

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

by Avi Fertig

Crisis Through My Mussar Lens

The sound of the doorbell awakened me from my sleep. It was 4 or 5 AM on a cold snowy night and I had been sound asleep in my bedroom. I must have been about 7 years old. I listened to the muffled voices coming from my parents' bedroom and then the noise as they made their way downstairs to the front door. I jumped out of bed and cautiously made my way to the living room of our split-level house and peered down the stairs to see two police officers entering our home.

The officers explained that there was a small group of burglars going down the street, one house at a time, and breaking into parked cars to steal the radios. Someone had spotted them and notified the police. The officers had arrived, given chase, and had apprehended the suspects in our backyard.

More than forty years later, I vividly recall this incident. I relive it in my mind's eye and sense the terror of my tender childish mind, and the intense feeling that my world was not secure. There was danger.

Looking back at that incident, and at my childhood in general, I appreciate that I was blessed to have grown up at a time of relative peace, security and calm. Who could have imagined that my own children would be isolated at home, along with almost the *entire human race*, protecting ourselves from a deadly enemy that cannot be seen or heard. With concern, I wonder what is going through the mind of my five-year-old son and the millions of other children who are being told that they must stay inside for fear that they or others will become sick.

How can we remain calm at a time of fear and uncertainty? How can we be paradigms of strength and support for others? As adults, we have the responsibility to model behavior and attitudes that bring calmness and peace of mind. We need it for ourselves and there is much good to be done for the benefit of others. How can the wisdom, guidance and tools of the Mussar tradition help us to process this challenging situation in the best way possible?

A custom among Mussar teachers that I have experienced many times is hearing them begin their talks by saying, "I am speaking to myself. You are all invited to listen." I know well that despite the current situation being the most universal threat in my lifetime, each of us is experiencing the crisis in our unique way. While some of the circumstances are the same, many are not. I live in a comfortable and spacious home, generally work from a home office, have plenty of food and medical care, and my family and I are relatively young and healthy. Nevertheless, I will share my own reflections and perspectives, providing a Mussar lens that has helped me to remain calm, focused and positive. You, my dear friends, are invited to listen.

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Over the many years I was privileged to study in traditional Mussar Yeshivot, I must have heard the following text quoted a dozen times. The text was marshalled as a response to both historic national calamities as well as current crises:

It is a positive *mitzvah* from the Torah to cry out and to sound trumpets for all troubles that come upon the community; as it is stated (Numbers 10:9), “upon an enemy who attacks you and you sound trumpets.” That is to say, [with] every matter that troubles you—such as famine, pandemic, locusts and the similar—cry out about them, and sound the trumpets ...

If they do not cry out and sound [trumpets], but rather say, “What has happened to us is the way of the world, and this trouble is merely happenstance”—this is surely the way of cruelty, and it causes them to stick to their negative deeds. And the trouble will add other troubles. Concerning this it is written in the Torah (Leviticus 26:27-28), “[When you] walk with Me as if happenstance. Then I will walk with you in the fury of happenstance.” That is to say, “When I will bring upon you troubles—if you will say that it is chance, I will increase the fury of this ‘chance.’” [Rambam, *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Ta’anit 1:1,3]

The first few times hearing this teaching my immature mind thought, that’s not very helpful. What exactly am I being directed to do? Okay, I thought, God is sending me a message. There is a lesson to learn. But what is the lesson? What is God telling *me*? And what should I do as a result? I know my deeds are far from perfect, but how does this teaching help inform my response? How does it help at all?

As I got older, studied more and absorbed the lessons of my mentors, I began to appreciate that the entire point is just this. There is a lesson to be learned and the message God is sending me is purely individual. The lesson is mine alone, and it must be so. Without prophecy, nobody can know the lesson for me. It must be revealed from within me, and through my own individual experience.

The teaching of the Rambam is directing me to be awake to my own experience and to reflect deeply upon a lesson I can learn from it. The response to experiencing any sort of suffering in life is to force yourself into a mode of learning. What can I learn from this experience? What is it saying to me?

Indeed, this is the lesson of the Talmud as well:

If one finds suffering coming upon them, examine your deeds, as the verse states: “Let us search and examine our ways and return to God” (Talmud Berachot 5a, quoting Lamentations 3:40)

Now that I have lived through more and more challenging circumstances and difficult situations and have made a practice of forcing myself into a mode of learning from my

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experience, I have come to appreciate something truly amazing. I've found how incredibly calming the process of doing *cheshbon ha'nefesh* can be, especially in very difficult circumstances.

Cheshbon HaNefesh, literally, "Accounting of the Soul," refers to a set of consistent and defined introspective practices where a student reflects upon their inner life, their struggles and successes, in light of their present situation. In the midst of personal crisis, I often found myself stressed and worried. I forced myself to sit and introspect, and felt a calmness washing over me. I asked myself:

- What are my feeling right now?
- What are my challenges?
- What can I learn from this challenge?
- Which natural strengths might I call upon now?
- What positive thing can I do to help the situation or to help another who is suffering?

Life experience has taught me the true profundity of what my mentors were teaching me in my earliest years in the Yeshiva. Calmness comes most readily when you force yourself to introspect about your challenge, to find the lesson and meaning *for you*. Of course, the specific lesson you draw is also important, even essential. Yet, it is the process itself that is so valuable in dealing with life's greatest challenges.

Switching to a mode of learning from your experiences, rather than just bearing them, allows you to gain a perspective about a crisis that you cannot have when you are just surviving. It allows you to see even the most troubling things in a more objective and positive light. It allows you to reveal the almost certain blessings and wonders that the challenging reality is bringing. In viewing your experience as something to learn from, you gain the ability to bring calm even to the most trying of circumstances.

To illustrate this powerful practice, allow me to share a few of the lessons that this current crisis has brought home for me. The things I have learned, I already knew, but had forgotten in my life.

We live in a diverse world and a world of divisiveness. COVID-19 doesn't care about the color of your skin, or the language you speak, or whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, Likudnik or Labornik (Israeli political parties). It doesn't care about your gender, age or sexual orientation. The virus reminds me that our differences are external and that, at the most essential level, we are very much the same. Every human being shares more in common than the things that divide us.

"And God created humanity in God's likeness (Genesis 1:27)." Every human being shares this exalted appellation. In the words of The *Alter* of Slabodka, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel:

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Just as great as the unfathomable value that is possible to evaluate and recognize of God, Creator of the universe, may He be blessed, so is the greatness of the value of the appellation designated to humanity in their likeness to the Creator, may He be blessed. (“The Hidden Light,” p. 36)

The virus cannot be seen with the naked eye, and neither can the exalted godliness that exists in every human being. It takes a very powerful microscope to see Corona virus. And it takes an illuminated lens to see beyond the external to the inner essence of another person. How much divisiveness could be avoided when we remember how much we have in common rather than focusing on our differences?

The spreading virus humbles me, it reminds me of my physical limitations. And it reminds me that we are all connected. My lack of humility and my lack the proper honor due to others prevents me from hearing the other. I forget that what I do affects others around me.

Forced to be physically separate from others causes sadness. Human beings find joy in connection. But when we cannot be together physically, we can come to appreciate that we are connected to others on the soul level. And we can constantly find more ways to connect on a soul level.

An often-cited story regarding Rabbi Yisroel Salanter took place at the height of a cholera epidemic in 1848 in the Lithuanian town of Vilna. R. Yisroel posted notices in all the synagogues exhorting everyone not to fast on “this holy and awesome day, to cut short the prayers, and to walk outside of the city during the cool of the day.”

On Yom Kippur itself, in front of the entire congregation, R. Yisroel ascended to the *bima* with wine and baked goods and proceeded to make Kiddush and eat, so that all present would act likewise. Many distinguished rabbis were opposed to his actions, but R. Yisroel stood firm and vehemently argued that this was the proper course to follow. (There are numerous versions of this story, with slight variations. See for example, “Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement,” Immanuel Etkes, pp. 170-1.)

Was R. Yisroel being lenient with the laws of Yom Kippur? Did R. Yisroel lack fear of heaven? There is a lesser known story about R. Yisroel which sheds some light. It was his custom to deliver a Mussar talk on Saturday evening before sunset, as the final moments of Shabbat were approaching. He would often become enraptured with the ideas he was imparting and completely absorbed with his talk.

One such time, completely lost with enthusiasm, he unknowingly picked up the lantern sitting next to the podium from where he was speaking. A lantern is *muktzah* on Shabbat and may not be moved. Upon realizing what he had done, R. Yisroel immediately fainted.

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The students brought smelling salts to revive their unconscious rebbe. R. Yisroel slowly opened his eyes, looked around him and saw the lantern. He fainted again.

Such was his heavenly fear of transgressing God's Torah. And so, how could it be that R. Yisroel was willing to eat on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year? The answer is that R. Yisroel was not being lenient with God's laws. He was teaching us that the highest of God's laws is the preservation of human life. There is no greater religious responsibility than guarding one's health and the health of others.

This is a life-changing lesson when taken to heart. Every single moment of every single life is of greater significance than all other religious obligations. Not because the preservation of human life supersedes one's religious obligations. Rather, because preserving human life is the single greatest religious obligation there is.

The Mussar practice that most sharply pulls together the threads we have been discussing is called in Hebrew *Nosei b'ole im chaveiro*. Literally, the term means, "Bearing the burden with the other," and in Mussar parlance refers to the practice of feeling what the other is feeling. Invariably, my Mussar teachers mentioned this practice as a key tool for spiritual growth at a time of suffering.

God first calls to Moses from a burning bush. Why a bush and not a majestic tree? Rashi (Exodus 3:2) explains that God is revealed in a thorny bush to express that God, too, feels anguish when people suffer. The Midrash comments:

The Holy Blessed One said: I wrote in Scripture, "I will be with him in pain" (Psalms 91:15). They, [the Israelites,] are placed in servitude, and I, too, will be in a place of constriction and pain. Therefore, "from within the bush" which was all thorny. (Midrash Tanchuma Exodus 14:2)

It comes as no surprise that our very first introduction to Moses as the future leader of the Jewish People is:

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and *observed their burdens*, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew ...

Explaining the words, and *observed their burdens* Rashi comments:

He cast his eyes and heart [toward them] to *feel their pain*. (Exodus 2:11)

R. Yisroel teaches us that the value of every human life is our highest spiritual value. Similarly, turning to face the other, *bearing the burden with the other*, is a primary responsibility of our own inner life.

My dear colleague, Alan Morinis, said it well: "Pain and suffering cause people to feel isolated and alone. 'Bearing the burden' calls on us to penetrate another person's fortress

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with the aim of relieving that person's pain by joining ourselves to his or her suffering.”
(*With Heart in Mind*, pp. 202-3)

The depth of this practice is that even when nothing physical can be done to alleviate the suffering of another, allowing yourself to feel their pain will connect you on a soul level and expand your own soul in the process.

My primary Mussar teacher, Rabbi Reuvain Leuchter, often taught us to use the power of visualization to help bring the pain of others to life within us, even when circumstances preclude you from being physically present. Another Mussar teacher, Rebbetzin Dina Schoonmaker, taught that to feel connected to another, don't just pray for someone else; rather, pray *as if you are the other person*. What would they ask for? What do they need? In these ways we forge a deep spiritual connection to others and expand our own inner world.

The great Mussar master of our generation, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, teaches that part of this same practice is to feel the joy of others. He illustrates this lesson with a story about his father-in-law, the spiritual advisor of the Slabodka yeshiva:

As a youth, Rabbi Avraham Grodzinsky (1888-1944) studied in the Slabodka Yeshiva. Reb Avraham came from Warsaw, which was some distance from Slabodka. Like many of the students, he returned home for the summer intercession to be with his parents. Once, while sitting with his family, he glanced up at the clock and a thoughtful expression crossed his face. Suddenly, he jumped up and began singing with tremendous fervor. Song became dance, time stood still, as he danced and sang with complete enthusiasm. Unaware of the reason for this behavior, his family looked on in confusion. As he finally finished, he explained, “Right now, one of my friends from yeshiva is getting married. Since it's too far away for me to attend, I am unable to share in *his* joy. However, I can rejoice here; after all, it's *my* celebration as well!” (*Alei Shur*, Volume 2, page 209)

How many young couples cannot celebrate their weddings now? This past week in my neighborhood, several weddings were celebrated in backyards or in the privacy of one's home. We had a wedding a few doors away, where people went to their porches to celebrate together with the couple. In another wedding taking place in a backyard, someone arranged for people to come together in their cars and to honk in unison to share in the joy of the young couple.

This brings me back to the many blessings that this challenging reality can reveal, when we focus our eyes and hearts to appreciate them. It can be a burden to be stuck in one's home, or it can be an opportunity for special family bonding. Not being able to go to the gym can be an opportunity for a walk in nature and for appreciating anew the wonders of God's magnificent world.

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Every *nisayon*, meaning a test or challenge, is also a miraculous opportunity. The word *nisayon* shares the same etymological root as the word *nes*, meaning a miracle. When we pause to contemplate and introspect about the crisis we are living through, we must also find the wondrous blessings that are revealed through this new reality.

The word *nes* also means a banner. The tools of Mussar can bring you to gain focus and calm, turning your *nisayon* from a challenge to an opportunity and allowing you to become a banner, a model of calmness and inspiration to others. This challenging crisis will eventually pass, the lessons we learn are eternal.

May the One Above protect each one of us, keep us healthy and heal the sick, and grant us the wisdom to hear the message and to live its lessons.

For Focus

1. Approach each day as a learner: spend time considering what message/lesson can I learn today?
2. Consider: What wonders and blessings can I appreciate in this challenging reality?
3. How can I feel more connected to others on the soul level?

Practice *Nosei B'ole im Chaveiro*: pray for others and pray *as if you are the other*. Share in their pain and in their joy.