

Musar Discussion and Study Guide

RJ reformjudaism.org/musar-discussion-and-study-guide

A. Introduction

Leonard Felson defines Musar as a Jewish practice for self-improvement "which focuses on living a more conscientious life and heightening awareness of the world and one's responsibilities; in short, becoming more of a *mensch*." Another way to put it is that Musar aims to help us become more holy, and more whole.

Because Jewish tradition sets such high standards for human behavior, leading thinkers in previous generations took it upon themselves to help us identify the areas in which we personally excel and fall short, and guide us in making strengths out of our weaknesses. This strand of Jewish thought and practice began to emerge in the 10th century and became a full-fledged movement in the Jewish world of 19th century Lithuania. Until recently, Musar existed only in the Orthodox community, which explains why members of other denominations have been little exposed to its teachings and practices.

Although the focus of Musar is on personal spiritual development, it is not a selfish or self-interested activity. Musar teachers insist that we are assigned our spiritual curriculum in life-addressing those inner traits (*middot*) that need balancing-so we can struggle to become more whole: but not just for our own sake. If you are habitually impatient, then developing patience will not only improve your own life; it is your assignment to make the world a more patient place. If you are more often stingy than generous, then generosity is your assignment on behalf of your soul and the world. And so on, through the full range of traits.

B. Overview Discussion

The following quotes from prominent Musar leaders of past centuries present core Musar concepts. The accompanying review questions will help you explore and discuss these Musar ideas.

1. "The one stone on which the entire building rests is the concept that God wants each person to complete himself, body and soul." - Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, author of the seminal work *The Path of the Just* (1740)

- What do you think of the notion that each individual is meant to use this life in order to become more "whole"?
- The Hebrew word for "wholeness" is *shlemut*, and an individual who is whole would be described as *shalem*. Both of these Hebrew words share a root with the word *shalom* (peace). What might be the connection between wholeness and peace?

- What do you think wholeness might look like in a person, given that each human being has flaws and weaknesses? Have you ever encountered a person who impressed you as embodying a measure of wholeness? What was it about that person that made you perceive him or her as whole?
- Can you begin to reframe your life, seeing everything you do in terms of bringing you closer to wholeness?

2. "The entire purpose of man's existence is to purge every negative trait and character attribute from his heart." - Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the 19th-century founder of the Musar movement

- Of the list of traits below, which ones do you see as being relatively problematic in your life?
 - patience / impatience
 - generosity / stinginess
 - gratitude / deprivation
 - trust / worry or fear
 - honor / judgmental
 - enthusiasm / laziness
- The Musar teachers recognize that change requires practice. Which of the following actions could you commit to doing daily for one full week?:
 - patience [*savlanut*] - identify the specific situation in which your patience is most tried on a daily basis, and commit to "bearing the burden" of your impatience for the first 5 minutes you are in that situation
 - generosity [*nedivut*] - do 3 generous acts daily. Note that you can be generous not only with money but with possessions, time, emotions, physical assistance, etc.
 - gratitude [*hakarat ha'tov*] - say thank you to everyone who does the slightest thing to help you, including things like letting you change lanes on the freeway, doing their jobs, being in your life, cleaning public spaces, etc.
 - trust [*bitachon*] - whenever you feel worry or fear arising in you, recite to yourself the phrase, "I am in good hands."
 - honor [*kavod*] - greet everyone you meet with a smile and a kind word. Go out of your way to do so.
 - enthusiasm [*zerizut*] - jump into action, from getting out of bed the moment you awaken to taking care of things you might otherwise put off.

At the end of each 7-day practice, do a personal stocktaking of your experience: What happened? How do you feel at the end of the week in contrast to how you would ordinarily feel about this "trait of your heart" you were addressing? Did any experiences bring to mind purity or impurity of heart?

C. Middot Discussion

To assist us on our personal spiritual curriculum, Musar teaches us to strive toward the positive and strengthen the opposite of the trait with which we struggle. So, for example, if you tend to be miserly, generosity would be on your personal curriculum. A judgmental person (one who judges others) would work on the trait of honor (honoring every human being), and so on through the full range of *middot*.

Here are passages that can help deepen your discussions with others.

Discussion #1: Awareness - *Zehirut*

"Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel were in dispute, the former asserting that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it [would have been] better for man not to have been created than to have been created. But now that he has been created, let him *examine* his actions. Others say, let him *feel* his actions" (Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 13b).

Before examining and feeling comes awareness. In his book, *The Path of the Just*, Rabbi Luzzatto begins his progressive series of steps for the spiritual seeker to follow with the trait of *zehirut*, usually translated as watchful or cautious. "The task of watchfulness," writes Rabbi Luzzatto, "involves a person being cautious in his actions and his interests, which is to say, conscious and aware of whether his deeds and his ways are for the good or not. The point is to avoid abandoning his soul to the danger of destruction (God forbid) and not to go in his habitual ways as a blind person in darkness. This is a thing that our intelligence knows and ought to dictate."

Questions to discuss:

- What exactly does Rabbi Luzzatto wish us to be cautious about?
- What recent action of yours was for the good? What action was not for the good?
- Had you been actively practicing the trait of caution before you did the negative action in question, do you think you still would have done it?
- What does it mean to you to be cautious in your "interests"? When you think about your own interests in light of Rabbi Luzzatto's teaching here, are there any interests that you know ought to be avoided?
- Rabbi Luzzatto credits our intelligence with knowing that we should be cautious. If so, why don't we simply follow such common-sense guidance?
- What happens to awareness and free will when actions are taken in a habitual way?

Discussion #2 : Compassion - *Rachamim*.

"Compassion," writes Rabbi Avraham ben Ha'Rambam in *The Guide to Serving God*, "is one of the lofty traits and one of the Torah's objectives. It is the first of the traits ascribed to God- 'a compassionate God' (Exodus 34:6). The Torah repeats the phrase- 'the Almighty your God, is compassionate'

(Deuteronomy 4:31). And the prophets said, 'for You are a kind and compassionate God' (Jonah 4:2)... Your temperament should be inclined away from callousness, toward compassion and sensitivity. Thereby, you will be kind to one who deserves compassion, helping one in distress, saving the oppressed from oppressors, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and the like."

The *American Heritage* dictionary's definition of compassion is "deep awareness of the suffering of another, coupled with the wish to relieve it." *Reform Judaism* author Fran Zimmerman quotes a Musar teaching that guided her in being more compassionate in her relationships: "For our response to be truly compassionate, we must not just feel with another person, but also try to see things from the other's perspective."

Questions to consider:

- What difference do you see between the above dictionary definition and the Musar guidance Zimmerman cites?
- How much effort do you make to see things from another person's perspective?
- Could/might you do more?

Discussion #3: Patience - *Savlanut*

"Woe to the pampered person who has never been trained to be patient. Either today or in the future he is destined to sip from the cup of affliction." - Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*

As *RJ* magazine author Gary Shaffer describes, rush-hour commuting can easily ignite impatience. You need to be somewhere and the person in front of you is moving too slowly, or the traffic is jammed. Or it's just your luck to arrive at the one ticket counter staffed by a trainee.

Actually, the cause of our impatience is never the situation itself, though that is how it appears to us. A situation that infuriates us might not cause the slightest bit of concern to another person who doesn't approach it brandishing the same fuse as we do. We experience impatience only when we strain against a situation we cannot control.

The Hebrew term for patience, *savlanut*, is made from the three-letter root *samech-lamed-nun* [S-L-N] shared by the following words:

- *sevel* (suffering)
- *lisbol* (to suffer)
- *sevolet* (tolerance)
- *sovel* (burden or load)
- *sabol* (a porter or carrier)

Seeking out the common element in all these words teaches us a fundamental lesson about patience, as Jewish tradition would have us understand it. Being patient does not mean that you are in a completely calm and unruffled state of mind, but rather that you

are able to bear the burden of your hostile and explosive feelings without reacting. Think of your emotional load as a heavy suitcase, and you as the porter who can take it on his shoulder to bear the burden.

Still, it is not enough to learn the meaning of the word *savlanut*. If learning remains purely intellectual, the Musar teachers insist, it is unlikely to have any impact on your behavior. That is why Rabbi Elya Lopian defined Musar as "Making the heart understand what the mind knows."

Questions to discuss:

- What can you do to internalize your understanding that patience means bearing a burden of emotions in the midst of the situation?
- What image, phrase, or other prompt might you use to remind yourself that the burden of your feelings of impatience are to be picked up and carried on your shoulder?

Discussion #4: Trust - *Bitachon*

"Internalizing the attribute of *bitachon* [trust in God] leads to two benefits," says Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz in *Madregat Ha'Adam*. "First, he who trusts in God is freed from all the troubles of the world. He is spared the emotional fragmentation caused by overly intense involvement in too many worldly concerns. He is also saved from wearing himself out, body and soul...Second, he has acquired the habit of trust, a path and a course in life. The direction that one has in this world is even more important than the benefits to which it leads. The advantages gained through *bitachon* are only indicators of its supreme value and by no means its only measure."

There are other advantages of cultivating trust in God, says Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda in *The Duties of the Heart*:

- Freedom from worldly cares.
- The peace of mind that comes from not having to travel on faraway roads, which is so physically ruinous and menacing.
- An easy profession that earns him a good reputation which allows him enough leisure time to reflect and fulfill his obligations to study Torah and do the other things he must do.
- Few professional cares, even when his product does not sell, when he cannot collect money owed him, or when he becomes ill.
- He is pleased with everything, even if it goes against his grain.

Questions to discuss:

- If Musar is Jewish spiritual practice, and if the trust under discussion here is trust in God, why does *The Duties of the Heart* text emphasize the worldly benefits of this trait?
- What practice might you do to cultivate trust in God?

Discussion #5: Humility - *Anavah*

"Humility is associated with spiritual perfection," writes Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook in *The Moral Principles*. "When humility effects depression it is defective; when it is genuine it inspires joy, courage and inner dignity. At times it is not necessary to be afraid of greatness, which inspires a person to do great things. All humility is based on such holy greatness."

Humility (*anavah* in Hebrew) is a much misunderstood trait. In the Jewish view, humility does not mean being a meek, silent, cowering person who is always deferring to others. How could that be when the Torah tells us that Moses, who repeatedly confronted Egypt's god-king, led the Jewish people out of Egypt, and cut such a large figure in Jewish history, was "the most humble man on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3)?

A modern definition of humility, based in Musar thought, is "limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others" (*Everyday Holiness*).

Questions to discuss:

- Given the modern Musar definition of humility, do you see yourself as needing to expand or contract the personal space you tend to occupy in your life situations?
- How might you go about contracting or expanding the personal space you fill up?

Discussion #6: Holiness - *Kedusha*

Acquiring holiness is like climbing the highest mountain: there are blizzards and treacherous conditions that prevent all but the very strongest from reaching the summit. The heroes who make it are afraid of nothing. Persistent, courageous, and determined, they refuse to give up no matter how many times they fall. Besides their physical strength, they have enormous powers of spirit-unshakeable confidence. As Proverbs 24:16 says: "The *tzaddik* falls seven times and still gets up."

The goal of Musar practice is to become more holy, in fulfillment of the Torah's injunction *kiddoshim tihiyu*, "You shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:1).

But what exactly is holiness?

Rashi analyzes the Hebrew word for "holy"-*kadosh*-and tells us that being holy means separating from that which is impure and improper. He calls on us to remove ourselves from all "sins," though he specifically focuses on improper sexual behavior: "You should keep distant from sin and licentiousness, for wherever you find decrees against sexual misconduct you find holiness" (Rashi commenting on Leviticus 19:2). Rashi's message is that all we need to do to be holy is to keep ourselves from defilement.

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (known also as Nachmanides, or Ramban), who followed Rashi by 150 years, writes in his commentary to Leviticus 19:2 that "In my opinion, the separation being discussed here is not to separate oneself from licentious behavior, as Rashi maintains, but rather this separation is the one referred to throughout the Talmud.

Thus the rabbis are always referred to as 'Prushim,' those who separate themselves.... The issue is that the Torah forbade certain sexual conduct, and prohibited certain foods and drink. It also permitted intercourse between husband and wife, and the consumption of meat and wine. This might allow a person to act licentiously with his wife, or his many wives, and to be a glutton for meat and drink, and speak vulgarly as his heart desires. For the Torah does not forbid any of these things, and he would be allowed to be a vile disgusting person with the Torah's permission."

Instead, Ramban emphasizes self-restraint as a measure of holiness.

In *The Path of the Just*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto says that holiness means attaching yourself to God: "Even when you are embroiled in matters of the world for the sake of the well-being of your body, let your soul not be moved from its state of great attachment. As it is said (Psalms 63:9), 'My soul attaches itself to You, for Your right arm supports me.'"

Questions to discuss:

- Why do you think that there is so much disagreement about holiness? Is there something about holiness that makes this concept especially difficult to define?
- Are these three definitions in disagreement, or is each touching on one aspect of a larger view?
- Why would you pursue holiness?

D. Beginning Practice

"Matters of piety, reverence and love, and purity of heart," writes Rabbi Luzzatto, "are not ingrained in your heart...[or] come upon nonchalantly like...sleep and wakefulness, hunger and satiety.... In truth, you have to foster means and devices to acquire them. And there is no lack for things to keep them back from you."

To transform your personal inner life, it is not enough to study Musar as a body of Jewish sources. As the Musar masters teach, it takes practice, practice, practice to effect change in one's character.

1. Reciting Phrases

Reciting phrases is a good place to begin your own practice.

Below you'll find some soul traits and phrases that can be recited to cultivate them. Print or write out one or more of these phrases on a card and place it where you are sure to see it every morning. Some people tape their card to the bathroom mirror, the coffeemaker, or their computer screen. Then, every day for one week, when you make contact with your card, spend 5 to 10 minutes reciting the phrase to yourself, either aloud or silently as a meditation. In 19th-century Lithuania the tradition was to recite the

phrase with building emotion and adding a melody. You can sit still or you can move. The point is to repeat the phrase enough times and with enough forcefulness that it imprints deeply and strongly in the mind. Then go about your day.

The Musar teachers tell us that each episode of repetition "leaves a trace on the soul." That means you are not likely to see or feel any instant change. But you will be laying down these traces nonetheless, and over time they will accumulate, until one day you find yourself in a trying situation and a new thought or impulse-aligned with the phrase you recited-arises in you. Then, you will see that the practice has done its work.

Do one phrase for one week and then take on another. Once you have completed a week of recitation for each trait on your list, go back to the beginning and repeat.

TRUST: "Blessed is the person who trusts in God, and whose trust is God" (Jeremiah 17:7).

PATIENCE: "Everything in its time."

HUMILITY: "No more than my place, no less than my space."

GENEROSITY: "The generous heart gives freely."

2. Visualization

All too often in the busy, tiring, and stressful world in which we live, we allow ourselves to be ruled by our emotions. Instead of enjoying the calm steadiness of equanimity, we live volcanic lives-about to explode, exploding, or cleaning up the mess following the last eruption. In contrast is the desirable inner quality of equanimity, an even-tempered mind-state. The Hebrew term *menuchat ha'nefesh* literally means calmness of the soul.

In *Reform Judaism*, author Henry Wodnicki suggests one way of developing this prized quality which makes it so much easier to bear the ups and downs of life: "Visualize the flame of a match touching the fuse. See how the flame moves to touch off the fuse. Now in your mind's eye, imagine the flame moving more slowly toward the fuse. Next, try to picture yourself in control of the flame, in charge of how quickly, or how slowly, the flame will ignite the fuse. You, and you alone, can control when the explosion will occur.... You, and you alone, can control how and when your anger will affect yourself and other people."

Many Musar teachers have extolled the practice of holding vivid mental images in mind in order to enlist the power of the imagination to etch impressions deep within. The mental images you choose to visualize create real experiences for you, and we are all shaped by our experiences.

Wodnicki's suggested visualization of a match-standing for influences that stimulate a reaction in you-and a fuse-signifying your readiness to react-can be practiced. Set aside a small period of time, at least 5 minutes, to visualize the following sequence:

- a match is lit
- the match is brought toward a fuse
- hold that image steady
- then expand the space between the match and the fuse
- keep expanding that open space

Impressing this image on your mind through several sittings will likely equip you with a new tool, imprinted in the mind (or, some would say, the heart). You won't experience the change until somebody acts in a way that would typically have provoked you and suddenly the image of the space between the match and the fuse appears in your mind, giving you the option to respond differently, preserving your equanimity. Try it and see.

E. Resources

Climbing Jacob's Ladder , by Alan Morinis

Everyday Holiness , by Alan Morinis

Cheshbon Ha'Nefesh , by Rabbi Menahem Mendel Leffin

Orchot Tzaddikim (anonymous)

The Path of the Just , by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

The Guide to Serving God , by Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam

The Duties of the Heart , by Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda

Strive for Truth! , by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler

More resources are available from [The Mussar Institute](http://TheMussarInstitute.org), or email info@mussarinstitute.org.