



MUSSAR PROGRAM

CLASS #16



EXTERNAL DISORDER MAY BE A REFLECTION
OF INTERNAL DISARRAY.

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First a person should put his house together, then his town, then the world. (Rabbi Israel Salanter)

The soul-trait of "order" (*sefer* in Hebrew) clearly and concretely embodies the Mussar teaching that encourages us to seek the middle way. When there is too little order, the result is chaos. At the other end of the range, too much order gives rise to obsessiveness and rigidity. The best in order lies between these extremes.

The Book of Numbers begins with the instruction to count a certain segment of the Jewish people. Immediately after the count, the Jews are directed to arrange their camp in the desert. The Torah specifies: "And the people of Israel shall pitch their tents, every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard, throughout their camps" (1:5). The Torah goes out of its way to tell us that people did not camp wherever they felt like. There needed to be orderliness in the camp.

This section of the Torah, with its images of the well-ordered camp, have offered much inspiration to the Mussar teachers. They have drawn the lesson from this example that order is a practical necessity, and more: it is a spiritual value deriving from the word of God.

This reflects the emphasis on order we can find in the wider Jewish tradition. The word for order – *sefer* – shows up directly in the name given to the evening ritual meal on Passover, the Seder. It is also the root of the name of the prayer book itself, the siddur. Because all of creation runs on orderly principles, it is said to be *mesudar* – orderly – and therefore the Torah, which is the blueprint of the world, is *mesudar* as well.

Anyone who has tried to organize groups of people knows that it just makes sense to create order. To let things fall randomly leads to chaos and increases the risk of conflict and loss. How much time and energy is diverted into the channels that spring from disorder? How many relationships are challenged or even destroyed by a lack of attention to order?

But of even more concern is the inner order (or disorder) which sets the template for our outer lives. Picture chaos, with stuff flying and piles of junk and cluttered thinking and a clanging ruckus. Who could possibly hear the fragile voice of truth whispering in that tornado? And in contrast, but equally disabling, where order has been taken to the point of extreme inflexibility – how could you change, if so unbending your ways have become? The extremes of chaos and obsessive rigidity, at opposite ends of the spectrum, are both impediments.

Pearl Necklace

When we look at the Mussar teachings on order, we see that they are often very practical. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a product of the famous Mussar yeshiva in Kelm, lists three reasons why we should put things in order:

- (1) Order is good because knowing that things are well-arranged creates a feeling of confidence that everything is under control.
- (2) Order helps you find things when you need them and saves you the time that would be lost looking for them.
- (3) Some things will only work if they are ordered correctly, like a machine that requires every one of its parts to be in good working order – and often in a specific sequence – to function properly.

Well and good, but Mussar is not the handmaiden to Martha Stewart (who is quoted, by the way, as saying "Life is too complicated not to be orderly"). There must be more to understand and appreciate in the soul-trait of *seder* than just the practical, as important as that is.

That a Mussar teacher of Rabbi Dessler's stature would so clearly emphasize the practical dimensions of order reveals something about the nature of Mussar thinking. We are not guided to seek a spirituality

that is lifted off from this world but rather the opposite. We are encouraged to seek spiritually within the ways of this world. From this perspective, the order that you seek to create on your desk, in your car, your clothes, your financial papers, your tools, your kitchen utensils and so on, is not just good management. It is all spiritual work. Nothing less.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe says in the name of the Alter of Kelm that seder can be compared to the clasp on a pearl necklace. The pearls are what make the necklace, but without the clasp, the pearls will scatter, leaving only an empty string. Similarly, a person contains an abundance of strengths, intellect, character traits and qualities – but without seder, all these virtues will scatter, and you will be left with nothing.

The Alter of Kelm saw the Torah as being entirely based on principles of order. After all, only one moment separates Shabbat from the weekday. One hairbreadth is the difference between a kosher and an unfit slaughtering. A small quantity of water can render a mikveh unfit. And so on.

In Kelm, the primary focus for Mussar practice was the cultivation of inner attitudes, and so external disorder was taken to be a reflection of internal disarray. A person whose possessions are messy is likely to have thoughts that are also jumbled. If he is not careful about the cleanliness of his house, he is also likely to be lax about the purity of his spirit. There is an oft-repeated story that the Alter of Kelm once went to visit his son, then a student in a distant yeshiva. The first thing the father did was visit his son's room. On inspection, he found the boy's possessions in order. From this alone, he could tell that his son was doing well in yeshiva. Only then did he go to see his son.

The Alter of Kelm's successor and son-in-law, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Broide, was a classic product of the attention to order that characterized Kelm. His daily timetable was arranged with almost military precision, and it was said that you could set your watch according to Rabbi Broide's comings and goings.

Affecting Others

One consequence of disorder is how it affects those around us. It demonstrates consideration for other family members to return things to their place after you've used them. This practice saves others untold time and aggravation, and communicates a sense that they are cared for and considered.

The Greenbergs have a special hook for the car keys. Usually, whoever uses the car returns the keys to its place. One day, Mike took the car to the library. When he got back he forgot to return the keys to the hook. In the evening, with the keys still in his pocket, he walked to the restaurant where he works. His mother is a nurse who works the night shift at the hospital. At midnight she was ready to head out for work, but the keys were nowhere to be found!

She looked on the table, the floor, and then went through the cabinets. She starting fuming, "Who didn't return the keys? I'm going to be late for work!"

She had no choice other than to wake up her husband. But he hadn't used the car. "It must have been Mike," said Mr. Greenberg, "but he won't be home for another half an hour. We'll have to call a cab to take you to work."

Consider how family harmony can be upset if we don't return things to their place, and how significantly we can improve family harmony if we do. Once we accustom ourselves to maintaining 'order' in the family environment, we will also apply it in the other areas. For instance, replacing a book to its place in the library or synagogue, and returning supplies to their appointed location in the office.

Counter-Culture

The Alter of Kelm taught that if a person were to be careless in his behavior, neither organized nor precise in his deeds, then he will also be confused in his thoughts and opinions. That is a problem in itself, as chaotic thinking makes for difficult living. But even more important was the recognition that inner and outer disorder interferes with our ability to serve God properly. And serving God properly is the whole point of life. It is not an exaggeration to say that the essential Jewish view of a 'well-lived life' is one in which the role of being an *eved Hashem*, a servant of God, has been perfected.

- In Deuteronomy 34:5, Moses is called an *eved Hashem*. The first line of the Book of Joshua repeats this phrase, again calling Moses *eved Hashem*.
- Psalm 36 begins: "To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord."
- In Leviticus 25:55, God says: "For the children of Israel are servants to Me. They are My servants, whom I have redeemed from Egypt."

To elevate the role of a 'servant' to the pinnacle of spiritual life is about as counter-cultural a notion as I can imagine. The French, Russian and American revolutions that set the course for our era, as well as innumerable anti-colonial wars of independence, were all attempts to overthrow regimes that propagated servitude. So too, the American Civil War. How many national constitutions laud the value of being a servant?

But the Jew is meant to serve. Our answer to God's commandment is: "We shall do and we shall hear" (Exodus 24:7). Doing comes first. We will serve.

Align Your Will

Certain actions are right and good and are proven so in time, even if there may be doubt and opposition in the moment. Decisions and actions that work out to be right and good reflect *ratzon Hashem*, the Divine will. The challenge we face is to be able to discern the Divine will in the present, without the benefit of hindsight. And the extension of this challenge is to align your will with the Divine will, so that you become a servant of God in the next action you take.

Serving in this way requires that you not give rein to the needs and demands of your ego and habits (of thought, speech, feeling and action). In the first instance, you have to find guidance that will help you discern what is good and true. Teachers, tradition, prayer and the deep stillness of meditation (where the quiet voice of the soul can be heard) give guidance. And then you have to *act* on that discernment, which requires that you strive to rise above your own personal habits and gratifications, to align with the Divine will, goodness and truth – which is much larger than your own ego.

Being orderly in a moderate way is essential to developing into a servant who aligns with the Divine will. In time, your efforts born of orderly processes will be judged to have been right and good. Right alongside, the doors to personal happiness will be opened wide. There is no long-term satisfaction of any kind to be gained by pursuing and even temporarily gratifying the desires of the “little personal will.” Contrast Moses, *eved Hashem* par excellence, who is described in the Shabbat Amidah:

*Moses will be happy
with the gift of his portion,
because a reliable servant
You have called to him.*

Happy. A servant.

WORKSHOP

Think about the idea of order in one of your primary life spaces: work, home, school.

To begin, answer the following preparatory questions to describe and analyze the situation you face. (We'll use the example for a workplace.)

- How does "order" show up as an important feature of the work you do and in your workplace?
- How does disorder show up?
- Can you identify any practical costs of the disorder? (Consider as well the toll that disorder takes on people, including inner wear and tear.)
- Is there any "cost" you would describe as a spiritual cost?
- Can you identify any impediments to creating more and better order in your work and workplace?

Review your answers to these questions, then go on to the following activity:

Identify where you could improve the order in your workplace. Be specific in identifying the specific areas.

Make a list of steps you can take to create more and better order in the work and workplace.

Break down your list to cover the days of the week that you will do this practice. List what you will do on Sunday, Monday, and so on.

Pay special attention to the obstacles that you have identified as standing in the way of you being more orderly, in order to take steps toward overcoming them.

At the end of every day, record your experiences in your Accounting of the Soul Diary. You are bound to be enlightened by what you discover.

And don't forget your morning affirmation key-phrase. Some suggestions are:

"Each thing in its place."

"Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind."

(‘Affecting Others’ courtesy of Rabbi Moshe Miller)