

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

By Alan Morinis

Pandemic: Now and Then

We know that every member of our global Mussar community is feeling the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic in your personal life and in your community. I am sending wishes for blessings to you if you are unwell or caring for others who are ill. Whether you are struggling to work from home with kids at your feet, scrambling to find ways to fulfill your responsibilities, revising your business plan – or your retirement plan – ensuring that aging relatives are cared for, feeling isolated, or experiencing our new reality in other ways, I want to convey my heartfelt wishes for good health and resilience to each and every one of you, from my soul to yours.

We are reading and hearing about what an unprecedented challenge we are facing, and at one level, that is certainly true. Our world has become so interconnected that a person getting sick in Iran sends someone to the hospital in Vancouver and causes a death in Brazil. If there was ever to be a demonstration that we are living in a global community, this is it.

And yet it is exactly that interconnectedness that we are being told to pull back from now. We all need to stay home and limit our contact with other people to the maximum extent. I have worked from home for years and so that is not really much of an adjustment for me, but still, I felt my life contracting when my shul shut down, and I had to cancel travel plans for talks I was looking forward to giving in other cities and countries, and especially when my family decided to cancel the Pesach seders for this year. The supermarket is no longer a place to browse but a minefield that I need to navigate as quickly as possible in the hopes of slipping through unscathed. And then I wash my hands down to a new layer of skin.

But from another perspective, this is actually not such an unfamiliar situation. It may be unfamiliar to us as individuals because we have been blessed and privileged to live at a time when public health has been so good and effective that infectious diseases seemed to be largely a thing of the past. But as a species, and over the span of human history, waves of disease burning through the community is actually the norm, not the exception.

I know this from my own experiences. In 1974, my wife and I worked with the World Health Organization in India in the global smallpox eradication program. When we joined that effort, we were stationed in the central Indian state of Bihar, where in that one year, 186,000 cases of smallpox were reported, along with 30,000 deaths, most of them children. And that was in only one state! And it is a poor, rural state so who knows how high the numbers were in reality? And yet by the next year, that disease which had

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

been a scourge on human life for millennia, was gone. Eradicated not only from India but from the world. Simply no longer part of the biological makeup of our planet.

Working in the smallpox eradication program was a very formative experience for my adult life. It certainly had a major impact on my wife, Bev, who decided as a result of that experience to apply to medical school at the senior age of 27. We both saw close up the reality of the gruesome power of a virus ripping through an unprotected population. And we also saw how the collective will of diverse people coming together with a single purpose and sound intelligence could break the chain of disease transmission and put an end to the threat, with finality.

As a result of that experience, I have to tell you that I am actually optimistic right now. If we all do what we are being asked to do, to the fullest extent possible, we can deal with COVID-19, just as we could eradicate smallpox. It will take an extraordinary show of cooperation and compliance, but it is in our hands to do what we can toward the outcome we all hope and pray for.

Now, you may wonder why I, who have come to share spiritual perspectives on the current situation, begin by emphasizing the practical things we can and must do to confront the challenge before us right now. The answer is that I have done that because of the role-modeling provided by our Mussar ancestors, to whom epidemics were no stranger. In those eras, just as in ours, everyone was very anxious and worried. The response we see in our spiritual teachers was not to encourage everyone to meditate for the sake of their own peace of mind, but, in the first instance, to get busy taking on the practical tasks of caring for the community. They did provide tools for dealing with worry, which is both a natural response, and one that is actually not all that helpful, but not as the first call to action.

I want to share with you lessons we can learn from the response of the Mussar teachers to a cholera epidemic that swept through Europe in 1849, and only then turn to a key teaching on dealing with your own inner worry. As you will see, the ordering of this lesson makes sense, because the first step in dealing with worry, according to our teachers, is to undertake those actions that are practical and feasible for you to do to deal with the troubling situation. You may well find that making those efforts actually has the effect of reducing your anxiety. But worry may remain, and we'll get to a teaching on that subject later on.

In 1848 the world was ravaged by one of the deadliest cholera outbreaks of the 19th century, leaving a trail of devastation across much of Russia and the surrounding regions. In Russia alone, one million people died.

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

It was around the same time that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter founded the Mussar movement in Europe. When Yom Kippur rolled around in 1848, with the cholera epidemic in full swing, Rabbi Salanter ascended the *bimah* of the Vilna synagogue and explained to the congregation that because of the raging tide of illness, they must not spend the day gathered together in the synagogue, but should leave the building and walk outside to breathe fresh air, which was believed at the time to reduce the severity of the illness.

As he spoke from the *bimah* that Yom Kippur morning, Rabbi Salanter also said that it was imperative that everyone maintain their strength so that they would not fall victim to disease. And so, even though it was Yom Kippur, Rav Yisrael explained, everyone should not fast; instead, they should eat and drink in order to protect their health so they would survive the epidemic.

But he didn't just tell the congregation that they must eat. He held up a plate with cake in one hand, and a cup of wine in the other. As he faced an astounded congregation, Rabbi Salanter recited *kiddush*, drank his cup of wine, ate some cake, and told the congregation to go home and do the same.

That Yom Kippur, Rav Yisrael authorized posters be put up throughout Vilna encouraging Jews to maintain their health and strength in the face of the spread of the disease – even if that would mean shortening the Yom Kippur prayers and abandoning the fast.

So stringent were his rulings, that one of his proclamations banned the eating of fish (which the doctors had forbidden) and said that eating fish was tantamount to eating pork! One senior member of the Vilna Jewish community approached Rav Yisrael and told him that he had always eaten fish on Shabbat. He would cook the fish himself. Could he at least taste the soup? Rav Israel answered: “Buy pork and eat it together with the fish!”

So far, so good according to Jewish law. The *mitzvah* of *pikuach nefesh* – saving a life – overrides all other commandments and so it is in line with Jewish law to break any ritual commandments if what is at stake is saving lives.

But we know from reports from that time that Rabbi Salanter did not stop with a proclamation on ritual matters. He also threw himself into the practical fight against the cholera outbreak. He volunteered to care for the sick and was instrumental in organizing the Jewish community to take care of those who were ill, and to watch over orphans left behind in the wake of the disease.

What lessons can we extract from this history that are pertinent to the situation we find ourselves in today, with the COVID-19 pandemic? I would say that when Rabbi Salanter

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

insisted that people not fast on Yom Kippur, he was acting like a good rabbi ruling in accord with the *halacha*. But his selfless actions of putting himself in charge of the fight against the epidemic, serving the community with his personal efforts require more investigation.

In being involved in practical efforts to help others, Rav Yisrael was going beyond the measure of the law and into the territory of what Pirkei Avot calls *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, which means “bearing the burden with your friend.” Unlike *pikuach nefesh* – saving lives – this quality is not an obligation. It is a sign of piety to make such personal efforts to help others. And, indeed, we are called upon to do so, not by a commandment, but by the injunction that figures prominently in the Torah that calls on us to be holy. *Kedoshim tihyu*, it says in the Book of Leviticus, “you shall be holy.”

In other words, it is good and proper to do what is required of you, but that alone will not actually fulfill your highest spiritual potential, which the Torah frames as “being holy.” And so, when Rabbi Salanter engaged himself in taking care of the needs of others, he was not somehow dropping his spiritual activities to focus on something more real and urgent. Rather, what he was showing us is that it is only when we go beyond what is required of us that can we fulfill our spiritual potential.

When we apply that lesson to present circumstances, we can divide our responses to COVID-19 into two categories:

1. that which is required of us, and
2. that which we do that helps us grow spiritually.

The news reports in all media have been full of instructions about what we are called upon to do:

- stay home,
- minimize contact with others,
- cancel all unessential travel or shopping,
- wash hands,
- use sanitizers,
- and so on.

These actions are obligatory. Many *poskim* (that is, Jewish legal authorities) have said that a person who goes out and endangers other people by their actions is considered to be a *rodef*, invoking the grave traditional Jewish term for someone who pursues another person in order to inflict mortal harm. So, we need to follow the guidelines to the letter.

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

And when we go beyond what is required of us, we are stretching ourselves in the direction of holiness. That does not mean that it is admirable to endanger yourself for the sake of others; that is not so. Recall that Rabbi Salanter ordered an end to the fast on Yom Kippur because we are, in fact, obligated to take care of our own well-being first. But there are sure to be things you can do that will help other people bear the burden of their difficulty at this time, including making contact with isolated people by phone or computer, checking on your neighbors, sending notes of appreciation to health care and other front line workers whom you know, and the like.

We at The Mussar Institute are encouraging our community to support your local Jewish food bank, sometimes called food pantry, and if there is not such an organization in your area, then the community food bank, which exists almost everywhere. The people who count on food banks are the most vulnerable members of society, who are the people who will feel the enormous economic impact of the pandemic most directly, to the point of being unable to put food on the table.

According to your ability and the local need, you can donate money, volunteer, drive, make phone calls, and the like. We urge you to walk in Rabbi Yisrael's footsteps by making contact with the local food bank to discuss what they need that you might be able to offer. Or doing what is appropriate to you in your situation to reach out to help others.

And we urge you to do these things with the clear recognition that doing so is spiritual practice. Any image you may be carrying around of a holy person as being somehow so refined and rarified that this person is set apart, almost like a different species, floating about this ordinary world, is not accurate. Holiness is actually much more mundane and attainable than that, which, on reflection, is as it must be since the Torah puts the demand for holiness on all of us.

Whenever you put self-interest aside and serve the needs of others without ego, you have entered the realm of the holy. It was Rabbi Yisrael himself who said two things that are relevant in this context. He said:

The spiritual is higher than the physical, but the physical needs of another are an obligation of my spiritual life.

And he also said:

A good Jew does not worry about his own stomach and another person's soul. A good Jew worries about another person's stomach and his own soul.

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

Since this last quote mentioned the word “worry,” that provides us with a jumping off point to discuss the one other thing I wanted to bring to you right now, which is to address the issue of “worry.” The truth is that the vast majority of us are suffering more from anxiety about the pandemic than we are from virus infection itself. And that is good, because while a virus cannot be treated, anxiety can.

Rav Yisrael tells us that we who would be good Jews should be worried about another person’s physical needs. That tells us something about worry, which is that like every *middah* [i.e., soul-trait], it is neither positive nor negative in itself. In other words, there is a way in which worry is a positive trait, and a way in which it can be negative.

When worry falls into the category of active concern, it is positive. That’s the quality that reminds us to wash our hands frequently, to maintain our 6 feet distance from other people, to give up unnecessary trips out of the house. It keeps us alert, attentive and cautious.

But when worry gets blown up to the point of sending us into endless, fruitless hand-wringing and spirals into wild imagining of “what-if” scenarios, then worry is a spiritual obstacle that detaches you from truth.

We want to encourage the first manifestation of worry and overcome the second. And how are we to do that? The Mussar teachers have a principle, which is that it is usually pointless to try to reduce a *middah* that has a high negative charge. In other words, their guidance is not to set goals like, “I am going to be less angry,” or “I’m not going to worry.” They just know from experience that strategies like those are not going to be effective because the emotion is just too powerful to be restrained by resolutions.

Instead, they encourage us to practice and strengthen another trait that will have the effect of reducing or resolving the hot one that is plaguing our inner lives. In the case of worry, that countervailing trait is “trust,” or in Hebrew, *bitachon*.

The roots of *bitachon* as a Jewish concept go back to the Torah, where it shows up strongly in the book of Psalms, and it features in the *siddur* as well. Although the word translates as “trust,” the concept really involves trusting God. And that is a very important qualification. When we introduce God into the picture – whatever you may hold that to mean – what we are pointing out and underlining is that each of us human beings is not the one in charge. We may control some of the factors that go into determining the course of our lives, but we do not control all of them. We have not written the script, we are not the directors of the play, nor can we control all the actors that influence most of what happens to us.

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

From my perspective, that is not so much theology as it is fact. If you look at anything that has happened in your life, as well as things that did not happen, you have to admit that you as an individual did not have control over every factor that came into play that determined the outcome. Other people's wills and actions, the weather, chance happenings ... so much goes on that has an effect on our life that we do not control.

To take a pertinent present-day example, the vast majority of people who have come down with COVID-19 did nothing more blameworthy than sit on the subway, go to the grocery store, help an elder, attend a class, go to the office, and the like. To an extent, we do shape our lives, and to a different extent, life happens to us.

Having *bitachon* means that you recognize and accept that a significant part of your life is not in your hands to determine. And it has always been so for human beings. When Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda wrote *Chovot HaLevavot – Duties of the Heart* in the 11th century, *bitachon* was one of the main qualities he profiled in his book. In Gate #4, the Gate of Trust, we read:

But one who trusts in God is secure against mishaps, and that person's heart is assured against future bad things. Whatever comes to him or her from God will be accepted with joy and gladness and his livelihood comes to him peacefully, quietly, and happily, as written "God causes me to lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters" (Psalms 23:2).

When we look into this quote, we will see that ibn Paquda is not telling us that our trust will ensure that we get what we want. That is not the way *bitachon* works. We might well think that because, on first glance, he seems to be saying that a person who has strong *bitachon* is "assured against future bad things," but that cannot mean that nothing negative will befall him or her. The commentary on this book, which is called the *Pat Lechem* by Rabbi Chaim Avraham HaCohen (1740-1815), says as much. He writes, "Certainly it cannot be taken literally, that for one who trusts in God, no bad things will ever happen to him, since what our eyes see contradicts this."

But hear the quote again. Ibn Paquda actually doesn't say that having *bitachon* means that you will be surrounded by an impenetrable force field that will protect you from all painful or difficult situations. What he says is that a "person's heart is assured against future bad things."

The effect of *bitachon* is not seen in the events that transpire in the outer world so much as it is felt in the chambers of your own heart. *Bitachon* is a pathway to inner tranquility and joy no matter what changing life circumstances you find around you in the moment. Hence, as we read in the Psalm (84:13):

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

Ashrei adam boteach bach – Happy is the person who trusts in You

Bitachon has the effect of uplifting of the heart, not setting around you an impregnable anti-missile defense system. It is because *bitachon* has this effect that it has an important place on the personal spiritual curriculum of anyone who finds the constrictions of anxiety and worry pressing in on their heart. When you accept that fundamental aspects of your life are not under your control – they are God’s to will, not yours – then the tight bonds of worry are relaxed, to be replaced by joy, peace and tranquility.

We learn something important about this trait when we look at the 16th century compendium of Mussar topics called *Orchot Tzaddikim*. When you look at the Table of Contents of that book, you find chapters on humility and pride, generosity and miserliness, worry and anger, and compassion and cruelty. But surprisingly, there is no chapter on trust. We would not expect such a comprehensive study of inner experience to overlook such a fundamental trait as *bitachon* and, indeed, it does not.

Where we find the long discussion of trust in *Orchot Tzaddikim* is not in its own chapter, but in the chapter on joy. It is followed by a discussion of worry, and so in the scheme presented in this book, the heart is either taken over by worry or by joy, but the two are mutually exclusive.

Orchot Tzaddikim says something else that actually ties together the two subjects we have been examining here. We began with a focus on what we can learn from Rabbi Salanter’s extraordinary efforts on behalf of the community in a time of cholera, and then focused on the inner trait of *bitachon* as the antidote to fruitless worry.

In its discussion of trust, *Orchot Tzaddikim* says, “There is no trust without good deeds.” It goes on to say that it is expected that one should “exert oneself as much as one can,” and only after one has expended that much effort should a person turn over their heart to *bitachon*.

The Mussar teachers generally express this idea by assigning to us an obligation to make effort, which in Hebrew is *hishtadlut*. Everything that Rabbi Salanter showed us to do involved the spiritual practice of making effort, *hishtadlut*. And once great efforts have been made with the tools and the skills that are already in our hands, beyond that, we are called upon to open our hearts to *bitachon*, to trust.

It is a sacred obligation of a Jew to protect a life, whether one’s own or someone else’s. And so, we must wash our hands repeatedly, stay at home, keep our physical distance, be concerned for the physical and mental well-being of others, and the like. That is the *hishtadlut* that is our sacred obligation because it protects lives. Does doing those

Mussar in a Time of Crisis

things guarantee that you or others we know won't get the virus? No, it does not. And so, while it is incumbent upon us is to make the best effort we can, with sincerity and diligence, when that is done, we are to bow in recognition of the fact that you and me, we are not the Master of the Universe, not even the master of our own lives, and we recognize and accept that there is "One" who does know the script in which we have, to the best of our abilities, just played our part.

This is the path to effective action and peace of mind that ibn Paquda mentions. And so, in reflecting on the teachings and also the actions of our wise ancestors, I urge you to do what you can to help yourself and others in this time of great need. And I also urge you to put your trust in God. As the Psalm says (55:22): "Cast your burden on the Lord, and God will sustain you."

I send my wishes for blessings to you and all people, that we should emerge soon from this challenging situation. And when we do, I hope you will be able to look back and say, "I did what I could. And as for the rest, I trusted God."