

# Freedom

BY GARY SHAFFER

Like many who came of age during the Vietnam War, I saw the key to personal and political freedom as arising from knowledge. *Study human behavior and history and you can avoid the mistakes of the past. Focus that study on your family and you can avoid being like your parents—that's freedom. Knowledge will beget understanding, which will beget clarity of vision and lead to clear-headedness, happiness, love, and productivity.* Yet, experience proved otherwise. My accumulation of more information did not necessarily lead to more successful and satisfying actions. Through some luck I discovered Mussar, which addressed how one moved from “knowing what to do” to acting consistently with that knowledge.

Enrolling in an online Mussar course, I began studying the parameters of various *middot* (soul traits) such as humility, patience, anger, generosity, and forgiveness—concepts most people assumed they understood and could easily describe as either good or bad: humility=good, anger=bad, generosity=good. The course began with humility, and the good/bad dichotomy quickly became irrelevant. *Middot* were not good or bad per se. There might be a time for anger, and one could be too patient or even overly generous. From the perspective of Mussar, for example, humility did not imply meekness, passivity, or even a certain reserve, but rather consideration of the proper space we take up in the world. Do we leave enough space for others? Do we assert ourselves enough or too much?

The Torah describes Moses as the most humble of men. If so, then humility certainly did not mean stay-

ing in the background. Yet, at the burning bush Moses did all he could to avoid God's call. If he could progress from one who felt most comfortable tending his father-in-law's sheep to one who could confront Pharaoh and lead thousands out of bondage, clearly humility was not a static concept. What did that say for people in general, and for me personally? Did I shy away from things I should have embraced? Were there times I tried to impose myself when I shouldn't have?

The Mussar process seemed fast at first, and exhilarating. Each *middah* revealed new possibilities for personal liberation from habitual self-defeating behaviors—misplaced anger, unnecessary impatience, complaints about what I didn't have, failure to acknowledge and be grateful for what I did have. Freedom seemed within sight—a clear sign, I would later realize, that my work had just begun. Initial euphoria always fades. Actions taken with well-intended, wholehearted enthusiasm collide with reality. As I considered the parameters of each *middah*, I bumped up against years of ingrained habits and internal notions of what was right and wrong.

About two years after beginning Mussar practice I joined a Torah study group at my synagogue, Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, New York, and began to see both Torah and Mussar work as parts of a similar process, that of moving along a continuum from slavery to freedom. The Jewish people sing and dance after they cross the Reed Sea, then quickly return to their grumblings about having left Egypt. Leaving behind the past and reworking ourselves takes time, and work.

My Mussar practice remains imper-

fect. I have difficulty keeping a regular journal, though I do write something

several times a week. Sometimes it may be two sentences. Occasionally the two sentences blossom into a paragraph. I've noticed that my ah-ha moments, to the extent there are any, come when I write, so at least for me, the writing is critical. As words appear on the screen they generate unexpected ideas or insights. Writing forces the intellect to take stock and question the behavior. Sometimes I write and realize, “I didn't know



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that. I could have handled this differently.” When making notes about frugality I was struck by how it relates not just to money, but to how we handle time as well. Both are finite and can be wasted. In studying patience, I met the resistance of the New York City subway system. Slowly, over time, I have become more tolerant of the inevitable delays, recognizing my freedom of choice: give in to my impatience and fume, or give myself more time for the trip and have the requisite reading material readily at hand.

Has it “worked?” I like to think I'm a bit more patient, less prone to anger, willing to take on new responsibilities, and slightly more forgiving toward myself and others. My Mussar practice has also made me more reflective, more spiritually aware, and more grateful for what I have.

We are all to some extent slaves to our upbringing, genetic make-up, and prior decisions. Mussar cannot undo those aspects of our lives. But I have found that it provides a structure and focus for changing and refining my conduct in small ways so that over time I may become a better person. To me it is applied Torah. □

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