musar*, for one cannot simply read books or hear lectures on the subject of ethics and arrive at self-transformation. Rather, one needed to repeat lessons and transform behavior through the subconscious. At the center of his philosophy and educational experience he placed *yirat Elohim*, or the fear of God. According to Elaine Adler Goodfriend, *yirat Elohim* signifies “an awareness of ethical standards [and] basic principles of morality,”²⁸ which was required to insure the proper treatment of the poor and the powerless, who do not, ironically, have the power or means to seek justice in the courts. *Yirat Elohim* adjures compliance with ethical standards when human courts cannot or do not intervene, which include collective reward and punishment, individual reward and punishment, gratitude to God, mutual love between Israel and God, the experience of Israel as slaves, and the inherent morality of God, as expressed in Psalm 146:

Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,
maker of heaven and earth,
the sea and all that is in them;
who keeps his faith forever;
who secures justice for those who are wronged,
gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free;
The Lord restores sight to the blind;

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Elaine Adler Goodfriend, “Ethical Theory and Practice in the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality*, ed. by Elliot N. Dorff and Jonathan N. Crane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36.

the Lord makes those who are bent stand straight;
 the Lord loves the righteous;
 The Lord watches over the stranger;
 He gives courage to the orphan and widow,
 but makes the path of the wicked torturous.

(Ps. 146:5–9)²⁹

Salanter regarded *yirat Elohim* as the *only* force strong enough to permanently affect the subconscious, break bad habits (*shevirat ha-midot*), and transform behavior. He developed an innovative method for achieving these educational goals having the following features to be practiced daily, weekly, or on a longer or lifelong schedule.

1. Select a text of *Sifrut ha-Musar* that the student believes will suit her needs, as, for instance, Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim*, for more advanced Talmud scholars, or *Shmirat ha-Lashon* for the more general reader. The student should select *midot* or character traits that most closely resemble faults, flaws, or lapses about which the student has become aware in her behavior, so she can *tikun midot ha-nefesh* or improve the traits of the soul.³⁰ Then she should begin the process of refining her thinking about the relevant issues – for instance, she should consider, perhaps meditate on, the subconscious motives for selfishness or dishonesty or gossiping under particular circumstances or with certain persons. As Elyakin Krumbein notes, this process of selection is a “very personal study that constantly confronts us with the necessity to choose what is right for us and commit ourselves to our choice.”³¹
2. Keep a diary or journal (on a daily or weekly basis) to engage in a systematic process of self-observation directed at *hitpaalut* or self-transformation. This diary keeping should aim not only at understanding but also at acceptance, focus on identifying with pertinent issues, and avoid an overly didactic or “will power” approach to *hitpaalut*. The intended end is not only *hishtalmut* or wholeness but also the discovery and refinement of one's *makhsheva* or world outlook. The diary, like the practice of meditation, is a contemplative and self-reflective activity that enables one to monitor and consider quietly one's subconscious mind, impulses, and actions.
3. Establish a *havruta* or learning partnership with another person. It does not suffice for one person to carry through transformation working on her own. It is very difficult to maintain *hatmadah* or regularity when studying alone, for one grows distracted, discouraged, or makes excuses. Only working in tandem enables the student to stay the course and to more readily correct her errors in

²⁹ These verses reveal that *yirat Elohim* is an overarching concept, and that the Hebrew Bible knows no absolute distinction between ethics and morality and the Law.

³⁰ Alan E. Morinise, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2007), 249.

³¹ Elyakin Krumbein, *Musar for Moderns* (Jersey, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2005), 24.

thinking, share her innermost concerns, experiences, and apprehensions with another student.

4. The *havruta* should discuss, debate, and ponder the musar readings that have been selected. For Salanter, one student should passionately defend her line of reasoning, while the other student should argue for the other side with equal passion and commitment. Then both students should consider the arguments of the other side and begin the search for truth, or “learn with sharp analysis, then with love.”³²
5. Engage in tranquil introspection, away from other people, and use *hitbodedut*, or solitary meditation in nature.
6. Seek out and attach oneself to a person of reputation with whom one can speak, not as an equal to an equal, but as a learner to a teacher who can guide the student along righteous and flourishing paths, answer particularly thorny questions, and provide an ideal model of emulation.
7. *Hitbonenut*, a concept that refers to the difference between having and experiencing knowledge, appears in the musar practice of prayer, which uses melody and emotion to “create existential attachment from objective analysis.”³³ This prayer assists with learning calmly and patiently and yet with emotional fervor — and with a sweet voice and complete attention. A state of inner enthusiasm “should reach the state in which the student feels connection, identification, belonging, and unity with what he has learned.”³⁴ The ultimate purpose of such prayer is to achieve *daat*, or knowledge through intimate connection, concentration, and, above all, *duration*. Prayer is at once done in calm and with emotional excitement, as the vehicle for existential identification with the ethical ideal.
8. Venture into the world and observe the behavior of the widest variety of people possible to achieve *khakham* or wisdom in worldly affairs and “comprehensive knowledge of the inner drives and deceitful behaviors of men in general.”³⁵ Students should learn to judge deeds not absolutely but rather by consideration of the attendant circumstances, and how the character and the moods of people make the performance of *halakhah* and observation of *yirat Elohim* so difficult. This perception of people is refined through lifelong friendships founded in musar study. As Rambam noted, the ultimate setting — and test — of Musar study is immersion in the complexities and tensions of the real world, and the learned capacity to retain one’s repose and equanimity.

Salanter, who challenged the notion that one fulfills ethical obligations only through mitzvot and Torah study, believed in *tikun ha-midot* or character improvement as an essential educational endeavor, and, most important, a *way of life*. His work and writ-

³² Ibid., 278.

³³ Ibid., 85.

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

³⁵ Katz, *Musar Movement*, 101.

ings reflect the ancient models of “the art of existence” dominated by the principle that one must “take care of oneself” that Michel Foucault explores in *The Care of the Self*.³⁶ This “cultivation of the self”³⁷ broke loose from its previous philosophical moorings in Socrates’ “examined life” and became its own phenomenon and movement, much like the Musar Movement developed from the individual study of *Sifrut ha-Musar*.

It also took the form of an attitude, a mode of behavior; it became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught. It thus came to constitute a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions.³⁸

Insofar as human beings are free and reasonable, so is it natural and desirable that they dedicate themselves to the care of the self, and perceive life as a permanent exercise. There was no right age for this self-cultivation, and older human beings as well as the young can engage in self-care practices, exercises, procedures, and friendships, in order to “rediscover the basic principles of a rational conduct.”³⁹ As Salanter had noted about musar practice, it requires *time* and one of the major problems involved in this kind of study is to determine the portion of a day – or a lifetime – that ought to be devoted to it.⁴⁰ As Foucault notes, “around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself and communication with others were linked together.”⁴¹ Although there are portions of the care of the self, like musar practice, that are solitary and individualistic, very much for the most part, they are not exercises in solitude, but, rather a true *social practice*.⁴² In brief, these modes of self-cultivation has nothing to do with the alienated narcissism and unsuccessful and un-contemplative individual “effort” that marks the modern phenomenon of “self-help,” with its predominantly narrow and selfish motivations. Rather, musar and the ancient art of existence about which Foucault speaks, spawned schools, lectures, friendships, and mutual obligations and ties. In both cases, the individual formed himself as an ethical subject not in relation to associations of power or dominance over others, but rather in the exercise of these qualities over herself.

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³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988), 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴² *Ibid.*

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