

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

by Rabbi Eric Gurvis

## **Desperately Seeking *Seder***

I keep pinching myself. I am trying to make sure I didn't just fall asleep in front of the television, which is playing some odd movie, the type I tend not to watch. Every morning, I step out of my bedroom, grab some coffee and devour the morning's news, and I am shocked back into reality—and I know I am not alone in feeling this. And what a reality we are now experiencing, collectively, and even more so individually! We are separated from our customary connections—synagogues, community centers, offices, shopping centers, gyms, family and friend gatherings, restaurants, and every other venue which is a part of the landscape and itinerary of our lives. We now live on our own islands. It is beyond surreal.

Think about the new lingo we've acquired in just a handful of weeks: social distancing, essential services, and shelter-in-place (okay that one is not new to many of us, but we've never had to do it for such an open-ended period). The people we turn to on news channels and late-evening entertainment, who we regularly invite into our homes so we can catch up on the latest news, or have a laugh are now inviting us into their homes. That's the only way they can continue to do what they do and reach us, their audience. Many of us are working from home. For some of us that was already a part of our reality. But now, even our home workspaces have become shelters and caves as we barely leave our homes. The days seem longer, and in many ways, they seem to have lost any sense of differentiation. Our errands, our classes, meetings and outside activities helped us frame our time. Much of that is now gone, for we do not have anywhere to go, save perhaps to our phone or computer monitor for the activities that fill our days.

I keep hearing folks talk about the "new normal." I find that I simply can't embrace that language. It's not that I am in denial, nor am I oblivious to our reality, my reality. I have found that I prefer to call this our "now normal." And I pray with every fiber of my being that it is short-

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lived, at least as short-lived as possible. Even more so, I pray that the devastation, the losses we will number as we emerge from this collective nightmare will be as absolutely few as possible. I continue to hope and to dream of the “new normal” we will build when this chapter gives way to what is next.

In his presentation last Sunday, my teacher and colleague, Rabbi Avi Fertig told us that he was speaking to himself, and that we were invited to listen in. I totally understood what Avi meant when he said that. In my years as a fulltime congregational rabbi, the local Jewish newspaper would call every year or so during the summer to ask me, and other rabbinic colleagues what topics we would be addressing during our High Holy Day messages. I rarely answered directly. Sure, some years it was clear what would be on the agenda. But in truth, even when I know far in advance, I am often still writing and rewriting as the Holy Days approach. (It’s not hard to imagine at least part of what will be a theme come the Holy Days this fall!) However, one thing I almost always said in response was, “I’m really talking to myself. I am delivering the message I need to hear at this year’s holy days. I only hope that someone else needs it too.” It’s true now as well.

My teachers and colleagues, Alan Morinis, Rabbis Avi Fertig, and Amy Eilberg, who have all been a part of this initial Mussar Institute response to the existential reality in which we find ourselves have been deep, thought-provoking and healing in their messages. I can only hope to achieve a small bit of what they have done with their words.

An important anchor for my current rabbinate, comes from the six *Mussar* groups, *va’adim* with whom I have the privilege of walking the *Mussar* path. Six groups from five different Boston-area congregations. Indeed, just traveling to each of the congregations was a part of my routine in what I now call “the time before,” or “the good old days.” For as I would arrive in each of the

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congregations, I also had the opportunity to casually interact with other members of those communities. That's another piece of what we have lost, at least for now – casual, impromptu interactions. Like so much of our current reality, my groups now convene virtually. There are few incidental human interactions, only those which are scheduled. Sure, you can still pick up a phone and spontaneously call someone – and many of us do – but so much more of life in the here and now unfolds in those little boxes on our computer monitors, tablets, or smartphones.

As I write these words, I still cannot comprehend that it is not yet three weeks since my last live and in-person *Va'ad* session. It seems like an eternity has passed. And we have absolutely no idea when virtual reality will give way to the ability to gather together in person yet again. The same is true for my small congregation, not to mention my immediate family which is sheltering in three separate locations across Massachusetts. How I long to hold and play with my grandsons! How I long to embrace my children! All but one is elsewhere. I know we all share these feelings. They too, are beyond surreal.

I find that my mind is flooded with *middot* all clamoring for attention in my soul. Is that a part of what I am meant to learn from this time? Is this a new kind of laboratory time for soul work? It certainly can be, if we but awaken to the possibilities. *Kavod* / Honor—who among us has not taken to seeing and honoring people in our lives who, in the “time before” were present, but we somehow did not quite notice them in the same way we do now—the cashiers who help us check out at the grocery store, or those stocking the shelves; the mail carrier, or those who collect our trash. *Anavah* / Humility—who among us has not realized in this moment that for all we know and all we can control, we are, individually and collectively, largely at the mercy of something no one can see? *Savlanut* / Patience (or perhaps even more along the lines of the teachings of the Alter of Kelm—(“bearing the burden”)— many of us are now living in closer quarters, and with more members of our family back at home. We must relearn how to share time and space.

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*Hakarat haTov* / Gratitude for the blessings around me—I can't remember the last time I ate three meals a day with my wife and our one son who is currently living with us other than on a family vacation. Life has been so busy, and everyone's schedule operates as if in a parallel universe, less so now. And there is a bit of blessing in that. To be sure other *middot* float in and out of my mind, and my heart and soul, as I try to make sense of the life I am now living.

There is one *middah* which resonates even more powerfully for me at this moment in my life—*Seder* / Order. With all the dramatic changes we have each had to make, all the adjustments required to keep on living with a sense of normalcy, I find that my rhythm, my *seder* has been demolished. In speaking with members of the *va'adim* with whom I share the *Mussar* journey, I am learning that I am not alone in feeling the void in *seder* that has been created by the restrictions and shifts in day-to-day life.

In the early days it seemed easy. I'd still get up, brew my coffee and turn to the news sources which are a part of my daily routine. But that routine seemed to spread, as on some days, there was nothing to draw me into action until mid-day, or often, the evening. After a few days of this I felt sluggish, and aimless. I began to realize that I miss the coffee shops and libraries where I would go to sit and do my work. I had learned that working out of the house enabled me to better focus. Working from home leaves me with a myriad of distractions. And a week or so into this now normal, it was almost all distractions. Like many, I realized I needed to create my new *seder*. I turned to my *Mussar* books to locate something which would inspire me. As is so often the case for me, I found it in a teaching from Rav Shlomo Wolbe, whose *Mussar* has had so profound an impact on me over these years of my *Mussar* journey. In *Alei Shur*, part 1, pages 67-68, I found a passage I had never studied before, simply entitled *Seder*. I skimmed it quickly and found that it had much to say to me at this moment. I consulted my usual sources, Rabbis Avi Fertig and David Jaffe, perhaps they knew of a translation of the passage, but they did not. "No, not that section."

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So as is often the case, I set it as an intention to study the passage closely and translate it (by this time I knew I was going to be sharing a teaching in this series).

Rav Wolbe opens his discourse by citing a passage from the Talmud – *Sotah* 49a:

**Rava says: Each and every day is more cursed than the previous one . . . as it is stated in the chapter detailing the curses in the book of Deuteronomy: “In the morning you will say, would that it were evening, and in the evening you will say, would that it were morning” (Deuteronomy 28:67).** It is unclear **which morning** the verse means. **If we say** that in the evening, he will wish it would be **the following morning, does he know what will be** the outcome of the next morning, which would cause him to yearn for its arrival? **Rather**, it must mean the morning **that has passed**; that is, in the evening they will pine for the previous morning, because their situation is continuously worsening.

It’s hard to know to exactly which deteriorating situation the Talmud is referring, though we could easily conjure up a few possibilities. What I find more striking is the end of the passage cited by Rav Wolbe: “It must mean the morning that has passed; that is, in the evening they will pine for the previous morning, because *their situation is continuously worsening.*” When life is spinning out of control, we look for something onto which we can grab hold to steady ourselves. Often, it is those nearest and dearest to us we will grab hold of. How do we do that in a time when we are constantly being told we must practice social distancing? In the early days, the “elbow bump” seemed cute, an innocuous way we could acknowledge and even smile at our unfolding reality. Now, it’s not cute. And the need to continue maintaining our distance runs counter to our natural human instincts. Like those in Rava’s time, we are keenly aware that our “situation is continuously worsening.”

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Rav Wolbe takes this as an opening to remind us that there is something onto which we can grab hold to steady ourselves, to steady those around us, and to reassert a measure of control over our lives. He teaches: “The continued existence of the world depends upon *Seder* (order). Only a fixed order, without instability can bring the strength needed to banish the darkness of curses. Just as this is true for the life of the collective, so too is it true for the individual. Darkness, and the valley of the shadow of death also exist in the life of the individual, even more so if he or she lacks *seder*. If there is *seder*, light will also appear from the darkness, in the life of the individual as well. (*Alei Shur*, part 1, page 67)

Indeed, both morning and night, our liturgy reminds us of this as we recite the prayers *Yotzer Or* and *Ma’ariv Aravim*: There is One who sustains the order of our universe, “bringing on the light,” “causing evening to fall,” “causing the seasons to alternate,” and so on. God’s role in the universe, on a daily basis, as well as over the course of time, is a complex and eternal question. For my part, I do not find myself pondering theological questions in this moment. I do find myself asking, what will bring balance to my life and the lives of those around me? What can I do, to re-establish a sense of *seder* in this now reality, even as I dream of what *seder* will be needed when this darkness has passed and we take our steps, shaky as they may be, towards the new reality, the new *seder* we will need and want to create?

Lest I leave this at only the “what I can do” level, and give short shrift to the power of Rav Wolbe’s teaching, I must read on: “In the life of an individual, every regular behavior which he or she succeeds in establishing as a fixed habit, elevates his or her life to a higher plane. And it draws the person closer to a special place of *Hashgachat Pratit* (Divine Providence.)”

Rav Wolbe turns again to the Talmud, this time to *Berachot* 6b, where we learn: “Ravin bar Rav Adda said that Rabbi Yitzhak said: One who is accustomed to come to the synagogue and did not

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come one day, the Holy One asks about him (or her), as it were, to determine what happened to him, as it is stated: ‘Who among you fears the Lord? Who hears the voice of His servant? Though he walks in darkness and has no light, let him trust in the name of the Lord, and rely upon his God.’ (Isaiah 50:10).” It is as if our Rabbis are teaching us that we are not the only ones who notice when there is a disruption in the routine. God also notices that something is amiss. God notices when our lives are out-of-sorts. For some that can be a comforting notion. I can easily imagine that for others it may be infuriating or even a non-starter. I’m not interested in a theological response to our current reality. I am interested in how we are responding. And I come back to Rav Wolbe, “The continued existence of the world depends upon Seder (order).” We cannot simply look to the heavens to ground ourselves in this new moment. We must look within and draw upon our strengths and the lessons we have learned through our *middot* work to lift ourselves up and choose the path forward. As my colleague Rabbi Amy Eilberg reminded us just days ago, Rav Wolbe’s notion of *hitlamdut*—learning from our own experiences, our own struggles, must lead us to choosing a path forward even when the path is not quite clear. And that choice is one we must consciously make. In the spirit of Rav Eliyahu Dessler, we must find the *nekudat ha-bechirah*, the choice point, which can send us out to write the script of life in this new reality, rather than simply allowing the script to be written for us. We must put our house, our lives, our days, and our relationships in order— we must choose and build the *seder* that will ground us as we traverse this unfamiliar territory. Rav Wolbe would add, when we engage in this with *kavannah* with sincere intention, rather than allowing the *seder* to emerge without our effort, then we will be supported by a higher force, perhaps you will call it God: “The pattern of behavior which one establishes for him or herself, [if it is a laudable behavior] this brings a special form of Providence from on high. Neglect (of proper behavior) arouses the attention of the Holy One, who will (in turn) “will ask after” that person, “and will be strict (*makpid*) with him/her. But sustaining (laudable behavior) brings blessing, *zechut* (merit) from on High going forward.” (*Alei Shur*, part 1, page 68)

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And let us listen to just a bit more of Rav Wolbe. Reading his teaching, I found that I could not help but wonder if he wrote these words precisely for us in this time: “It happens in our lives, from time-to-time, that we come upon unusual circumstances. We even occasionally find ourselves in such a surprisingly new situation which has come upon us without warning, so much so that we are unable to anticipate or prepare for it. Happy is the one who knows how to establish *seder* in his or her life, according to the principles of his or her prior work and his/her knowledge (or experience with *seder*). Such a person does not lose their sense of balance, nor do they fall in spirit!” To illustrate, Rav Wolbe brings us a familiar figure from our people’s past, our father Joseph: “It is in this situation that we realize we have encountered a great person. In Exodus 1:5 we read, “And Joseph was in Egypt . . .” Haven’t we already learned that he and his children were counted among the seventy souls (who came to Egypt.) So, what does this phrase come to teach us? Did we not already know that Joseph was in Egypt? It comes to emphasize the righteousness of Joseph: This is the same Joseph who tended the flock of his father. This is the same Joseph who was in Egypt and became king, standing steadfast in his righteousness. (according to Rashi, commenting on the opening of Exodus.)

Because of his steadiness when it came to *seder*, Joseph was also prepared, knowing how to bring *seder* to his life in difficult and changing situations. He was able to fall back on all he had done to prepare himself with his regular routines, so that a time of difficulty would not upset his balance. His steadiness in each of his *middot* enabled him to continue walking the path of his life and his service (to God.)”

Rav Wolbe concludes his discourse in this way: “To summarize: Each one of us stands, at points in our lives, in the face of trying and difficult circumstances. These challenges reveal our personal *seder* along the path of our lives. *Oy* to the one who glides into the midst of turmoil or tragedy as if he were a person blinded by the darkness, hastily and fruitless in his or her preparations. And



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happy (*ashrei*) is the one who knows to guard him or herself, standing firmly on the foundation of his/her ordered and proper behavior and service. Such a person will succeed in turning the challenging times in their life into a *gush echad* (a unit) in which the Holy One is with him/her, from the start (of the challenge) even to the end!”

We are living through a time of deep uncertainty. Nearly every bit of our routine and the *seder* of our lives has been disrupted, if not completely overturned. How we will emerge from this time, God willing in good health, rests substantially in our hands. We may not be able to solve the medical, economic or societal challenges singlehandedly. But we can do our small part, by living our *middot* and preparing our hearts, minds, and souls for the new reality that together we will build together. The first step – creating the *seder* that will allow us to flourish to the degree it is possible, in this challenging time.

## For Focus

- What might be one or two things you might do in the coming days and weeks to establish a sense of *Seder* in this time?
- What, from among these new routines or practices do you want to hold on to as we emerge from this period into the reality which yet awaits us?