

Kol Nidre 5767

Why is it so hard to be good and what does it matter? Let me begin with the second half of my question. It matters because I am here to speak, first of all, about spiritual transformation and, secondly, about the very real possibility of transforming the world. My vision is to transform the religious life of our community, nothing less. That is what I proposed to the Legacy-Heritage Foundation and that is what they have given us \$30,000 to begin to do. Let me be very clear about this vision: it is not primarily focused on what passes for a definition of religion in popular parlance. While there are very important reasons for keeping the traditional *mitzvot*, the so-called ritual *mitzvot*, an astounding increase in their observance would not constitute the religious transformation of our community. Rather, I want to begin this process of transformation by re-connecting with the meaning of the word religious. The goal of religious life in Judaism is holiness. The question is not: how to be religious, but, how to be holy? And the answer could not be clearer from the Biblical perspective. At the center of the Torah, at the center of the section of the Torah in Leviticus known as the holiness code is the injunction: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself?” This is what we Jews have always meant by religion: The religion that is expressed very specifically in the ways we treat our neighbor. I understand our closest neighbor to mean our parents first, then our spouses or partners, our children as well as our neighbors in the community: our fellow congregants, our fellow citizens, those we know and those we do not know, and those, finally, furthest away, the vast number of strangers who are our neighbors around the globe. How we speak to each other, what we write in our emails, how we signal with our body language or our tones of voice whether we are indeed able to include the neighbor into the very definition we have of our self, or whether our self is so full that there is no room for another. This is the meaning of holiness: creating a world in which the care we extend to those closest to us and beyond precipitates a transformation in our very experience of the world we live in. I have located this, what I believe is the authentic meaning of religion and of Judaism in particular, within the long tradition of *Mussar* and I’d like to explain more clearly what that tradition is and where it comes from as well as how I am already using it to impact people’s lives and how I envision using it to impact

our community, why I applied for and received the Legacy Heritage grant. I am going to do that in two stages. Tonight I want to tell you a little about how I came to *Mussar* as well as a little bit of just what it refers to, its history. Tomorrow I want to focus on what I have in mind for our community and how you can be involved in helping to effect this religious transformation.

As a preface to those goals, however, let me keep your focus on the central claim that I want to make: namely that it is possible to transform ourselves and in so doing to transform our communities and by extension to transform the world. That is to say, I want to suggest that the heart of Jewish spirituality remains bound up with the power of a Messianic vision and I want to encourage us to unfetter our imaginations such that that vision could regain the power it has had for generations of Jews. Can you imagine a world so transformed by our smallest acts in which people feel that the burden of their lives are borne in part by their families, their friends, their communities?

Now I can return to my first question: Why is it so hard to be good? That is, if the Messianic vision of transformation I have outlined is so compelling, then why are we all so deeply ensnared by our concern for the ego that pushes away all attempts to let the other in? The Rabbis tell us that were it not for the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*, what I have called the material force, no one would marry and no one would keep a job. Let this teaching introduce to us the notion of the *Yetzer HaRa* and through that introduction to the world of *Mussar*. Let us conceive of the *Yetzer HaRa* as the mechanism by which we fulfill our ego needs and let us conceive of the *Yetzer HaTov*, the spiritual force, as the mechanism by which we displace our ego needs in favor of meeting the needs of another. Let us conceive of human consciousness itself, the very definition of our humanity, as the tension between these two mechanisms or, more precisely, to be human is to be faced at every moment by the need to choose between the *Yetzer HaRa* and the *Yetzer HaTov*. It is at this crucial moment that we turn to *Mussar*. When we recognize that from what might simply be described as habit we face the ever present need to choose between good and evil that defines us as being human by choosing evil, or worse, by not even being aware that there is a choice to make. In this latter case we, in fact, cease to exercise our own humanity. We simply give up the knowledge that there is a choice to be made. This is the total victory of the *Yetzer HaRa*.

Mussar is a commitment to a spiritual discipline that refuses to allow this victory to stand. It allows us to take control of the choices we make by first alerting us to the very ubiquity of choices. It guides us in reflecting deeply on the character traits, for example: order, patience, equanimity, calmness, truth, humility, etc. that emerge as the field on which these choices present themselves. It disciplines us to evaluate the choices we make vis-à-vis each individual trait and to become sensitive to the ways the *Yetzer HaRa* has of convincing us that we really don't have a choice.

It is so hard to be good because it is so hard to be human. It is doubly hard to be good because the mechanism for fulfilling our legitimate ego needs – symbolized by the Rabbis as marrying and making a living – is necessary, but this very choice threatens to become definitive of all our choices. It is so hard to be good because it requires that we somehow become aware of this existential situation even as our *Yetzer HaRa* assures us that we are either mistaken in this awareness or powerless to change it. It is hard to be good because it requires departing from the current cultural norms of our society in which self-absorption is celebrated. And it is so hard to be good because it requires just enough humility for us to be willing to adopt a discipline necessary to effect change.

And does it matter? Well, is this the only world you can imagine? Can you not imagine a world in which we endeavor to meet the needs of others even more than our own needs, whether that is in the context of our families, our synagogue, and our local communities or even on the national and world stage? The fact that the future is by definition not yet determined and that it can be envisioned for good is the act of Messianic imagination at the heart of *Mussar* and Torah together.

I first became interested in *Mussar* as a beginning rabbinic student. I had come to seminary after a short but intense career as a social activist. Called to conscience by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's I worked for a time in that movement, specifically agitating for fair housing policies in New York. I became active in the student movements of the time and was a participant in the demonstrations against the war in Viet Nam. Immediately prior to enrolling in the seminary I had been a street outreach worker among teenage drug abusers. The concern to carry my social consciousness into the fabric of my religious commitments was self evident to me. This concern deepened as I soon learned that the two commitments did not always go together.

My discovery of *Mussar* was both discouraging and encouraging. It was discouraging, in that it meant that *Mitzvot* or Jewish religious observance, and *Middot*, ethical self-discipline did not always go together. It was encouraging, in that it provided a methodology within the tradition for addressing this fact, but my ability to integrate *Mussar* techniques and teaching into my religious practice was impeded by the fact that the *Mussar* texts that were available carried the weight of a Jewish theology that was problematic for me. The vision of God that these texts accepted, the ancillary religious ideas of reward and punishment, literal ideas of life after death and an essentially fundamentalist view of Sacred Scripture that they espoused, were at odds with my post-holocaust, post-enlightenment sensibilities. But *Mussar* remained in the back of my mind as a spiritual option that I wanted to explore.

I spent a great deal of my intellectual energy over the course of the next 20 years trying to find a theology that was both compelling in itself for a post-holocaust, post-enlightenment Jew and would support a practice modeled on the *Mussar* Movement. The culmination of that search for me was the discovery of the work of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, came from Lithuania and lived his early years in the shadow of the height of the *Mussar* Movement's influence over Lithuanian Jewry. His way of thinking required that philosophy acknowledge not the primacy of the self, but the primacy of the other. He taught that the self comes into existence by virtue of the other. He taught that the self therefore comes into being indebted to the other. And that this other, the other person, presents him or herself to the individual by virtue of a face-to-face encounter that commands a response of service. He taught that this face-to-face encounter shatters the totality of the self. In other words, questions of ethics precede questions of being. Levinas was fond of re-writing Shakespeare in this regard: the question is not “to be or not to be?” But rather, “now that I am, what are my responsibilities?” Finally, he located a post-holocaust notion of God to be discovered in the commanding obligation we have to the other. First the other closest to us, and then the next and the next outward infinitely; In the debt to the Infinite Other we encounter Judaism's God.

As a result of finding a theological comfort zone by way of Levinas's philosophy I was able to turn back to *Mussar* texts and begin to envision a contemporary *Mussar* practice.

Mussar means "correction" or "instruction" in the sense of correction, but has come to signify moral education and serves as the simple Hebrew word for ethics and morals. As a literature it can be said to extend back to the exhortations of the biblical prophets, but more specifically describes a literature of spiritual-ethical exhortation that took form in the 10th century and continues to our own time. The *Mussar* Movement refers to a specific historical movement in Jewish life that developed primarily in Lithuania in the second half of the 19th century. The *Mussar* Movement was founded by Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant, or Israel Salanter. It began in Lithuania and is a fascinating example of this tendency to reiterate ethics as the goal of the study and observance of the law. It is both interesting and important to understand that this reiteration itself has been a continuous element of Jewish experience. This fact accounts for the presence in Jewish literature of the many ethical/pietistic treatises that became the material out of which Rabbi Salanter began to build his movement. The study of these texts, oft-neglected, was a central characteristic of his *Mussar* system. But, more importantly, Rav Salanter asked a question that previous Jewish moralists had not asked: If we have so much literature telling us what is good, why is it still so hard to do what is good? What forces might be at work in the human soul that needed to be addressed more actively than through merely reading exhortative texts?

Chief among the elements in Salanter's understanding of *Mussar* - the quest for ethical perfection - is that it is a process. Second in importance is his sense that this process encounters opposition from aspects of human nature, that is, that our personalities, the very traits that are required for the establishment of our individual identities, retard this quest. Therefore, Salanter's educational goal is to transform personality or human nature. Critical to Salanter's *Mussar* is the idea that service to and responsibility for other human beings is the single most important human value.

However, since transforming behavior was the goal, behavior had to be monitored, and the deeply rooted impediments to changing behavior that are evident in people had to be addressed. The method of address that Salanter devised, based on an

implicit understanding of the forces "unconsciously" at work on human beings are as startling as Freud's and required, like Freud, a type of therapeutic talking. First a talking to oneself, and then the dynamics of what can only be called group analysis. Based on Rav Salanter's methods, students at the Philadelphia *Mussar* Institute here at BZBI have been engaged in this process, some now for their fourth year and nearly twenty new students just this year. They set aside time for daily reflection on a specific character trait each week. They engage in a group workshop about their struggles with this trait. They study in class for an hour a week a traditional *Mussar* text and prepare for that class by meeting for half an hour with a study partner. And they have each taken on the obligation to study some other Torah text for fifteen minutes a day. This is an intense encounter with Judaism and with its transformative potential. Not everyone can participate in such a program. But I am convinced that we can use the insights of *Mussar* study, translated in many different ways throughout the life of the community, to experience the benefit of its power. Tomorrow I will share with you some of the first of the programs I envision at BZBI.

We began with a series of questions. These questions are the very questions that *Mussar* addresses. Why it is so difficult to do what is good? What is the relationship between living a religious life and an ethical one? If one manages to live an ethical life what does it still lack such that religion becomes a desirable part of an ethical life? To these questions we will add another: in a cultural milieu in which personal satisfaction and spiritual satisfaction are deemed to be synonyms, can we have access to an alternate spirituality that promises to take us beyond ourselves not through intoxication, but through profound concern for the other people among whom we live? Through *Mussar* theory we have begun to answer the first questions. There is a reason why it is so difficult to do what is good and that reason is implicit in the very structure of our personalities. When we know the reason, there are proven strategies we can use to work toward overcoming it. There is a relationship between ethical life, what we will more and more refer to as *Middot*, and religious life, what we will refer to in the classical Jewish sense as *mitzvot*. Learning about that relationship will have a positive impact wherever we find ourselves on the spectrum of Jewish observance and may become a determining factor in that observance. And there is an alternate spirituality that moves us off the center of the

Universe, making room first of all for other people and, in the end, the Most Other as well. And turning back to the Most Other in a powerful way is precisely why we are gathered here tonight.