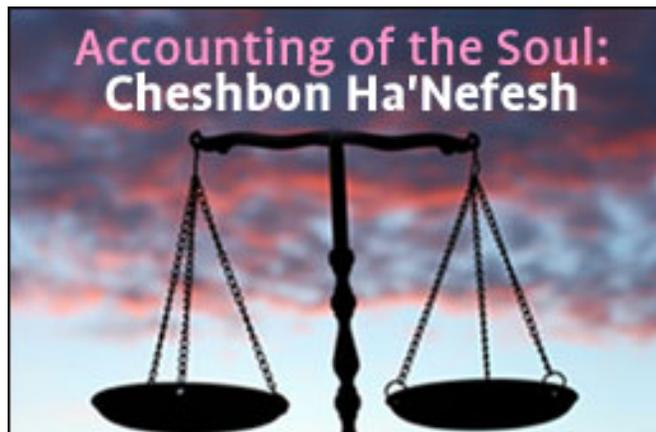




## MUSSAR PROGRAM

### CLASS #5



A FEW MINUTES, TWICE A DAY,  
IS THE BACKBONE OF MUSSAR GROWTH.

BY ALAN MORINIS

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Before proceeding to the actual 13 character traits that we'll work on, we need to grasp one traditional Mussar activity that is the backbone of a daily Mussar practice. This practice has an enormous effect, directly in the areas where you have your own spiritual curriculum.

It is called in Hebrew "*cheshbon ha'nefesh*," which translates into English as "accounting of the soul."

An accounting of the soul can describe any kind of inner stock-taking. The phrase shows up in *Duties of the Heart* (written in 1040) and has had wide application in the Jewish world. When Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are approaching, it is stock-in-trade for the rabbi to encourage the congregation to do introspective assessment, an accounting of the soul.

As a Mussar practice, this personal accounting needs to be systematic and thorough. This version of inner stock-taking is based on the book called, naturally enough, *Cheshbon ha'Nefesh*, written by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin and published in Lvov in the Ukraine in 1812.

The practice is actually very simple, even though I will use a lot of words to describe it, to be as thorough as I can be. There are actually only two activities: a morning affirmation and an evening diary practice. To prepare for these activities, you need to compose a list of *middot* (traits) that will be your personal focus. Traditionally, that list consists of 13 traits, and for the purposes of this course, that is the number we will use.

The basic pattern is to focus on one *middah* (trait) for one week. In the second week, you go to the second trait on your list, and so on through the whole list. When you have completed your list, you go back to the beginning and run through it again. A list of 13 traits would take 13 weeks to complete, and you could get through that list 4 times in a year (since  $4 \times 13 = 52$  weeks). That means that you would have

had each of your priority traits in focus for 4 weeks of the year, almost one month per trait.

In actual practice, many people choose to focus on a smaller number of traits, 3 or 4, and spend a full month before proceeding to the next. Either way, the basic idea is the same.

## Morning Affirmation

Every trait that you are working on needs to be assigned a simple phrase that captures the “ideal” of that quality. And every morning you will repeat to yourself the phrase for the soul-trait that is your focus that day. Phrases can come from a dictionary, Torah, Talmud, siddur or any other wisdom source, or just compose something yourself – so long as what you end up with accurately captures the essence of that particular quality. In his book *Cheshbon ha’Nefesh*, Rabbi Leffin gives us suggested phrases such as:

- Equanimity: "Rise above events that are inconsequential – both bad and good – for they are not worth disturbing my peace of mind."
- Decisiveness: "All of your acts should be preceded by deliberation; when you have reached a decision, act without delay."
- Righteousness: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Every morning, soon after you have awakened, read over to yourself the reminder phrase for the *middah* that is your focus for that day. It is helpful to write each phrase on a card that you set beside your bed, or at another place where you are sure to see it and be reminded.

Read over the phrase slowly and with full concentration. Read it aloud. Read it several times. Chant it. Go over this reminder in whatever way causes it to be so clearly illuminated in your mind that it seems to have been written in neon. I have a student who reprogrammed her computer screen-saver to bring the phrase before her mind. My wife has her phrase written on a post-it note that she sticks on the bathroom mirror. Once you've really heard the phrase in a penetrating way, go on with your day.

Of course, during the day you try to live up to the ideal stated on your reminder card, but not with strain or by repressing tendencies. Just do your best.

## Evening Diary

Then at bedtime, do the second part of the practice, which is to make entries in a journal. We call this the "Accounting of the Soul Diary." Reflect back over your day, to see what relates to the *middah* you are working on that week. Record all thoughts and experiences that relate to that particular quality.

Many people keep a small notebook beside their bed, along with a pen, and do the journalling just before going to bed. Other people prefer a keyboard to handwriting. In either case, your notes should be brief, just an outline of the facts that reveal something of how you experienced that particular soul-trait that day. Focus especially on the role it played in shaping your thoughts, words or deeds. Don't worry if what you write wouldn't pass as literature. No one but you will ever see this notebook. More important than the amount you write or the floweriness of the prose, is the honesty you bring to your introspection.

## Daily Rhythm

"Accounting of the Soul" is simple but amazingly effective. I wrote about it in *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*:

*The central point [of Accounting of the Soul] is really to reveal to consciousness the contents of the unconscious mind. These are, by definition, hidden from us, and so no matter how hard we peer directly into our inner selves, we won't uncover anything of what lurks below the surface. But because the contents of our unconscious are perfectly reflected in the patterns of our deeds, certain images return night after night, and the patterns become unmistakable.*

*We need this truth about ourselves to guide our steps on the path to deep, lasting, fulfilling transformation. And, in fact, as soon as we have brought to light those soul traits that might otherwise have continued to live in darkness, we have already begun to change.*

Often, people find it hard to get into the rhythm of keeping the diary. It's a habit you have to cultivate, and that sometimes requires a stratagem or two. If you know someone else doing this course, make a shared commitment to send each other an email or make a phone call to confirm that you did the writing. If you find that some days you don't find anything to note in your diary, still take the trouble to write at least something, even if it is "nothing to write" or "too tired." If you are diligent about writing at least *something* in your diary every night, the writing will soon become an established habit. And then the diary will really begin to speak to you.

Because Jewish law considers writing as a type of "work" that is forbidden on Shabbat, the guideline for this course is to write in your diary on Friday afternoon.

## Auditing the Inner Life

The main focus of the journal practice is to help you focus on the particular soul-trait that week. Once you have done that, however, you may want to make notes on any other things that reveal a different soul-trait in action. In that way, you will identify other *middot* to go on your list of 13.

You might see that you've got too much of a trait, like anger, for example, or it could be too little, like calmness. Too little anger (expressed as passion and vitality) is also a possibility. Any quality that could benefit from some measure of change ought to be recorded in your diary. Some traits will leap out at you because they are already well known to you, while others are there to be discovered.

Whatever you see, record.

The "accounting of the soul" practice gives you tools you need to "audit" your inner life. You are giving your conscious mind access to what lurks in the unconscious, because you will detect patterns and connections in your behavior that are invisible on simple introspection. You will become aware of how your soul-traits mold your everyday existence, including your thoughts, feelings and actions. That's how Accounting of the Soul works. This awareness is crucial for the inner journey of transformation and ascent that is the work of Mussar.

Here is a list of the traits we will be exploring in coming classes along with a phrase for each. You can use this phrase if you wish, but it is not the only one that could be used for the trait, nor does it have magic powers, so if there is another that speaks more to you, you can substitute:

## 13 Soul-Traits (Middot)

	English	Transliteration	Hebrew	Key-Phrase
1	Humility	Anavah	ענוה	I am dust and ashes.
2	Gratitude	Hakarat HaTov	הכרת הטוב	Awaken to the good and give thanks.
3	Patience	Savlanut	סבלנות	Bear the burden of the situation.
4	Honor	Kavod	כבוד	Each one, holy soul.
5	Generosity	Nedivut	נדיבות	The generous heart gives freely.
6	Kindness	Chesed	חסד	The world stands on kindness.
7	Strength	Gevurah	גבורה	Holding boundaries
8	Tranquility	Menuchat Ha'Nefesh	מנוחת הנפש	Rising above the good and the bad.
9	Trust	Bitachon	בטחון	Under the wing of Hashem.
10	Enthusiasm	Zerizut	זריזות	Don't delay.
11	Order	Seder	סדר	Each thing in its place.
12	Awareness	Zehirut	זהירות	Shining inner light.
13	Truth	Emet	אמת	Truth is the seal of Hashem.

## WORKSHOP

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Right now, without delay:

1) Write the name of each trait (English, or Hebrew, or both) on a small card.

2) Add to each card a reminder phrase that captures the essence of that trait as you understand it, and as you aspire to have it within you.

3) Buy a small diary to keep by your bedside for your evening practice. I have found that a lined notebook from the drugstore does the job just fine, though there is virtue in getting a nicer, more aesthetic diary so as to elevate the importance of the practice in your own eyes.

For each lesson, we will provide a PDF page to print out and use for your diary, if you wish. Of course, don't feel limited by this; use whatever system you find most effective. The important thing is to shine a bright light on your day, to see the quality that is your focus for that week, and write down what you need to clarify the facts of your motives, actions and reactions.