

FOCUS: Mussar—A Spiritual Practice to Elevate Character

The Mussar Revival

Reform Jews in congregations across the continent are now embracing a Jewish spiritual practice formulated in 19th-century Lithuania.

BY LEONARD FELSON

It's Sunday morning at Congregation Beth Shalom in Carmichael, California. Karen Brandt, a 54-year-old administrative law judge, is meditating with six other congregants. Afterwards, they break into a discussion about humility, or *anivut* in Hebrew, talking about how the character trait showed up in their lives over the past two weeks—not in the sense of being humble or pulling back, but by taking a leadership role when the situation demanded it. As the Mussar phrase goes: “No more than my place; No less than my space.”

On the surface, Brandt's class, led by Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen, could be any Jewish adult-ed class, except that these Reform Jews are part of an emerging and growing phenomenon within the Movement that few could have imagined a decade ago. They're doing Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice rooted in the tradition, but until recently little known outside the Orthodox world—a practice which focuses on living a more conscientious life and heightening awareness of the world and one's responsibilities; in short, becoming more of a *mensch*.

Mussar is aimed at elevating one's character, or what Mussar calls soul traits (*middot*). Practices include meditation, chanting, studying Mussar texts, engag-

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ing in Mussar discussions, and keeping a daily journal on the *middot* (soul traits) that practitioners discover to be obstacles



The Mussar group at Temple Solel, Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California. Clockwise from left to right: Bruce Sachs and Chris Bengs; Larry Henkin; Lynne Henkin listens to Hershel Sakulsky; a moment of support and connection.

in their lives.

Though Mussar practice is often viewed in ethical terms, it is at its core a method of drawing oneself closer to God. “To single out the ethical, behavioral, or practical elements without reference to the religious or spiritual aspects,” explains Alan Morinis, founding director of The Mussar Institute, “is to distort what Mussar is and has always been.”

Brandt and her fellow Mussar classmates, who meet for an hour every other Sunday, next turn their attention to the *middah* (trait) of *yirah*, or awe of God.

One woman talks about how it showed up as she stood with her family while her father underwent surgery. For the two weeks the group worked on this trait, Brandt often recited the phrase from Psalm 16: “*Shiviti adonai l'negdi tamid*—I set God before me always.” This focus, she says, helped her better accept that her father's and her family's fate was in God's hands. “Maintaining a constant sense of God's presence has become my religious practice, my spiritual practice,” Brandt says. “It has become how I organize my life, how I keep track of how I am going through the world.”

Similar Mussar groups involving an estimated two dozen Reform congregations are meeting throughout North America, from Carmichael's Beth Shalom to Brooklyn's Congregation Beth Elohim. At Temple Chai in Phoenix, for example, a group of six women called the Mussar Mamas has been meeting for five years, and two more temple groups are now up and running. The Mussar group at Temple Beth El in Eureka, California has been going for three years, and another recently started. “It's the most excitement I've seen generated about anything at our *shul* in a while,” says adult-ed teacher Caroline Isaacs.

“The interest out there is just tremendous,” adds Alan Morinis,