

Acceptance

BY DEBRA COHN

In 2004 a dear friend asked me to join a Mussar group she was forming. Frankly, I was reluctant to embark on something new because I had become an expert at finding distractions to keep me from completing my dissertation. But I'm a "junkie" for Jewish text study and for exploring spiritual practices.

I took to the material right away, though I had no thought of making Mussar "my practice."

First I identified my "soul curriculum," i.e., the character traits—humility, patience, and trust—that were out of balance in my life and repeatedly arose in challenging situations. Then, for each *middah* (soul trait), I chose an appropriate phrase from Hebrew scripture, Talmud, or other writings to chant with *kavanah* (intention) every morning; selected a daily action to reinforce that *middah*; and did an accounting of the soul every evening. So, while focusing on *bitachon* (trust), each day I would chant "Blessed is the person who trusts in God, and God is [the source of] his trust" (Jeremiah 17:7); ask God for help with something and thank God for whatever happened; and record my observations in a journal. Also, every two weeks I discussed texts related to the trait with my *chevruta* (study partner), who was working on the same trait.

This past year, after almost four years of practice, I made a breakthrough!

I was working on the *middah* of *menuchah hanefesh* (equanimity). My chanting phrase for this *middah* was "This, too, is for the good"—reinforc-

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ing the belief that good can come out of any situation if one looks for it.

Well, a friend and I were driving to a spirituality workshop in another city on the topic of "surrender." We'd left plenty of time to get there, but the map we had was confusing and we drove around for twenty minutes looking for the right street. We even stopped to buy a local map, but soon found out that it was the wrong map, and my friend's unsuccessful attempt to get her telephone GPS

system working only added to my frustration. I crumpled up the map in anger and threw it down, even as I knew this was an opportunity to practice equanimity. Except for crumpling the map, though, I wasn't doing too badly—I wasn't taking my frustration out on my friend. To distract myself and calm down I grabbed a book on Jews and spirituality. Opening it to the page where I had left off, I read that the spiritual path is "long and arduous, full of surprises, difficulties, and dangers."

That's when I had an epiphany. As a text-study and spiritual-practices junkie I knew all about the nature of the spiritual path. What I had missed was the understanding that THIS APPLIES TO ME! I am a human being subject to human nature, the human condition, and the laws of the universe! Somehow I had believed unconsciously that I was exempt from the difficulties and dangers of the spiritual path because I was a "good student" and worked hard to be a "good person." My learning and hard work had actually gotten in the way of my spiritual growth, leading me to the false notion that I would be spared from life's challenges. I was relieved

to finally understand that learning and hard work are only tools for helping me accept and navigate life with humility and gratitude.

We finally found our way to the workshop, and it was excellent—but the process of getting there was worth the price of admission! I had never been so aware of and responsive to the various *middot*—acceptance, patience, gratitude, and humility—at the intersection of a difficult situation.

When the workshop broke for lunch I noticed in the nearby

gift shop a display of beautiful olive wood pendants carved in the shape of doves. I decided to buy two: one for myself and one for my sister, who has always been my "hot-button" person; together we are like gasoline and a lit match. When I had worked on the *middah* of *savlanut* (patience) some months earlier, I'd focused on our relationship, chanting the phrase, "God created the human being in the Divine image" (Genesis 1:27). My intention was to look for the good in my sister by listing her admirable qualities in my journal each evening, such as being a hard worker with an exceptional sense for organization and aesthetics. I realized that, like everyone else, she wants to be praised for her good qualities and accepted in spite of those qualities that may be less admirable. It was time to make peace. When I saw the dove necklace I thought, "My sister will appreciate receiving this symbol of peace from me." In fact, she was very touched by the gift, and we have gotten along fairly well since.

Not only have I been working on Mussar; Mussar has been working on me. □



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