

MUSSAR...Seeing our SIN—Saving our SOUL
Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman & Rabbi Bethie Miller
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J: There is one term that fills the air tonight and tomorrow
So seldom spoken aloud, almost ominous in its echo,
that we could easily call it *“The S Word”*...
Some might even argue that its Christological connotation renders it
A virtually foreign reference, ringing untrue in Jewish parlance.
Yet, truth be told, that “S Word” is essential to our being here these Holy Days,
as it is the key to our understanding where this Day of Awe leads...
So today we embrace it—for what it is, and what it enables us to become.

As Rabbi Gershon Winkler quipped: [Moment Magazine, Fall 2015]
“We love sin. Without it we could not improve or ennoble ourselves.”
Our first step, then, in growing into our best selves
Is seeing our sins...acknowledging our misdeeds...facing our faults;
even confronting our darker side.
But to do that, we must look at sin through a uniquely Jewish lens...

Though the Biblical terms *Avon—to twist or err*,
Pesha—to transgress, appear [far]more often,
the term *“Chet—to miss the mark”*
was organically integrated by the Rabbis in the post-Biblical period
as they forged their understanding of Teshuvah,
the “Repentance”—or “Return” so central to this holy day...
Based on countless incidents of ancient confession,
from King David’s Batsheva Affair admission,
To Israel’s ongoing acknowledgment:
“Chatanu im Avoteynu—We have sinned like our forefathers” [Psalm 106:6]
the notion of fessing up carried with it a hopeful note.
For since *“there is no person who does not sin,”* King Solomon [I Kings 8:26]
coming clean carried with it the possibility of doing just that:
cleansing ourselves by dealing with the dirt [dare I say] directly!
Catherine Madsen, liturgist, novelist, herself a Jew-by-Choice,
draws the distinction...
*“Moral life is a harvest of regrets...The Christian remedy is a general
deliverance, one man’s expiation of the sins of the entire world...Jewish*

confession, by contrast, is a long list of specifics—serious damages and daily irritants...The remedy is not to accept God’s forgiveness...but to stop inflicting the harms on others...If “*Chet*” literally means “*missing the mark*” Teshuvah amounts to taking better aim.”

[We Have Sinned, ed L.Hoffman, Jewish Lights; Madsen, “Back To Zero,” pg 212]

B: Rabbi, before we move ahead, we should spell out some of these sins. Just moments ago, we confessed to betrayal, cruelty, disrespect and exploitation, and how we continue to covet and deceive. What’s crucial to consider is that no matter the size of the sin, the starting point is almost always the same. Just as the ultimate endpoint of repentance is atonement, or at-one-ment with the world around and within, most of our sins begin inside of ourselves. Sin begins within. We were impatient, ungrateful, and lacking in trust. We expected ourselves to be perfect, and became disappointed when others were not. Hiding from our weaknesses and perhaps even from our strengths, We really *missed the mark* when we tried to be anyone but ourselves.

J: Tonight the “S Word” is inescapable as it is irreplaceable. ASHAMNU—our public confessional, puts “sin” front and center. “We are not so arrogant as to say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, we are righteous and have not sinned. *AVAL-But we and our ancestors have sinned.*”

Understanding the alternate Hebrew rendering for *Aval*—not but, Rather “***Truly we and our ancestors have sinned,***” It still seems superfluous—an obvious admission. Of course we have sinned. Why else would we be here confessing? Yet [as our teacher Rabbi Larry Hoffman makes clear] the real challenge reveals itself when we turn back over 1100 years, to 860 or so, and check out Seder Rav Amram, the Siddur which frames ASHAMNU in its original. For it reads:

“We **are** so arrogant that we say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, we are righteous and have not sinned.

AVAL-TRULY we have sinned.” [We Have Sinned, L Hoffman, Jwsh Lights, pgs 9-11]

We arrive at this most awe-filled day actually believing

All this stock-taking, chest-beating and soul-searching is meant for someone else. Talk about hiding, Rabbi!

We convince ourselves that we have little for which to say “I’m sorry.”

IF we can just make it through this 24-hour exercise in ‘Penitence power-lifting’ without too much undue stress...6 Ashamnus, 7 Avinu Malkeynus...18 Al Chet’s, and as that redemptive shofar blast sounds, our confessional will be complete.

B: AVAL...I’m afraid, arrogance isn’t our only problem.

There’s more going on.

Arrogance often masks fear, and here the fear is of looking inside.

We’re not sure what we’ll see when we look at ourselves closely and clearly, so we avoid the whole exercise. [Or simply go through the motions.]

We keep the truth locked up in the dark, rather than finding a flashlight to see what’s *truly* going on inside.

J: This Atonement Day urges our confessional in a most personal way:

By shining that inner light in those hard to see places, admitting how we’ve gone wrong—where we’ve fallen short.

But acknowledgment does not magically absolve us...

Essential as this Atonement Day is, it is but the beginning.

Actually living “At-One” starts by seeing ourselves inside, sins and all, and through a process of ongoing reflection and real-life recalibration,

dedicating ourselves to [that other word so easily uttered but seldom actualized]

C-H-A-N-G-E

B: For most of us, change is a tall order –

A challenge [that seems] more attractive in theory than in practice.

So it really shouldn’t come as any surprise that, despite our stated intentions,

We make the same mistakes each year.

And if we are truly honest with ourselves,

Our list of missteps remains quite long.
Teshuvah may require but a single step;
however, change, real change, is hard.

Rabbi Danny Zemel [who leads Temple Micah in Washington DC] offers a valuable teaching on the nature of change. He points to Jacob's metamorphosis into Israel:

Recall that Jacob – our premiere patriarch – does his share of sin as a young man, first manipulating his twin brother Esau and then deceiving his blind father. After 20 years of separation from his brother, Jacob is about to reunite with Esau. Camped beside the river, Jacob wrestles throughout the night with a divine being. Only when dawn breaks, does the being release Jacob from his grip and rename him “Israel – the one who struggles.”

Here Rabbi Zemel points out: “Jacob has been injured and, as Israel now, must leave the scene limping. Change it seems, is birthed in struggle and hurt. Redemption from sin comes only after time, effort, and pain”

[We Have Sinned, ed L.Hoffman, Jewish Lights; Zemel, “Al Chet Shechatanu: Collectively We Own Them All,” pg 243].

J: And that's still not all...Even after this transformational wrestling match, with its pain and tears, all is not resolved. Just a few verses later, Torah refers not to Israel but to “Jacob.” The symbolic name-change has come undone. He reappears as “Israel” when his relationship with Joseph is introduced, but still his status remains fluid. When viewed in most lights, Jacob struggles but never completely becomes Israel – he never becomes the self he could be.

B: So how might we understand this failure to change by the patriarch who gives us our name “Israel?”

Rabbi Zemel concludes and comforts by explaining:

We as Jews and as humans can in fact change,
but the process is often extremely slow.

Change can take a lifetime, and sometimes,

as is the case with Jacob's transformation into Israel,

it may only be the next generation who truly learns/grows from our struggles [244].

Change is hard, and can be painful.

Yet Judaism is rooted in the belief that people can change and grow. That process is made possible by the power of our collective.

We can't do it alone.

We need support and structure.

We need a community of sinners, trying to take better aim...

Isn't that why we're here?!

J: Unquestionably!

And though various schools of Jewish thought offer many paths to change, there may be no more effective way to carry the impetus of Yom Kippur as incentive to maintain that sincerity of heart & integrity of hand every day than the path which MUSSAR provides.

Mussar means *instruction*, or even more, *correction*.

Developed under the model of famed late 19th century Lithuanian teacher, Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter,

Mussar combined daily life-introspection and behavioral application.

Taking hold among many Eastern European Jews as a life-perspective & practice, [unlike the Kabbalah which preceded it],

this was not some mystical prospect to transcend the problems of the world, but a path to address life's tensions and tears in a most personal way;

by directly altering *our way* in the world.

Mussar's operative assumption is that "life is a curriculum." [[Everyday Holiness](#), Morinis, pg. 3]

Yet no two people's IEP—individualized Education Plan—is the same.

Our aim is to figure out our own life-curriculum—the courses we need to pursue so as to more positively impact the course of our lives...

B: 19th century Jewish Lithuania?! On the surface, life has changed a lot since we lived in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. But underneath...in our hearts and souls...we really have not changed much at all.

And so Mussar offers us the gifts of wisdom and practice to guide us.

Like most things Jewish, depending on which Mussar master you ask, you'll get a slightly different answer as to the main goal.

But for our purposes, the different angles should only expand its reach.

Goal Alef: Mussar supports us to follow the core command of Torah: *You shall be holy*. Because Mussar helps us to act on the impulse we already feel within ourselves – our inner drive to improve.

Goal Bet: Mussar supports us to become more whole. We were intentionally created imperfect and incomplete, so our world is a world of transformation. Mussar helps us navigate the tricky terrain within and beyond.

And *Goal Gimmel:* Mussar helps us to become mensches – not so we can feel better about ourselves, but so we can better serve the world...

J: When moral master, the Chafetz Chayim,

[19th century R' Israel Meir HaCohen, Rabbi of Radin, Lithuania]

Who lived well into his nineties—even touching the 20th century with his teachings, was asked how he had such a great impact, he replied:

“When I was a young Rav, I set out to change the world. I failed...

So I concentrated on the Jewish communities in Poland, but I failed there too.

I decided then to target my hometown of Radin. But people didn't listen.

So I put all my effort into changing my family's ways, and that failed as well.

Finally, I decided to work on changing myself...

and that is how I was able to impact the world. “

[Everyday Holiness, pg 16...The Hafetz Hayyim on the Siddur, Zaretsky, Foreword, xx]

B: Mussar compels us to take a good hard look at ourselves, but NOT for the **sake** of ourselves.

The purpose is not to actualize our potential to fulfill some personal worldly desire, helping us get what we *want* out of life...[Everyday Holiness, Morinis, pg. 41]

Rather, as we aspire to become our higher, holier and menschiever selves, tending to what our spirits *need*,

we kindle the sacred spark inside,

enabling us, by the way we live our lives, to be bearers of light.

J: Mussar is the spiritual life attunement, the sacred self-discovery and inner change, whose impact can transform our world...

B: Mussar begins by mapping our inner life.

According to Alan Morinis, Founding Dean of the Mussar Institute,

[J: and largely responsible for its 21st century revitalization],

“the Mussar blueprint of the inner life considers [your] soul not as an organ or a separate spirit but as the essence of who you are” [Everyday Holiness, Morinis, 17].

Mussar urges us – and ultimately helps us – to see ourselves differently, not as possessing a soul, but each of us, in our essential nature, as *being* a soul.

Soul includes personality, emotions, and talents.

Soul encompasses mind, psyche and spirit.

Our soul connects us to the divine, and also fuels our animation and vigor.

But perhaps most visible and accessible are the traits of the soul;

virtues like humility, patience, compassion and anger.

These soul-traits are called *middot*, the Hebrew term for measures.

And here’s a powerful, foundational teaching of Mussar:

Each of us, each soul, is born with every one of the soul traits: Order, honor, generosity and enthusiasm, we have them all. But each of us displays those traits in different measures. More accurately, these traits are alive to different degrees in each of our souls. So, according to Mussar, even the angriest person has a touch of calm, and even the most skeptical among us have some faith to access.

The goal of Mussar is not to acquire new traits or relinquish others.

The truth is that we need them all, but we may need to fine-tune to certain traits that exist in too high or too low a measure. The spiritual curriculum entails first learning about these traits and gauging their impact on our lives.

Once we understand how our soul traits are operating, then we can more clearly see which ones are holding us back.

This is where the next core teaching of Mussar comes in: Unbalanced soul traits tending toward the extreme ends of the spectrum act as ‘veils’ that block our inner light. Too much of even those highly desirable traits like patience or generosity or calm can obstruct our radiance, and prevent us from being most effective in the world [Everyday Holiness, Morinis, 17-21].

Mussar begins with introspection and self-examination, so that we can identify and become more aware of our inner imbalances. Sometimes this awareness alone can be transformative...

J: For if the “soul” is the essence of who you are, [Everyday Holiness, pg. 17]
then soul-searching is the discovery process that enables you to grow
into your most sacred self...

We fine-tune, recalibrate, repair ourselves from the inside out,
one soul-trait at a time...

Could be Patience or Perseverance...Moderation or Mindfulness....

Perhaps you need to work on Being **Grateful**—aware of all the goodness in your
life. Or is **Enthusiasm** your shortfall—embracing every day as an exciting
opportunity? Are you seeking a greater sense of **Compassion**—meeting the world
w/more heart?

Personally, I’d work on TRUST. Understood by Mussar as *Bitachon*,
this soul-trait is not about others trusting in you,
but rather you trusting in God...in Life itself.

Yes, this world is a crazy place—unstable, often unkind.
Tragedies confront us daily—our suffering is all too real.
Yet it is how we deal with the challenges life inevitably brings
that manifest our sense of “Bitachon/Trust.”

Trust is certainly not fatalistic; absolving us of our obligation to act...

Yet Trust can calm our spirits, enabling us to accept whatever the day brings...
as it can strengthen us to face tomorrow without fear,
understanding—much as we are not ultimately in control,
today is ours to live fully, with sincerity and serenity of Spirit...

When Alan Morinis called late last summer to say he’d be in town for a wedding,
Soliciting my help to find him and his wife a place close to temple to stay for
Shabbat so they could walk to the ceremony starting Saturday early evening,
He explained: “Normally I would not be so concerned. I’m sure if you ask around,
something will work out. But my wife’s *Bitachon* is not quite there...”

Understanding the term *Bitachon* in its modern Hebrew, I assumed it meant
“security,” as it does in relation to Israel. Morinis explained that “in Mussar, *Bitachon*
is Trusting with equanimity that what happens happens—and that you will receive/
handle it...with calm, inside & out...”

I reached out to the Seife family who were so thrilled to host...

And I knew they’d be perfect! Then Morinis emailed to add:

“Did I mention that my wife is allergic to cats?” ...OY!

Scrambling the week before the Dean of Mussar's arrival with no leads panning out, I got a call from Jane Brandes about another matter entirely... And it suddenly hit me, that this literary teacher, Chevrah Torah regular, is it! Jane was such a gracious host, so welcoming/thoughtful, [and with no cats] that with Morinis returning as our Fall Scholar in Residence, Dec 9-11, he mentioned: "I hope Jane has room again..."

B: In Mussar, awareness may be the first step, but then it's all about putting ideas into action. Once we've absorbed the explanations and stories that bring these soul traits alive, then the real learning occurs in real time. Practice is key.

If you are working on PATIENCE, Mussar suggests this approach...When you start feeling the spark of impatience growing inside, take three breaths before you respond. Over the course of the week, see if you can use that breathing space to reconsider your instinctive reaction. Are you trying to control something beyond your scope?

Or, if you're focusing on GRATITUDE...Commit to acknowledging 3 people a day by directly thanking them for what they give you/others...Then, at the end of the week, reflect on how that made them feel...AND how that made YOU feel, as well.

Or maybe it's MODERATION...Perhaps, even limiting pleasures. Take a week's time to note each day the personal pleasures you make sure to enjoy...[That cup of coffee, that second scoop, joking with a friend...] Look at your list and ask yourself: WHAT do these pleasures really bring? Would I be healthier, more open, more myself...with a little less?

J: SO...All this practice sounds good in theory, but really taking it on: being aware enough to alter our conscious life response, requires enormous openness, and a commitment to real change....

[A commitment I'm not sure I'm ready to make...]

Bethie...to be honest,
Most days I feel a lot like Jacob...sort of stuck in operating mode out of habit,
and frankly, fear...I worry...about my kids being OK, not just making it in life, but
being fulfilled in what they do, or actually, in who they are...I worry about not
being there for them enough, then I worry I'm there too much...
And without Susan, I feel so unequipped...Who will be that pusher of a presence?
Who'll make sure my grandkids get all the cutest stuff to wear,
whether they need it or not?.....
And even now, after all these years here, I worry about Temple...about really
serving every member, about modeling a Jewishness that will inspire...
Are we the congregation we should be....? Are we living up to our own vision?
And don't get me started when it comes to our world. Sometimes I think, what
are we creating that the coming generations will inherit? Of course, I know we do
what we can...but it all seems so big, so immense....so beyond my control....

B: Jeffrey...I know...

I worry so much. Much of the time I worry about messing up:
I worry about mixing up words in Hebrew and calling people by the wrong names.
I worry that I won't have anything helpful or intelligible to say,
and that I'm not spending my time on what's most important.
I worry about my family – everyone.
Am I being an attentive daughter, wife and mother?
And are we doing what we need to do as a family to stay healthy?
I also worry about our future – how life will unfold...Will I be able to figure out
how to really balance work and family and bring the most nourishment and
happiness to all of us?
I know my worries spring from my core struggle with trust –
in myself, and so too in others and in the mystery of life.
I know fear holds me back, and that my biggest, toughest adversary has always
been myself. But it's so hard to overcome these ingrained ways of being and
tendencies of the soul. It's so hard to learn not to fear.
But it's fear that blocks my light and holds me back from being fully alive...

Jeffrey, for you and your life, how have you learned to live with more trust than
fear?

J: Bethie, Trust for me has come over time...But the sense of self came long ago. It was given to me by my Mother, and my grandparents who lived right downstairs, my Bobba & Solly, who made me feel from the time I was a kid that I could do anything...They believed in me...So I believed in me...as I believe in the people I serve...And when we, or I, do not live up to all we can be, I know, we have one another. Maybe trust starts when you realize, everyone's working on the same stuff! And everyone's a little afraid. So why not share the struggle...and the growth, together?

B: Whenever we really talk, Jeffrey, I see my struggles, and yours, most clearly.

J: And that's what builds trust.

J:...Remember, neither of us are Mussar masters. We are new students to this realm of Jewish practice. But based on what we have learned about Mussar and what we hold dear about this community, there's more reason to trust than fear this treasure of relevant [and perhaps even redemptive] Jewish wisdom.

I learned in Art School the secret to how we, through Mussar can really become the soul—the sacred selves we seek to be.

To make any drawing three-dimensional and truly bring it to life,

You have to add shading, even shadow, cross-hatching, murky smudges, making some parts of the drawing pretty dark...

But in order to do so, you first had to identify the source of light.

SO it is with our lives...

The Light-source cannot be realized unless we recognize the shadows;

The under-developed, underbelly edges where we are not letting the light shine.

B: Brandeis Judaic Studies Professor, Rabbi Reuven Kimmelman points to today's purpose in specifying our sins.

“The verb for ‘Confession’ is Hit’VaDah, which originally meant ‘to reveal oneself,’ the opposite of concealment. Only sins exposed to the light of day can be wiped away.” [We Have Sinned, ed L Hoffman, pg 187]

B: Mussar gives us that flashlight on our faults...

J: Mussar makes articulating “The S Word” not merely acceptable but essential... Mussar enables us to acknowledge the darkness so we can embody the light

B: Mussar provides a path to personal growth and change that informs our daily actions, and even transforms our world...

J: Today the Holy One holds up a mirror to help us see ourselves in 3-D. Will we see our sins, how/where we've missed the mark, as this coming year's courses of our life-curriculum?

B: Can we seriously consider the balance within, So no single soul-trait blocks our inner light?

J: Doing Mussar is a struggle: a heightened awareness and continuous life-reflection That makes every day a chance for At-One-ment...

B: Doing Mussar is a practice: a life-path that attunes our steps and refines our soul Which makes every moment a chance to climb...

J: It requires honesty. It demands sincerity. It helps us change from the inside out, Yet it's only made real from the outside in.

B: Its aim is to make you a mensch—not for your sake, but so you can serve the world. Its hope is to help you know you're already holy, so why not reflect it through the life you live?

J: And it all starts this Kol Nidrei night, As we see our sins for real, and struggling through together, support others to do the same.

B: May we each be able to speak these words in truth: Here I stand imperfectly...

J: Seeing myself clearly

B: Yearning to live.

J: May we know this day and every day that we have each other.

B: May we commit to becoming our most sacred selves...

J: And SO every day in the year now upon us, may it be.....AMEN.