

Menuchat Ha-Nefesh – Equanimity

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

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

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 Haze*h 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 haze*h. 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.