Mussar Program
Class #6

Do you occupy your rightful space?

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Mussar provides us with the image of life as a spiritual ladder that we climb, rung by rung. The rungs of the ladder are the traits of the inner life – the middot. How you practice generosity and kindness and forgiveness and honor and truth are all rungs of the ladder.

Now it may be that any one trait is so perfected in you that there is no climbing necessary. Thank God, we all have some traits like that. For me, I marvel at people who can be as patient as a rock while waiting behind someone fumbling at a painfully slow speed. Yes, there are such people, though I am not one of them.

No matter how good we might be in some areas, however, there are bound to be other areas of inner being where each of us is not so whole. In those specific traits you will find your personal spiritual curriculum.

One rung of the ladder to which the Mussar masters have always paid special attention is the trait of humility, anavah. Very often they suggested that this was the place to start the Mussar journey, and we will follow that advice, too. Their reasoning is not hard to uncover. The topic of “humility” covers all aspects of where your own sense of ego figures into your life. We tend to perceive and to relate to our lives through the lens of the self, and so if there is any distortion in that lens, then everything else in our lives will appear distorted as well, whether we realize it or not. This idea is conveyed in the more classic language of The Duties of the Heart, where we read: “All virtues and duties are dependent on humility.”

Because this is the first of the 13 middot, this lesson will be a bit longer than usual, as we need to lay some general guidelines for how to examine your personal level of the traits, and then how to implement the practical aspects of the Mussar experience.

I also have a suggestion regarding the pace at which you go through this course. For the next 13 lessons you should proceed at the rate of one per week. This will enable you to go through the daily exercises that are structured into each lesson of the 13 middot.
Golden Mean

We’ll get to exploring humility in a moment, but even before we do, take it as a given that in the eyes of the Mussar masters, the right way to be humble would not be to see yourself at either extreme of the spectrum. Following the notion of the “golden mean” that we encountered in Lesson #3, we should not allow our sense of self to inflate to the point of conceit or arrogance (ga’avah in Hebrew), nor should we hold ourselves to be the lowest of the low, so deeply ensconced in the dust that we could crawl under a worm wearing a top hat.

Proper humility is so crucial because your perception of any of your inner traits will be very much affected if you see yourself to be the king of the world, on one hand, or its most insignificant dreg on the other. And so, for example, if you were to consider whether you are being optimally generous in life, or how you practice the trait of honoring other people, your understanding of those traits will be refracted through the lens that is your ego. Should there be any misalignment of ego, that will affect how you see every other trait.

And so for its own sake, as well as to keep all our perceptions straight and true, it is with humility that we begin.

What is Humility?

One of the classic ways to describe the path of Mussar is to cite the Torah’s injunction to “walk in God’s ways.” When we turn to examine the soul-trait of humility, “walking in God’s ways” can mean abhorring arrogance. Tradition uses the strongest language: “All the proud in heart are an abomination to God” (Proverbs 16:5). And the Talmud (Sotah 5a) adds in regard to a proud person, “God says ‘I and he cannot dwell in the same world’.” If we set out to model our behavior on that of God, then arrogance will be an abomination to us as well.
As much as we have to be on guard against arrogance, we should not fall prey to thinking that pursuing its opposite extreme is the answer, either. Absence of self-esteem does not represent a spiritual ideal. Some kinds of pride are necessary for the healthy soul. This idea corresponds to the essential tenet of Judaism that we are all invested with a soul that is breathed into us by God. Bearing that level of worthiness is an honor in which one might well take pride. We get support for this idea from the Bible, where we read in regard to King Yehoshafat, “His heart was high in the ways of God” (2-Chronicles 17:6). This is praiseworthy pride.

So in being guided toward healthy humility, we are cautioned to avoid either extreme that flanks this trait. That’s good practical guidance, but it doesn’t address a primary question we need to ask, which is: What exactly is humility?

The word “humility” sounds so much like “humiliation” that it’s easy to get a very wrong impression. In the traditional Jewish understanding, humility has nothing to do with being the lowest, most debased, shrinking creature on Earth. Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Kook (1864-1935), first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, says it well:

_Humility is associated with spiritual perfection. When humility effects depression, it is defective. When it is genuine, it inspires joy, courage and inner dignity._

Being humble doesn’t mean being ‘nobody,’ it just means being no more of a ‘somebody’ than you ought to be. After all, Moses, the greatest of the prophets, is described in the Torah as “very anav [humble], more than any other men who were upon the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).

If a leader as great as Moses was so humble, then there is surely more to humility than the shrinking meekness we ordinarily associate with the term.
A Talmudic Insight

A story in the Talmud helps us begin to get a sense of the distinctively Jewish understanding of humility. The passage begins: “The anivut [humility] of Rabbi Zechariah son of Avkulas caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem” (Gittin 55b-56a). This was a cataclysmic event in Jewish history that is still mourned today. How could a virtue like humility cause so terrible a catastrophe?

To understand, we have to enter the story a bit earlier, when a man named Bar Kamtza sought revenge on the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, by going to the Romans to claim that the Jews were rebelling. To prove his point, he told the Roman leadership to send a sacrifice to the Temple. Normally such a sacrifice would be offered up, but Bar Kamtza caused a minor blemish on the animal that was unnoticeable to the Romans, but which he knew the rabbis would see and so refuse to accept the offering. This refusal would be “proof” that the Jews were in rebellion against Rome.

When the sacrifice came before the rabbis in the Temple, they noticed the hidden blemish, and understood immediately what was going on. One sage suggested that they offer the sacrifice anyway. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas, however, argued that if they did so, people would draw the incorrect conclusion that it was permitted to offer blemished sacrifices.

The rabbis then suggested that Bar Kamtza be killed to prevent him from telling the Romans and endangering the Jewish people. Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas responded again, by saying, “If we do so, then people will incorrectly think that those who inflict blemishes on sacrifices are put to death.”

As a result of this unwillingness to accept either course of action, Bar Kamtza succeeded in his plan. The sacrifice was denied, and the Romans took this as proof of a Jewish rebellion. The Romans attacked
and ultimately destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The Talmud concludes: “The anivut of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas caused the loss of our home, the burning of our sanctuary, and our exile from the land.”

What can we learn of the Jewish concept of humility from the story of Zechariah ben Avkulas?

Rabbi Zechariah showed humility because he did not act with presumption – either by offering a blemished animal that contravened the rules, or by condoning murder. But he actually manifested too much humility in shrinking from the task at hand. He held the fate of the Temple and his people in his hands, yet he seems to say, “Who am I to make such unprecedented decisions that will potentially mislead the people as to the law?” This was his excessive humility. His sense of self was flawed because he saw himself as less capable of solving a real-life dilemma of great consequence than he actually was. For surely if God sent the challenge, Rabbi Zechariah had the capability to handle it.

To clarify the picture even more, let’s add another enigmatic reflection on humility from the Talmud:

Anyone who sets a particular place for himself to pray in the synagogue, the God of Abraham stands in his aid, and when he dies, people say of him, “This was a humble person.” (Brachot 6b)

Where is the humility in sitting in the same place in the synagogue whenever you come to pray? The answer is that by fixing yourself to one spot, you thereby free up all the other space for others.

This example helps us frame a Jewish definition of humility as “limiting oneself to an appropriate amount of space, while leaving room for others.” Sitting in a predictable place, you make room for others to occupy their own spaces, too. In considering that the space a person can occupy can be physical, emotional, verbal, or
even metaphorical, it appears that Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas gave up too much of his “space.”

This definition also fits Maimonides’ concept that humility is not the opposite of conceit, which would be self-effacement, but rather stands between conceit and self-effacement. Humility is not an extreme quality, but a balanced, moderate, accurate understanding of where you actually fit in life. That’s why humility and self-esteem go hand-in-hand.

When you understand humility in terms of the space you occupy, it’s important to clarify that we are not all meant to occupy the same amount of space. Some people appropriately occupy a lot of space, as would be the case with a leader – think of Moses again. But if a leader laid claim to even more space than was appropriate, they would be the wicked Pharaoh, who defined himself as a deity. And we have already learned from the case of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas that for a leader to shrink from his responsibilities – to take up less space than appropriate – can have disastrous consequences.

At the other end, it may be entirely appropriate for a more solitary person to occupy less than an average volume of space. Were a person of this nature to force themselves to speak up more, be more outgoing, etc. – in other words, to fill more space – the soul-consequences could be negative. Nor would it serve the soul to withdraw even further from what is already suitable.

Think about some everyday scenario that you encounter. Perhaps at your weekly staff meeting at work, there is one person who is always more assertive than his position would call for. The possible scenarios are endless, but thinking about some genuine ones will help you bridge the gap from the theoretical to the practical.
First Trait

The Mussar teachers stress that *anavah* is the first soul-trait to work on, because humility entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. Without humility, either you will be so puffed up with arrogance that you won’t even see what really needs work, or you will be so deflated and lacking in self-esteem that you will despair of being able to make the necessary changes.

Recalling that the word middah means "measure," I invite you to ask yourself, what is the measure of your humility? Your answer can and should be framed in terms of space. Do you occupy your rightful space?

The graph of the quality looks like this:

![Graph of Quality](arrogance pride humility self-debasement)

WORKSHOP

Not everyone needs to develop humility. Some people are already too humble. In order to become more whole, one person needs to cultivate humility and another needs to enhance pride. We are strongly warned against arrogance, but Mussar encourages self-confidence and self-esteem. In Psalms 93, God is described as: “*Hashem malach geyut lavesh*” – “God will have donned grandeur,” providing us with a term to name the positive counterpart to arrogance – *geyut*.

And it is also true that one’s sense of self is contextual. A person who acts arrogantly with his immediate family may be meek and submissive in his place of work. Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pschishe used
to carry two notes in his pockets, so that he could reach in to fetch out one or the other, depending on the need. One said “For my sake was the world created” (Mishnah - Sanhedrin 4:5). The other had the words: “I am dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27).

If you are a person who seeks to become more humble, an exercise for you to practice is to take on the acts of a humble person.

What does this entail? We learn from the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) that to cultivate humility, you can try “sitting in a less than auspicious place, walking at the back of a company of people, and dressing in modest clothing.”

These are not just illustrations; these are assignments for you to practice. **Pick one** of the foregoing and commit to practicing it over the next week. Will you dress in a less eye-catching fashion? Or speak less than you normally do? Or seat yourself at the back of the room, rather than the front where you are inclined to sit? Choose an activity that will give you a sense of being smaller than you usually seek to be, and try that out in practice.

But if, on the other hand, you are a person who is already too meek and retracting, the trait to practice is geyut [grandeur]. Perhaps take a cue from the Mussar school of Slabodka, whose students dress very well, in clean and well-presented clothing (which, by the way, does not necessarily mean more expensively, but more thoughtfully put together), and carry themselves with great dignity. Improve your posture when standing and sitting, eat with fine manners, and speak with clear diction and good grammar.

Again, these points are listed not for theoretical, but for practical purposes. Choose one of the suggested behaviors and commit to it for a week. To achieve this, you will need to recite your key phrase as a morning affirmation, and than every evening record your observations in your Accounting of the Soul Diary. Consistency is the key. We want to change, to shake off those habits and behaviors which are getting us down. To do so requires genuine effort.
Practicing in these ways requires that you first be aware of where on the spectrum of ego you tend to be located. Then, if you see that it is desirable to move yourself to the left or to the right, act the part because, as Rabbi Luzzatto says, “The only way anything like it can be accomplished is by taking control of the external actions that are available to you. Thus you can slowly affect the internality of it, which you do not have as much control over.” You will see the effect in your own experience, which is and the most convincing lesson of all.

In summary, you will need:

- A morning affirmation / key-phrase
- A specific kabbalah-point to work on
- An evening session with your Accounting of the Soul Diary, and a built-in reminder system