



**The Middot Perspective:
The Spiritual Elevation of Everyday Choices
by Alan Morinis Ph.D.**

More and more people are turning to Mussar—an ancient but today little-known Jewish spiritual tradition—because the teachings and practices are so accessible and useful. Mussar's lessons show us how to work with, and ultimately transform, our everyday experience: The thought that flickers through your mind when you see your neighbor, how you speak to your child, the way your hand does or doesn't go to your pocket when you see a homeless person, how you park your car. With Mussar, every apparently inconsequential thing in your life is elevated to be the most important spiritual work you can do.

Below, Alan Morinis reveals the modern implications and beauty of one of the most revered classic Mussar texts, Orchot Tzaddikim.

In the middle of the 16th century, a book with the title Orchot Tzaddikim ("Ways of the Righteous") appeared in the Jewish communities of northern Europe. This book was remarkable in several ways. For one thing, it was written in Yiddish rather than Hebrew, which was by far the more common language for books on religious and spiritual subjects. Even more unusual was the fact that this book came forth anonymously.

Over time, Orchot Tzaddikim became revered as one of the classic texts of the Jewish spiritual tradition known as Mussar. The first stirrings of Mussar arose in the 10th century, and in each subsequent century more insights and more texts were added to the tradition, until in the 19th century Mussar flowered into a large and influential movement in eastern Europe.

Realizing the Soul's Potential

Mussar's purpose has always been to help people understand the ways of the soul, and to give us guidance that will help us move ourselves toward the lofty spiritual goals the Jewish tradition sets for us. Over the centuries, wise Mussar teachers have worked out a discipline of personal practices that help carry us toward those goals, which they articulate as inner wholeness (shlemut), holiness (kedusha) and closeness to God (devekut). This is the soul's potential, and Mussar shows us how to make it real in our lives.

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Though the origins of Mussar date back almost 1,000 years, few people today know much about this Jewish spiritual tradition. Most of the students and teachers of Mussar were swept away in the Holocaust, along with the communities that sustained them. This disaster all but broke the chain of transmission, cutting us off from Mussar's treasure house of wisdom about the ways of the soul. We must be grateful, however, that many of those masters wrote down their observations and conclusions, and while we have very few living masters among us today, we still have access to wise Mussar teachings through their texts. Books like *Orchot Tzaddikim* are sources of precious guidance that can help us navigate our own spiritual journeys.

Orchot Tzaddikim offers a deep look at the traits of the inner life, which in Jewish thought are associated with the soul. Each chapter of the book focuses on a particular inner trait and the next chapter considers its opposite, so that the chapter on "falsehood" is followed by one on "truth," as "humility" follows "pride," and so on through 28 such chapters. Why these traits are important, and how they figure in our spiritual journey, is the focus of the Introduction. I want to share an interpretation of a short passage from the Introduction because these four paragraphs provide a very good introduction to Mussar's perspective on the inner life. (The excerpts in this article are from the Rabbi Shraga Silverstein translation of the *Orchot Tzaddikim* edited by Rabbi Gavriel Zaloshinsky (1995; Feldheim Publishers).

Onto the Straight Road

The Introduction opens by asserting that human life is essentially good and elevated since the Torah tells us that we are made in the image of God. The text goes on to raise the obvious question: While our essence is holy and pure, how do we make sense of the fact that people - ourselves included - are so often flawed and sullied? Here is where we can begin to listen to a voice from more than 450 years ago telling us what he or she has learned about human life, in order that we can make use of and benefit from this guidance.

And now that we have mentioned man's superior state, it befits us to explain his ennoblement and his abasement, his good and his evil, until there emerges before the man of intelligence the straight road by which he is able to reach the great King's court; so that his soul will choose, in all of its might, the best and the most select in every trait, and he will cast aside the husk and take the grain. How so?



The images in this paragraph capture important elements of the Mussar perspective on the journey of the soul. We are on a road. Ideally, the end of our travelling is to arrive at "the great King's court," surely representing connection to God. The author promises to explain to us how we can find the straight road that will carry us directly there.

The paragraph then goes on to tell us what will happen when we set ourselves on the straight road: the soul will choose the most select in every trait. What we are concerned with here are very familiar human qualities—humility, arrogance, love, hatred, joy, worry, laziness, falsehood, truth and so on. The author is hinting that these ought to be the central concern of our spiritual practice.

The soul that is set straight will choose "the most select in every trait." It might seem more obvious to say that what we would want is "the most select of every trait," and this small difference in wording reveals an important Mussar teaching. Each of us has a wide variety of qualities and we could easily fall prey to thinking that some of them ought to be completely uprooted from our lives - the ones that are called vices, like anger, greed, jealousy, etc. Orchot Tzaddikim subtly guides us away from that thought. It suggests that every trait has its rightful place in us. The wise goal is not to try to be free of anger, for example, because that is not only unattainable it is also undesirable. The Mussar view is that anger has its rightful place in a spiritual life, but we may have inner work to do to get anger right. And so with every trait. This is what Orchot Tzaddikim means by the soul selecting "the best and the most select in every trait" rather than choosing among the traits themselves. Spiritual life becomes a matter of refining every trait, not choosing among them.

Orchot Tzaddikim then goes on to illustrate the extreme (and so undesirable) forms of the traits:

One man is wrathful and always angry, and another even-tempered and never angry. Or, if he is, it is only very negligible over a period of many years. One man is exceedingly proud, and another exceedingly humble. One man is lustful his lust never being sated, and another exceedingly pure-hearted not desiring even the few things that the body needs. One man is expansive of temperament, unsatisfied with all the wealth in the world as it is written (Koheles 5:9): "He who loves silver will not be sated with silver," and another is of constricted spirit, for whom even a trifle suffices and he does not rush to obtain all of his needs. One man afflicts himself with hunger and goes begging, consuming not even a penny's worth of his own without dire distress, and another is wantonly extravagant with his money. And, along the same lines, the other traits are found, such as cheerfulness and depression, stinginess and generosity, cruelty and mercy, cowardliness and courage, and the like.

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Although these words were written almost five hundred years ago, they paint a picture that applies just as well to us today. Notice that in every case, it is not the traits themselves that are being indicted, but rather the failing of taking them to the extreme. The problem is not anger but rage, not desire but lust, not generosity but extravagance. The implication is that our spiritual work needs to focus not on acquiring or banishing traits, but on the level of the various traits that live in us. In fact, the term that is almost universally used in Hebrew for "traits" is the word middot (singular: middah) which literally means "measure." In Mussar thought, it's the measure of our inner traits - rather than any sort of peculiarity about which traits we have - that sets our spiritual agenda and that gives us our spiritual work.

Nature versus Nurture?

Orchot Tzaddikim then steps into a very contemporary debate by asking whether the inner characteristics it has described are fixed and immutable, or whether we can and do change.

Among these traits there are those possessed by a man from the beginning of his creation, according to his bodily nature, and there are those towards which one's nature is inclined and which he is apt to adopt more than others. And there are those traits which one does not possess from birth, but which he learns from others or to which he grows inclined because of some thought that has arisen in his heart. Or it may be that he found a certain trait to be of value to him and worthy of pursuit so that he practiced it until it became implanted in his heart.

In modern terms, this is the well-known and (at one time) hotly debated argument of "nature vs. nurture." Orchot Tzaddikim clearly answers that we are the product of both. The level of some traits is set at birth. Others we are inclined toward. Some we pick up from experience. Others we can acquire by conscious choice and effort. This seems such good common sense that we have to wonder if the whole nature/nurture debate is just naive compared to this understanding of inner life that was articulated in the 16th century.

Reflecting on this portrait of our inner life and where our traits come from, we can see that the view of our lives given in this book is basically very optimistic. As anyone who has been around babies knows, everyone is born with certain distinct ways of being, but Orchot Tzaddikim assures us that no one is trapped into languishing with just that set of traits. We do change, we can change, and—most important for anyone who is interested in spiritual life—when we aim to acquire a quality, we can practice it until it becomes implanted in the heart.



Now the author goes on to expand on the issue of the traits and their levels.

There is a trait which must be exhibited often, and there is a trait which must be exhibited sparingly. This is analogous to one's cooking a dish and needing vegetables and meat, water, salt and pepper. He must use all of these ingredients by measure, a little of one, a lot of the other. If he is sparing of meat, the dish will be too thin. If he is over-generous with salt, it will be too salty to eat. The same applies to the other ingredients. If he uses little where much is needed and much where little is needed, the dish will be spoiled. But the expert, who takes the right measure of each ingredient, will produce a dish that is pleasant and tasty to those who eat it. The same is true of character traits. There are those which must be adopted in a large measure, such as humility, shame, and the like, and those which must be adopted only sparingly, such as pride, audacity, and harshness. Therefore, a man must weigh all of his traits on the balance scale of understanding to use each trait in its proper amount. He must be careful not to hold back on those traits which he requires in large measure and not to use too much of those which he requires in small measure. In this way he will attain the ultimate good.

In the passage, we find the principal message of the book that, in fact, is the main message of Mussar. We are told that a person "must weigh all of his traits on the balance scale of understanding to use each trait in its proper amount." This is a concise description of how we walk the path of spiritual practice in the direction of holiness. The guidance we are given is that life experience is there to be "read" - it is up to us to reflect and, based on what we see, to make adjustments.

As an interesting aside, the Jewish literary world is particular about assigning credit to authors, and the fact that no one put their name to *Orchot Tzaddikim* has led to persistent speculation that the author was, in fact, a woman. Though the writer has never been identified, the metaphor above provides some evidence to further fuel the speculation. How likely is it that a 16th century rabbi would have used an extended metaphor of cooking food?

The fact that this book was written in the vernacular of Yiddish tells us that it was not aimed at the rabbinic elite, in which case it would certainly have been written in Hebrew. We can learn something about Mussar practice from this fact - Mussar has always been meant to be accessible to everyone, regardless of gender, level of education, social status, etc. The emphasis falls neither on erudition nor literary mastery but rather on the work you do to become the fine person you have the potential to be. Mussar's goal is to help you become a mensch, which you do by observing the level of your soul traits and then doing the work to adjust the measure of the ones that are in some way not ideally calibrated. When all is said and done, this may be the ultimate goal of a spiritual life.

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Mussar and Everyday Choices

Because Orhot Tzaddikim is meant to offer practical guidance for living, it is fitting to honor this text and the tradition it represents by considering how we can apply these teachings in our own lives. You can do this by reflecting and identifying the trait or traits in your life that lie somewhere outside the mean, indicating that they are either too strong or too weak. You may want to reflect on humility, arrogance, love, hatred, joy, worry, laziness, falsehood, truth, and so on.

Doing this sort of inner life reflection may not seem to be a major accomplishment, but Rabbi Israel Salanter, who founded the Mussar Movement in the 19th century, tells us that the first and crucial stage of Mussar work is to become sensitized to the traits of your inner life. That awareness is needed to set up any transformative work that may follow. But in truth, just gaining that awareness itself is a transformative act.

*[Alan Morinis, Ph.D.](http://www.morinis.ca), is an anthropologist, filmmaker, writer, and student of spiritual traditions. Born and raised in a culturally Jewish but non-observant home, he studied anthropology at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship. For the past six years the nearly-lost Jewish spiritual discipline of Mussar has been his passion, a journey recorded in the book *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (Broadway 2002). He regularly gives lectures and workshops on the teachings and practices of the Mussar tradition, including a distance learning course, *The Course in Mussar*. On the web at www.morinis.ca*