

Menuchat Ha-Nefesh – Equanimity

*Rise above events that are inconsequential — both bad and good —
for they are not worth disturbing your composure.¹*

— 1 —

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. Therefore, 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 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*. Therefore 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

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 108-115.

express the temporal states: *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*. *Olam Hazeh* (misrepresented by the conventional translation: “this world”) means very simply the present, while *Olam Haba* (misrepresented by the translation: “world to come”) means very simply the future. On the basis of what we’ve already said, the present is 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. Thus the future is only and always the experience that we are moving toward on the basis of our enactment of these attributes. 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*. Clock time neither measures true present nor true future. To put it simply, the future is a consequence of our relationship with others, specifically our service to others in mercy and kindness.

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 HaNefesh* Rabbi Mendel of Satanov stresses that a disturbance of our *menuchat ha-nefesh* can result from both good and bad events. 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. But *menuchat ha-nefesh* is the first of many *middot* whose underlying principle must be understood as: “It's not about me.” Instead, ideally, our reaction should always be, whether we are assailed by good or by ill, “What about the other”?

Thus, as I've said, *menuchat ha-nefesh* is about maintaining emotional order in the face of events or experiences either good or bad. The methodology for achieving this level of *middah* consciousness requires that we habituate ourselves to asking the question in every situation we find ourselves: “What about the other?” This is nothing more than wakefulness at its most persistent. *Menuchat ha-nefesh* cannot be acquired without recognizing what it requires, but it also cannot be acquired without practicing asking oneself this crucial question in situations that are not necessarily destabilizing or overwhelming so that we can become accustomed to asking this question at more difficult times.

We must also recognize that *olam hazeh* is, in fact, 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, but is a necessary component of our human consciousness, so also *olam hazeh* is definitive of our humanity. We are always and only reaching from *olam hazeh* to *olam haba*. And just as *yetzer hara* has appropriate applications, so “being” in *olam hazeh* has appropriate applications. The journey toward *hasidut* and beyond will only change the balance between *yetzer hara/olam hazeh* and *yetzer hatov/olam haba*.

Therefore you can see that *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. It can be best anticipated by asking this question as often as possible at times and in situations when it does not carry the threat that will cause the *yetzer hara* to almost automatically interfere. But when such interference does occur we need to be prepared to oppose it in some manner and eventually we need to learn to take the very energy of this interference and turn it toward the good of the other. Ways of approaching the challenge of both *kibbush* and *tikkun* will be taken up next. However, by way of a concluding thought, it might be salutary to keep in mind that on this understanding of *menuchat ha-nefesh*, the future, our individual futures, are not only at stake, but very much under our control.

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When our *menuchat ha-nefesh* is disturbed it is 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 question that must be part of our preparations for being able to maintain *menuchat ha-nefesh* is: “Of what does our sense of security consist?” “Who are we, really?” “What qualities constitute ‘us’?” 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*. We will only mention these connections here, and of course, will re-visit them to some degree when we study those *middot* individually.

We begin with *emet*. In this context the *middah* of *emet* will be specifically called upon to help us determine the truth of our being such that we can experience a sense of security that is 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 that 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.

It follows, therefore, that the effort to sustain *menuchat ha-nefesh* through *emet*

leads directly to the need to meditate on *anava*. *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* defines *anava* as the ability to learn from all people. This ability requires the strenuous effort of putting aside our typically fearful and therefore 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 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 *anava* 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 already have deeply considered our own truth and the fact that our truth is not the same as the masks we wear to protect ourselves in the world; and we must already have 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*, and as we have done previously, we will view these encounters from the perspectives of both *kibbush* and *tikkun*.

When we encounter either bad news or good, an interruption in the flow of our daily routine caused by either, the first question that we must ask ourselves, even before the question we spoke about last week: “What about the other?” is: “If we are reacting in a self concerned mode, is it on behalf of our true self or on behalf of one of our 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?” This assumes that we can restrain the self even when 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, but that they can be

refused and resisted, then this *kibbush* can succeed.

However, *tikkun* in regard to *menuchat ha-nefesh* is both more difficult 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 we are not only able to serve another in any situation but to serve the other more. We are granted what we might call a surplus of potential energy for service that will not only address the needs of the closest other in the particular situation, but we compel us out of those very same circumstances to serve the next other and the next. For this reason, also, our tradition refers to *emet* as the “seal of God:” 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.