

MUSSAR as a Jewish Resource on Climate Change, and All Else

most quotations from Ira Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar*; NY: Aviv Press, 2006

“...human consciousness is...constructed along the tension between the *yetzer ha-ra* [evil inclination] and the *yetzer ha-tov* [good inclination]... what ideally happens to the *yetzer ha-ra*, given that it cannot disappear [?, is]... *kibbush ha-yetzer*, the first step of suppressing the *yetzer*, and [then] *tikkun ha-yetzer*, the second step of transforming the *yetzer*. (Stone, *A Responsible Life*, p. 57)

בראשית רבה פרשה ט, ז רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר: “הנה טוב מאד” זה יצר רע. וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד, אתמהא; אלא שאלולי יצר הרע, לא בנה אדם בית ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד ולא נשא ונתן-- וכן שלמה אומר (קהלת ד), “כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו”.

“Behold, it was very good”: this is the *yetzer hatov* [good inclination] and this is the *yetzer ra* [bad inclination]. That the *yetzer hara* is ‘very good’ surprises me: yet without the *yetzer hara* one wouldn’t build a house, marry a spouse, give birth, or engage in commerce; and that’s what Solomon meant (in Eccl. 4), “all toil and skilled work comes from one’s rivalry with a neighbor.” (Ber R 9:7)

...[Do] I pay inordinate attention to the gas gauge? Absolutely. And is it because I’m obsessed with global warming? Not really. True, that’s why I bought the car in the first place, paid the two grand extra it costs to get the hybrid engine. But if you thought about global warming all the time, you’d be nuts. When I’m behind the wheel, I’m an American—competitive, score-keeping, out to win. As I pull out of the driveway, what I think about is: can I beat my last trip? Will I make it home averaging 60, or is the last hill on Route 125 going to knock me under? ... If, as with most cars, you have only the dimmest notion of how many miles to the gallon you get, it’s no wonder that fuel economy ranks low on your list of priorities. The minute you start measuring mileage, though, you start caring about it. You can’t help yourself—it’s like an itch. Your driving habits begin to change: no more jackrabbit starts, not ever; it’s too easy to see the toll they take on your gas tank. You develop a light foot, learn how to hold a steady 65 on the highway without any yo-yoing up and down... (Bill McKibben, “My Mileage is Better than Your Mileage,” *Orion*, Jan/Feb 2003)

Energy is Invisible. What if you could see how much you use?... Every new Prius hybrid has a fuel-economy gauge that informs its drivers of their gas consumption in real time... And drivers are adjusting their behavior to save fuel. Other carmakers are getting the message: soon all new Nissans will have fuel-economy gauges. Tests show that drivers watch the gauge and, by smoothing out acceleration and braking, use 10% less gas. There’s a psychological insight here. Even with the best of intentions, most people won’t adjust their habits to fight global warming unless the benefits are visible. If our thermostats displayed the cost to us every time we turned the heat up, most people would put on a sweater instead... (Jim Motavalli, *Env. Def. Fund Sol’ns*, 5/08)

Ms. [Ellen] Watts...can think of [many] instances where projects sat on the cusp of a gold rating. Those institutions...paying for [LEED] certification--like Clark University, which earned a gold rating on a building her firm designed--took extra steps to make sure the building had enough green features to get the gold. "We're a competitive society, sports-oriented, and high scores get us jazzed," she says. "That can help play into a client's fundraising efforts, ... stimulate student discussion, and ... spur the design team to consider things that they aren't focused on without the scoring..." (Scott Carlson, *Chronicle of Higher Ed.*, 4/11/08, p. A17)

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“...questions that Mussar addresses: Why is it so difficult to do what is good [though we already know what that is]? What is the relationship between living a religious life and an ethical one? How can religion fortify an ethical life?

To these questions we will add one more: In a cultural milieu in which personal satisfaction and spiritual satisfaction are deemed synonymous, can we hope to attain an alternate spirituality that promises to take us beyond ourselves not through intoxication, but through profound concern for the other[s] among whom we live? (Stone, *A Resp. Life*, p. xxxii)

“In order to begin to explore the practical nature of *middah* work we begin with a chart that describes the *middot*. One should note that there is more than one such list of character traits in Mussar literature. The one we have selected, the thirteen *middot* (character traits) as outlined by Rabbi Mendel of Satanov in his book *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, is recommended by Rav Yisrael Salanter and has been one of the most widely used. There is a good deal of overlap between other lists and this one, and no single list can include all of the nuances of character that may need rectification. As one progresses in *middah* work, one becomes aware of additional areas of character that may require work, even when those areas may be so subtle as to resist naming. (Stone, p. 77-79)

עירובין יג:ב תנו רבנן: שתי שנים ומחצה נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל; הללו אומרים 'נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא', והללו אומרים 'נוח לו לאדם שנברא יותר משלא נברא'. נמנו וגמרו: נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא-- עכשיו שנברא, יפשפש במעשיו ואמרי לה: ימשמש במעשיו.

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued [*nakhlaku*] -- these saying, 'better for humanity not to have been created, than to have been created; and these saying, 'better for humanity to have been created, than not to have been created.' They voted, and decided [with Shammai]: "better for humanity not to have been created, than to have been created -- but now that the human been created, *y'pashpesh b'ma'asav*, let it examine his/her [past] deeds -- others say, *y'mashmesh b'ma'asav*, let it search its [future] deeds [i.e., and change them for the better]. (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b)

1. **Equanimity** / *Menuhat Ha-nefesh*. Rise above events that are inconsequential – both bad and good – for they are not worth disturbing your equanimity.
2. **Patience** / *Savlanut*. When something bad happens to you and you do not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.
3. **Order** / *Seder*. All of your actions and possessions should be orderly – each and every one having a set place and a set time. Let your thoughts always be free to deal with that which lies ahead of you.
4. **Decisiveness** / *Haritzut*. All of your acts should be preceded by deliberation; when you have reached a decision, act without hesitating.
5. **Cleanliness** / *Nekiyut*. Let no stain or ugliness be found in your possessions or in your home, and surely not on your body or clothes.
6. **Humility** / *Anavah*. Always seek to learn wisdom from every person, to recognize your failings and correct them. In doing so you will learn to stop thinking about your virtues and you will take your mind off your fellow's faith.
7. **Righteousness** / *Tzedek*. What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.
8. **Frugality** / *Kimnutz*. Be careful with your money. Do not spend even a penny needlessly.
9. **Diligence** / *Zerizut*. Always find something to do – for yourself or for a friend – and do not allow a moment of your life to be wasted.
10. **Silence** / *Shetikah*. Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect: "What benefit will my speech bring to me or to others?"
11. **Calmness** / *Nihuta*. The words of the wise are stated gently. In being good, do not be called evil.
12. **Truth** / *Emet*. Do not allow anything to pass your lips that you are not certain is completely true.
13. **Separation** / *Perishut*. Strengthen yourself so that you can stop lewd thoughts... (Or: **Breadth** / *Revacha*, seeing the big picture.)