

Kol shel Mussarnik

Doing the Hard Work of Becoming Easier in Dealing with the World

Miki Young describes how Mussar has helped give her the tools to moderate the way she relates to others.

We were visiting friends, and my son was “acting up.” The truth was, I was very uncomfortable visiting with these friends who didn’t have children, who didn’t know how to interact with them, and who presented some conversational challenges to me.



With more anger than was necessary, I told my son to “sit on the step” and think about what he had done (something so trivial, I can’t even remember). He looked up at me with tears welling in his eyes, “Okay Mom,” he said, “but remember, I am only 2.”

It was really my first conscious Mussar lesson—learning how responsible I am for the way my actions affect the others in my life.

My actions, my speech, can cause pain to those I love. I was responsible for creating pain for someone who was almost as close to me as my very own soul. Why? Probably he had done something that he shouldn’t have. But that wasn’t the cause of my overreaction. In truth, my overreaction was because I was experiencing discomfort in a social setting I didn’t know how to handle. And I simply, and unconsciously, took it out on him.

I had spent years at that point believing the proverbial wisdom of the 60’s: “Let it all hang out.” “When you’re angry, express yourself.” I had been raised in a family that was a place that allowed you to be your worst self. As family, we were all supposed to be totally accepting of each other; especially, the very worst of each other.

It’s a philosophy, and one that was meant to give us security—that we could still be loved even at our worst. It just wasn’t the philosophy that I wanted to use in raising my own children. I wanted my kids to understand their responsibility for each other and the need to be their kindest to each other. But I really needed to do some of my own work, to not only share that philosophy but to live it.

I discovered and started to study Mussar at Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel with Rabbi Ira F. Stone by divine accident as I was making a move from Merion to Center City. Over the years, as a member of Congregation Beth Am Israel in Penn Valley, I had become more appreciative of Jewish ritual, but even more than that, I had engaged in and experienced a deep spiritual connection to a personal God.

These beliefs and personal experiences led me to feel that my journey needed to continue; that to fulfill my own duty to God, I needed to move beyond a personal appreciation and actively engage in a responsibility for the broader communal good. I needed to stop thinking only about my own experiences and start reaching outward.

Mussar takes the study of Torah, the thinking, the discussion, the intellectual inquisitiveness, and my own spiritual direction and brings it down to an everyday reality, asking the question: “How do I behave toward the other?”

There is a midrash that says that when you get to heaven, the first question you are asked is “How were you in business?” and the second question is “Did you study Torah?” This isn’t a question of profit or loss. It is a question of how you lived as a human being, how you treated others, how you were when your ego confronts your humanity.

That is Mussar. It is not a head-in-the-clouds practice. It is a practice which again and again confronts you with your own ego, your own lack of discernment, in a way that creates awareness, strips away self-deception and asks you to be accountable. And to always consider the others. Even in the midst of the most dynamic business discussions—where I was responsible for convincing an unconvinced boardroom of the rightness of my client’s side—I had to stop and listen, to truly hear the voices of the others in that room.

Mussar is not for the lighthearted. Sometimes, I actually refer to it as the “spiritual marines.” It is a daily discipline of mindfulness, purposefulness and other-ness. It requires thinking about and carrying responsibility for deeply understanding those who are your significant others, the ones who are closest to you, in ways that puts their needs, their pain, their burdens paramount. This world—my world—no longer has me at the center.

Mussar has given me the tools to control the way I act. I’m not my mind. I am not my emotions. I don’t need to come from a point of protection of my ego. At every moment, I can choose to act with lovingkindness, with a deeper understanding of those closest to me. Every day, I continue to pray for the ability to just do that.

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