

## Equanimity | *Menuchat Ha-Nefesh* | מְנוּחַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ

### *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*

*Rise above events that are inconsequential — both bad and good — for they are not worth disturbing your equanimity.* (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov, *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*).

In his formulation of the *middah*, Rabbi Mendel the author of *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*, encourages us to undertake the work that leads to *menuchat ha-nefesh* and cautions us about the challenges involved in opening a space for the other when the demands of the self, control our relationship to the world.

The term “rise above” in Hebrew uses the verb *leitgaber*, which means to “strengthen yourself in order to make an effort.” This is a significant word choice. The same verb appears in the first sentence of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the famous codification of Jewish law: “One should strengthen himself (*itgaber*) like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator;” and also in the morning blessings, in the expressions *ozar Israel b’gvurah* (who girds *Israel* with strength) and *hameichin mitzadei gaver* (who strengthens each person’s steps). All of these phrases demonstrate how aware the Jewish tradition is of the strength and effort needed to wake up, both literally and metaphorically, which is the challenge posed by this *middah*.

This definition also raises the thoughts about “events that are inconsequential — both bad and good.” How do we identify such events? There are certainly practical ways in which certain kind of events can be categorized and prioritized, based on the *middah* of *seder*.

In a more general way, events are not really “good” or “bad” or “inconsequential” in themselves. It is we who give them those self-based valuations. This happens when we are taken up with the demands of the self over others. If we are truly working on this *middah*, then we take a place of balance. If we are working on this *middah*, we do not swerve from our ability to be there for the other because we have allowed ourselves to be overwhelmed by the circumstances of life—in a good way or a negative way.

Shabbat is the quintessential training ground for *menuchat hanefesh*. Defined as “a taste of *olam haba*,” Shabbat aligns itself with “being able to maintain the future, that is, wakefulness regarding our obligations for and to another.” (R. Stone).

During Shabbat we supposedly receive a second, extra soul, to help strengthen our weekly soul and enlarge the realm available for the other. By prohibiting most activities associated with the busy-ness and stress of the week, Shabbat can be the time when we can train ourselves and meditate on the resources of our soul to free them for the service of the other.

## **Rabbi Ira F. Stone's Shiur**

The *middah* of *menuchat ha-nefesh* follows directly from what we learned about *seder*. *Menuchat ha-nefesh* addresses orderliness in the realm of experience, while *seder* addresses orderliness in both our personal physical and spiritual domains.

Like *seder*, the aim of *menuchat ha-nefesh* is to allow for the pursuit of wakefulness. We discover that just as disorder undermines the possibility of wakefulness to our obligations to others, so too does a lack of *menuchat ha-nefesh* undermine the possibility of our wakefulness to our obligations to others. However, unlike *seder*, *menuchat ha-nefesh* requires cultivation before the fact, so to speak.

When confronted with disorder we have the luxury of trying to create order little by little, always measuring our very definition of order by assessing the impact our actions have on helping us bear the burden of others. When confronted by the disorder of external events that threaten our equanimity, we must already be prepared to maintain *menuchat ha-nefesh*.

This *middah* must be cultivated in anticipation of future events and is that much more difficult than the cultivation of *seder*. In order to understand how to even begin cultivating this *middah* we must understand something about the very idea of the future and its role in *Mussar* theory and practice.

Time manifests itself in the theory of *Mussar* as an expression taken from the Torah and understood as expressing the ineffable name of God: “God said to Moses I will be that I will be. Say to the people of Israel: ‘I will be’ sent me to you.”

The very nature of God, so to speak, is expressed as futurity. But we also know that when Moses again asks God to reveal God’s essential nature, God answers by “passing by” Moses, leaving only the Divine attributes of mercy and kindness “in God’s place,” so to speak.

Thus, the expression “God is” is meaningless. God can only be expressed as “will be,” and the “will being-ness” of God leaves in its wake the Divine attributes of mercy and kindness. This complex scenario is expressed in the rabbinic terminology that we use to express the temporal states: *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*. *Olam hazeh* is misrepresented by the conventional translation: “this world” and means, very simply, “the present.” *Olam haba* is misrepresented by the translation: “world to come” means, very simply, “the future.”

In actuality, clock time neither measures true present nor true future. On the basis of what we’ve already said, the present is truly the temporal experience of a world without God, a world in which God is absent, while the future is the temporal, but always receding experience, of the world of God’s presence. Negotiating, we might say, between the two is the enactment of the Divine attributes of mercy and kindness.

The present is the experience of being chained to our own self-interest. *Olam hazeh* is an experience of the totality of *yetzer hara*, while the future is an anticipation and experience of the *yetzer hatov*. The future is a consequence of our relationship with others, specifically our service

to others in mercy and kindness. Thus the future is only and always, the experience that we are moving toward on the basis of our enactment of these attributes.

*Olam hazeh* is the world we find ourselves in by definition. We cannot ever “escape” *olam hazeh* without ceasing to be who we are. Just as *yetzer hara* cannot be understood in simple terms of good and evil, and is a necessary component of our human consciousness, so also *olam hazeh* is definitive of our humanity. And just as *yetzer hara* has appropriate applications, so “being” in *olam hazeh* has appropriate applications. We are always reaching from *olam hazeh* to *olam haba*

In this context we can return to begin to explore the problems inherent in the *middah* of *menuchat ha-nefesh*. We note first that in *Chesbon Ha-Nefesh* Rabbi Mendel of

Satanov stresses that both good and bad events can equally disturb our *menuchat ha-nefesh*. Maintaining equanimity is not solely about being able to somehow absorb unpleasant news or events or absorbing wonderful news. Rather, it is about being able to maintain the future, that is, wakefulness regarding our obligations for and to another.

When we understand that *menuchat ha-nefesh* is dependent on our preparation in advance for the future defined as a consequence of our relationship with others, specifically to others in mercy and kindness, then we can understand Rabbi Mendel’s teaching more clearly. Events that we interpret as either good or bad are so interpreted on the basis of their impact on us. To the extent that we respond to those events, whether they are for our good or our bad, we are immediately immersed in *olam hazeh*. We are immediately taken up with the demands of the self. Inevitably at such moments our own needs take precedence over the needs of others.

*Menuchat ha-nefesh* is the first of many *middot* whose underlying principle must be understood as, “It’s not about me.” Instead, whether we are assailed by good or by ill, our ideal reaction should always be, “What about the other?”

The methodology for achieving this level of *middah* consciousness requires that we habituate ourselves to asking that question in every situation. This is nothing more than wakefulness at its most persistent. *Menuchat ha-nefesh* is a fundamental building block of *Mussar* spirituality. It asks you to ask yourself, “What about the other?” at times and in situations when this question would not naturally come to mind. Work in this *middah* can be achieved by continually asking that question in situations when it does not carry the threat that will cause the *yetzer hara* to almost automatically interfere. When such interference does occur we need to be prepared to oppose it in some manner. Eventually we learn to take the very energy of this interference and turn it toward the good of the other (*tikkun*). Keep in mind that on this understanding of *menuchat ha-nefesh*, the future, our individual futures, are not only at stake, but also very much under our control.

Our *menuchat ha-nefesh* is disturbed because our *yetzer hara* perceives a threat to our security. Both good news and bad are precisely “good” or “bad” in reference to our security. Therefore, the questions that must be part of our preparations for being able to maintain

*menuchat ha-nefesh* are, “Of what does my sense of security consist?” “Who am I, really?” “What qualities constitute ‘me’?” Answering these questions requires a willingness to enter into an in-depth evaluation of what we can call the “truth” of our being as opposed to the masks, if you will, that often express our being in the world. For, it will turn out, that it is those masks that are most directly threatened by events, good or ill, and it is in an effort to maintain those masks that the *yetzer hara* goes to work.

As we have learned before, no *middah* is an island. Rather, all *middah* work requires the application of multiple *middot* in evaluating our behavior. We find that just as *menuchat ha-nefesh* is related to *seder*, so also is it related to both *emet* and *anavah*. In this context, the *middah* of *emet* will help us determine the truth of our being, so that we can experience a sense of security based on maintaining that truth rather than the negative effort of maintaining the masks we adopt to seemingly protect ourselves in the world. The word “seemingly” is crucial here. The masks we wear only seem to protect us. They are strategies that we have adopted in response to real threats, usually threats against us made at a time when our knowledge of ourselves was insufficient to respond to those threats with interior strength. We adopted these masks because they helped us hide, generally, from threats that we did not have the resources to withstand. Once they are in place, these masks become who we think we are. But who we really are can only be determined by coming to know the truth of our soul as distinguished from our self. When we keep in mind that the truth of our soul is determined by the extent to which we are able to contract our self and make space for the other within ourselves, we begin to recognize and appreciate our truth. In the face of that truth, our masks often become unnecessary and any effort on the part of the *yetzer hara* to protect those masks is ill conceived.

*Mussar* defines *emet* as the “seal of God,” by which we understand what supports our ability to bear the burden of the other through language and expression is truth and the extension of that infinitely is the inscription of God in the world. We must deeply consider our own truth and the fact that our truth is not the same as the masks we wear to protect ourselves in the world. The power of *emet* allows us to maintain *menuchat ha-nefesh*, which in turn, allows us to extend our ability to serve the other infinitely.

It follows, therefore, that the effort to sustain *menuchat ha-nefesh* through *emet* leads directly to the need to meditate on *anavah*. *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* defines *anavah* as the ability to learn from all people. This ability requires the strenuous effort of putting aside our typically fearful and judgmental responses to people in all situations. To learn from all people, to make all people into our teachers, requires a self-effacement that allows us to see the other person clearly for what and who he or she is in the moment that we encounter him or her. To see, if you will, him or her behind whatever masks he or she projects. Our response to seeing the other with this clarity is then to allow ourselves to be seen in equal clarity. Thus we find that *menuchat ha-nefesh* intersects with *anavah* and *emet* as well as with *seder*.

*Menuchat ha-nefesh*, as we have already pointed out, requires preparation before the fact. When we are confronted with an event we must be able to respond out of an already cultivated

commitment to the obligation to bear the burden of the other that precisely defines the future. We must have already cultivated a sensibility of humility, allowing us to see the truth of others rather than their masks.

With this in mind we turn to the specific actions that are available to us when we confront a situation that calls upon our *menuchat ha-nefesh*, from the perspectives of both *kibbush* and *tikkun*.

When we encounter either bad news or good as an interruption in the flow of our daily routine caused, the first questions that we must ask ourselves, even before the question, “What about the other?” is “Am I reacting in a self-concerned mode? Is it on behalf of my true self or on behalf of one of my masks?”

Keeping in mind that “our true self” is as a soul, and as a soul we are constituted by the ability to constrain the self and make space for the other, are we reacting in such a way as to impede our soul in favor of our self or vice versa? If we find that, indeed, our response is caused precisely because our self is reasserting itself in the place we’ve made for the other, then our first obligation is to reject this reassertion precisely by then asking the question: “What about the other?” These questions assume that we can restrain the self even if we are unaware of the origin of the mask that the self is trying to maintain. As long as we are aware that we are often made up of a series of multiple masks, which can be refused and resisted, then this *kibbush* can succeed.

*Tikkun* in regard to *menuchat ha-nefesh* is both more difficult to attain and more powerful. If we have done the deep work of identifying the source of the masks we wear and recognize that they are not authentically who we are, if we have used *emet* to ascertain what our truth is and are able to extend that truth infinitely so that in every encounter our very being is constituted by our ability to respond to every and any event on behalf of another, then the cumulative energy that we have available to serve the other is greatly magnified. That is, when *tikkun* in regard to *menuchat ha-nefesh* is achieved.

Through *tikkun*, we are able to serve another in any situation and to serve the other more. We are granted what we might call a surplus of potential energy for service that address the needs of the closest other in the particular situation, and compels us, out of those very same circumstances, to serve the next other and the next.

### ***Meditation***

Sit down, close your eyes, relax and center yourself. Think of one event that happened during the past week that you had a strong reaction to (positive or negative). Once you have identified the event, relive it in your mind with all its details and emotional charge. Go over it three times

Then try to detach yourself from the emotion of the event. Imagine that you are omniscient. From this new level of wisdom, look at the event in an analytic way. See all the conditions and factors that came together to make this event possible. See all the consequences for yourself.

Imagine that you are filled with mercy and kindness. How would this event have changed? Finally relive the event again, using all the perspectives you have gained: how is this different from the way you experienced the actual event?

### ***In real life***

**Scenario 1:** Ira is at shul for morning minyan. While the Torah is being read, some people in the back of the room start chatting. Ira is immediately incensed and thoughts start running through his mind: “Have these people no respect for the Torah? Or for the rest of the minyan? If they want to chat why don’t they go outside?” And so on. When he finally snaps out of it he realizes that the Torah reading is over and he didn’t hear any of it. He realizes immediately the irony of the situation, how in his loss of equanimity he actually joined those who were not paying attention to the Torah. Ira decides to work on this middah. He sees his experience as a loss of a moment of *olam haba*, defined as the world of God’s presence. He recalls that trigger-phrases usually work well for him and sets out to find one to use in his work on equanimity. A phrase from the ending of the Amidah immediately strikes him, “...let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone.” Now when he reaches the end of saying the Amidah, this phrase settles his mind for whatever might occur during the rest of the service and the rest of his day.

**Scenario 2:** Orly’s husband comes home and tells her he forgot to pay the credit card bill. Right away, her equanimity is gone. She reminds herself to be calm and restrain herself from saying the first thing that comes to mind. She is able to do that but knows it is just a temporary fix. She can’t regain equanimity. She observes herself feeling very angry. She looks at her anger, reminding herself that humility (*anavah*) is often the antidote to anger. But, it doesn’t quite fit for her. She sits down and uses the equanimity meditation to reflect on this incident. As she imagines a situation in which her husband is aware of the consequences of his forgetfulness and full of good will and kindness, she can see herself fill with the same kind of feelings toward him. As she re-imagines the event in a new light, she realizes that she, in fact, sees her husband’s forgetting to pay the bill as more than just a simple act; she sees it as his absence of goodwill and kindness. And it makes her afraid. She sees her vulnerability. His not paying the bill in a timely fashion, makes her afraid that she won’t be able to count on him. Period. Orly explores that fear for a while. What’s the antidote to fear? Perhaps trust (*bitachon*) although she reminds herself that it’s not really her husband she needs to trust, it is HaShem. Ah, that feels right. As she gets to work on *bitachon*, the recognition alone returns her to equanimity. She reminds herself that next time she loses equanimity, take a look at trust. (Adapted from Shira Bell, <http://www.mussarinstitute.org/jul-eh-course.htm>)

### ***Pesukim***

*Pesukim* can serve as a reminder of the work you are doing on a particular *middah*. They are words repeated over and over again and can be used as leverage to stop negative action. Review these traditional *pesukim* as well as the secular saying to use (fully or partially) as interruptives between an ‘unmussar like’ thought and the actual action.

Repeat the following *pesukim* to help in cultivating *Seder*

- “To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone”  
*V’limkal’lai nafshi tidom v’nafshi ke-afar lakol tih’yeh - Amidah, concluding prayer*
- “He leads me beside the still waters.” *Psalm 23:2*  
*Al-mei menuchot yenhaleini.*
- “Return O my soul, to your rest.” *Psalm 116:7*  
*Shuvi nafshi, limnuchaichi*

### **Cheshbon**

This is a very easy *middah* to experience several times in each day. It is easy to lose our sense of balance as we face the day-to-day challenges in life. Regardless of the event—from the small inconveniences through to large events that we feel will “crush” us in life—*menuchat ha-nefesh* is always about where we have placed ourselves in relationship to others in our life. *Menuchat ha-nefesh* always puts the other in the center view.

In your *cheshbon*/journaling practice, consider the following:

1. How did your work on *menuchat ha-nefesh* help you make space for another?
2. How did your encounter with *menuchat ha-nefesh* affect another?
3. How did your working to perfect *menuchat ha-nefesh* help you to recognize when a person is acting out of his or her own burden? Did you help bear it or add to it?
4. Think of a situation in which not being able to exercise *menuchat ha-nefesh* made you aware of the presence of your own *yetzer hara*. What did you learn about your *yetzer hara*?
5. Think of a situation in which being able to exercise *menuchat ha-nefesh* made you aware of the presence of your own *yetzer hatov*. What did you learn about your *yetzer hatov*?
6. What other *middot* came into play in your attempt to perfect the *middah* of *menuchat ha-nefesh* ?

**Mussar Worksheet—Equanimity | Menuchat Ha-Nefesh | מנוחת הנפש**

Date:

This week's middah is:	Equanimity   <i>Menuchat Ha-Nefesh</i>   מנוחת הנפש
This middah is about:	Rise above events that are inconsequential — both bad and good — for they are not worth disturbing your equanimity. (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin of Satanov, Cheshbon ha-Nefesh).
My mussar phrase ( <i>pasuk</i> ) is:	_____
My <i>cheshbon</i> time is:	
My <i>chevruta</i> is:	
My mitzvah is:	

My account of this week's <i>mussar</i> work: (See <i>The 10 Steps of Mussar Practice</i> for a fuller explanation.)	
1. I am committed to the study of Mussar for at least thirteen weeks.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
2. On awakening every morning, I remember the middah on which I am currently working.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
3. I have set a specific time and place for daily Mussar work.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
4. I use this checklist to keep track of my work on the week's middah.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
5. I have a mussar phrase (a <i>pasuk</i> ) that reminds me of my middah and repeat it to help me in cultivating that character trait.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
6. I practice mussar <i>cheshbon</i> <b>daily</b> and keep a <i>cheshbon</i> journal.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
7. I keep a “commonplace book.”	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
8. I study Torah <b>daily</b> .	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
9. I engage in <i>chevruta</i> at least weekly.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
10. I have added one <i>interruptive mitzvah</i> to my daily practice.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

The middot I worked on this week:					
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Seder</i> (orderliness)	סדר	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Emet</i> (truthfulness)	אמת
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Menuchat ha-nefesh</i> (equanimity)	מנוחת הנפש	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Kimutz</i> (frugality)	קמץ
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Savlanut</i> (patience)	סבילות	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Nichutah</i> (calmness)	ניחותא
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Nikiut</i> (cleanliness)	נקיות	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Prishut</i> (separation)	פרישות
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Charizut</i> (decisiveness)	חריצות	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Histapkut</i> (temperance)	הסתפקות
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Zerizut</i> (diligence/zeal)	זריזות	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Metinut</i> (deliberation)	מתינות
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Anavah</i> (humility)	ענה	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Tzniut</i> (modesty)	צניעות
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Shtika</i> (silence)	שתיקה	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Bitachon</i> (trust)	בטחון
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Tzedek</i> (righteousness)	צדק	<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Nedivut</i> (generosity)	נדבות