

Seder (order)

*All of your actions and possessions should be orderly —
each and every one in a set place and at a set time.
Let your thoughts always be free to deal with that which lies ahead of you.¹*

— 1 —

Order is the heart of Mussar practice. Regardless of how convinced you are of your availability for the other if your own life, from the most mundane affairs to the most complex journeying of the soul, is not in order you will be unable to sustain righteousness. To sustain a life of righteousness is but the first rung on the Mussar ladder. To go beyond righteousness to saintliness and then to holiness without good order is unthinkable. Therefore it is of central importance for us to consider this midda closely and to return to it often in the course of our practice.

First, let us explore the roots of the importance of order within the human soul and the Universe of which it is a microcosm. We remember that the soul is constituted of two realms: the realm of the self or *Yetzer Hara* and the realm of the Other or *Yetzer Hatov*. To be more precise, we are each created with a capacity to serve ourselves as well as a capacity to serve the other. When the former overwhelms our consciousness our soul is reduced to a mere capacity or potential. If the latter overwhelms our consciousness our individual survival is threatened. The Universe is also constituted of two realms: the realm of matter and the realm of spirit. Without materiality the Universe could not exist. However, without spirituality the existence of the Universe would be meaningless, without value or purpose, could also not exist. Neither matter nor spirit is abstractly good or bad. Both are necessary. Neither service of the self nor service of the other is abstractly good or bad. Both are necessary. The key to creating a soul out of its potential capacities and the key for creating a world out of an abstract universe lies in the imposition of order on the elements of both realms of which Universe and consciousness are composed.

Religious traditions recognize this fundamental structure through different narratives. Our Torah narrative posits that beginning is by definition chaos. It describes a process by which chaos is contained and in that process the realm of spirit and therefore the realm of the other person are represented by light. The realm of matter and therefore

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 145-147.

the realm of the self are represented by darkness. The mystery of being itself is contained in the creation of a light in which all potential to overcome chaos is contained. The fundamental act of creation divides light from darkness. Existence and then life itself is described as a process of differentiation, a process of ordering the realms of both matter and spirit. Light, in this narrative is named Good. The structure being is imbued with an ethical character in opposition to the beginning. In beginning there is always chaos and darkness. To advance beyond beginning requires differentiation between light and darkness, between my needs and the needs of another. The space for this light within the darkness of the self creates within me the place we call soul. The space for this light in the Universe is called *Olam Haze*. To advance beyond *Olam Haze* requires differentiation between light and darkness, between those who have and those who need. The space in the Universe for this light is called *Olam Haba*.

In the book *Cheshbon HaNefesh* the *midda* of *seder* is presented in the context of emerging from a dream-like state. It is a beautiful image. For the author of *Cheshbon*, the dream state is characterized by a confusion of intellect and imagination, or better, a state in which imagination is totally unfettered by the necessary constraints of intellect. Therefore, knowledge and the application of knowledge are presented as the “cure” for disorder. But our experience in Mussar practice suggests that knowledge is insufficient to transform behavior. In fact often, especially in the case of this *midda*, the more we *know* that our disorder is obstructing our ability to serve the other, the more defensive we become, the more our *Yetzer Hara* “protects” us from using this knowledge to make changes. Therefore, while we agree that a state of disorder is akin to the sleep of the soul in which the self eclipses the other, we look for more than knowledge to help us enter a state of wakefulness in which the self makes room for the other to create a soul.

— 2 —

Order in all of its manifestations is a prerequisite to wakefulness. Without order we are inevitably distracted. Whether our material possessions, our schedule, our finances are in disorder, or our emotions, our inner lives or the quality of our relationships are disordered we are too distracted by the chaos to attend to our true obligations, particularly our obligations to another person. Thus wakefulness, which requires attention to our obligations and particularly attention to the face of the other and the demands the

appearance of the other's face makes on me, is obviously disrupted. Since attending to the obligations I have to the closest other and the next closest other and the next infinitely extended ultimately defines what we mean by attending, or serving (*avodah*) God, disorder makes such service (true worship) impossible. We may, we often do, in our disorder engage in the traditional forms of worship, but without the clarity that comes from *seder* such worship is more akin to idolatry than to *avodat kodesh*, holy worship.

The question that we return to is what makes this happen, what lies behind our propensity to disorder? We have learned that our inability to fully articulate any of the *middot* is a result of the action of the *Yetzer HaRa* within us. We have also learned that the *Yetzer HaRa* responds to protect us from perceived threats. In the case of *seder* we must consider what threat the *Yetzer HaRa* perceives on our behalf and whether the threat is real. If it is not, then we must consider what actions we can take to initially suppress the *Yetzer HaRa* and ultimately to understand its dynamic so fully that we can transform its response into one that serves the *Yetzer HaTov*. In other words, we engage first in *kibbush* and then in *tikkun*. The meaning of these two terms and the discipline needed to enter into their engagement will be explained in regard to each of the *middot* we study. Therefore, it is appropriate to take a moment to consider these terms at this first encounter with them. We will review and deepen this encounter as we continue.

When we become aware that our behavior is a result of unfounded fear (*Pachad*) that is exciting the power of the *Yetzer HaRa* our first response is to focus on changing our behavior. This focus requires that we control by an act of will the fear that is causing our behavior. But controlling that fear does not require that we analyze its source, nor does it require us to understand that suppressing the *Yetzer HaRa* does nothing to eliminate it. While suppressing the *Yetzer HaRa* positively impacts our behavior and therefore our relationship with the other person, this *kibbush* promises a long and difficult and always fragile struggle. Therefore, when we have altered our behavior through *kibbush* our work is not finished. Through continued focus on the particular *middah*, in this case *seder*, we work toward understanding the forces of *pachad* that lie behind the actions of the *Yetzer HaRa* and, more importantly, use the energy wasted on the *Yetzer HaRa* to strengthen the *Yetzer HaTov*. When we can act from within the *Yetzer Hatov* because the spiritual energy that previously had been fearfully spent through the actions

of the *Yetzer HaRa* or in suppressing the *Yetzer HaRa*, we have moved spiritually from the discipline of *kibbush* to *tikkun*.

What we don't want to hear, what threatens us is precisely the weight of our obligation. That is why *seder* is both so difficult and so ubiquitous in our lives. It is the first line of defense, so to speak, in our rebellion against the almost overwhelming command that, according to our *midrash* required that God dangle a mountaintop over our heads in order to get us to agree to "do and then to hear." And the order of that commitment is not incidental to our considerations of this *middah*.

From the moment we are born we are juxtaposed between the choice for the self and the choice for the other. From our earliest years we accept hungrily that which is provided for us by others, while at the same time freely giving of ourselves to the others around us. The experience of our being human inevitably upsets this equilibrium. Our hunger for nourishment of every type remains and the currency we develop to insure its continuation is precisely what we have to give to the other. Life makes both our appetite and our selflessness into commodities. This, what we might call the economics of everyday life, is at the foundation of human society and its tensions and its extremities account for everything from sibling rivalry to world war.

This, what I'm calling the economics of life, is responsible in large measure for the innate strength that we find the *Yetzer Hara* exerts on us. Disorder is the handmaiden of this strength in that what the *Yetzer Hara* desperately does not want us to acknowledge is the overwhelming debt that we owe to the other, a debt precisely created by our having spent so much of our energy serving ourselves at his/her expense! What began as a balance or even a predilection for the other at our own expense has been turned entirely in favor of the self at the other's expense. The profound application of *seder* in our lives reveals this fact to us and must precipitate either change or further recourse to the *Yetzer Hara* in the guise of guilt.

But what do I mean by "the profound application of order"? This question returns us to the foot of Mount Sinai, as it were. At Mount Sinai the people of Israel agreed to do and then to hear, by which it has been traditionally understood they agreed to act in consonance with the commandments as they heard them, but to continue to strive to hear

them more clearly, or as we conventionally say, to understand them, as if in understanding them their performance would become more compelling. Yet it is not understanding that is mentioned in the text, but hearing. And since Israel was pointedly poised to hear God's voice at Sinai, the fact that they had to agree to do and continue to try to hear implies that that hearing was imprecise. The commandment to serve the Infinite Other through ongoing service to father, mother, tribe, neighbor, the poor, the orphan, and the widow required a more and more refined hearing as the doing of what was heard progressed. So it is with the *middah* of *seder*. We begin with those aspects of order that present themselves to us close at hand, in the elements of our everyday life. The order we make of our possessions, our time, our closets, our garages act as the "doing" which as yet has not so clearly heard. But as we do, we hear more and better. And as we hear more and better, what we have to do, how order extends beyond the close at hand, becomes clearer and clearer. And as we move from *kibbush* to *tikkun* in regards to order, so too we become more and more clear what our obligations for the other truly are until we have brought a level of *seder* to our lives that aligns the energy of our inner spirit with the demands of our outer obligations.