

whose book, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, about his own discovery of Mussar, has become a gateway for many new Mussar students. The number of Mussar practitioners is believed to be in the hundreds within the Reform Movement, in the thousands worldwide—and growing.



The Mussar Movement was founded in 19th-century Lithuania by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810–1883). Ethical conduct based on Torah values, he taught, is the essential goal of the Jewish people. To improve one's ethical conduct, or, more to the point, to refine the traits of the inner life or soul, he invented a method he called *hitpa' alut*: the chanting of holy phrases or ethical concepts with such emotional intensity that the intellectual message reaches the unconscious mind and leaves a strong enough impression to modify behavior. As Rabbi Salanter and others experimented on themselves, they observed the results and concluded the method worked.

Rabbi Salanter's teachings were directed at craftsmen and laborers as well as influential lay leaders and opin-

ion makers in the community, women as well as men. True, traditional Jewish society excused women from time-bound *mitzvot*, but since work on one's inner life was not controlled by the calendar, Mussar leaders saw no *halachic* (or religiously legal) reason to exclude women from the practice.

Despite its inclusiveness, Mussar did not spread quickly, though it did influence a generation of rabbinic disciples who, by the mid-1800s, would become heads of many Eastern Europe *yeshivot*. Fewer than 100 years later, on the eve of World War II, three streams of Mussar thrived, each associated with a different *yeshiva* and locale. Kelm Mussar, an introspective approach, focused on the mind's power ("Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind"). Slabodka Mussar, a more behavioral-based approach, taught its adherents to internalize the belief they were made in God's image. And Novarodock Mussar, the most radical and aggressive of the three streams, insisted that inner change required one to "storm the soul." Of them, the Slabodka Yeshiva was perhaps the most influential, generating offshoots in Israel and the U.S.

Today, Mussar teachers draw on the teachings of all three schools.

Although many of Mussar's leading proponents were killed in the Holocaust, a sufficient number survived and brought their knowledge to approximately ten *yeshivot* in the U.S. and Israel that had been established before the Second World War. Still, Mussar was not widely practiced, in part because Rabbi Salanter's disciples focused on *yeshivot* rather than Jewish communities at large; and because many Hasidic and other rabbinic leaders opposed it, believing that anything other than traditional Torah study was a wasteful diversion.

It wasn't until the first part of this decade that the Mussar revival began, precipitated largely by the publication of Morinis' book, followed by the author's speaking tours. Those who heard him speak invariably would ask how they could bring Mussar into their own lives. Morinis had no answer until he created a course, emailing weekly lessons to students across the continent and beyond. He later introduced more courses and other resources on the website of The Mussar Institute, a nonprofit organiza-

HOW TO BRING MUSSAR TO YOUR SYNAGOGUE 5 PRACTICAL STEPS

1. "Plow the fields first," says Rabbi David Wechsler-Azen of Congregation Beth Shalom in Carmichael, California. Pre-Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to start laying the groundwork. "On the High Holidays rabbis can introduce a specific *middah* (character trait) such as *achrayut* (responsibility), and then use it in sermons and articles," says co-spiritual leader Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen. Also, remember, says Rabbi Helen Cohn of Congregation Chaverim in Tucson, Arizona, "most folks don't know what Mussar is. So speak from the *bimah* about it often." The Mussar Institute (www.mussarinstitute.org) can help you with this and most steps that follow.

2. Create an adult discussion/study program around this Focus section. Alan Morinis, founding director of The Mussar Institute, has created a Discussion/Study Guide to this material that will delve deeper into some of the issues raised in these articles, offer text study, and suggest practices each individual can do to increase awareness and taste some of the fruit of applying Mussar to his/her own life and relationships. For a free copy of this Discussion/Study Guide visit *Reform Judaism* magazine's website: www.reformjudaismmag.org.

3. Offer an adult education course—at the right time, and with a catchy title. Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen engaged

mothers in a 10-week "Mussar for Moms" class course right after they dropped their children off at day school. Rabbi David Wechsler-Azen called his men-only course "Spiritual Growth for Guys: Mussar for Men." The name "makes it accessible," he says.

4. Teach character traits in religious school. Tell stories and distribute handouts to be taken home and discussed with parents, says Rabbi Nancy Wechsler-Azen. One she's used involves the *middah* of *hit-cahyvute*, or keeping commitments, with God's name as a witness: "Judaism tells us that when we make a promise, it needs to be a promise that we keep...even little things like following through on homework or setting the table." She emails her teachers a *middah* of the week along with a short lesson and concrete examples each Monday for use the following Sunday.

5. Promote Mussar through your bulletin and website. Besides advertising Mussar events, consider following in the "websteps" of one of Rabbi Cohn's congregants (at her former temple, Emanu-El in San Francisco), who developed a website featuring the *middah* of the week. Rabbi Cohn also advises sending temple members a brief teaching about the current *middah* and a weekly link to the site.

—Leonard Felson