

less so; more patient, or less so; more firm, or less so—since the issue is never the trait itself, but whether you have too much or too little of it as your habit.

Take, for example, the often unconscious habit of being judgmental of others, which runs counter to Torah's injunction "v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho"—"you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Many of us walk into a room, look around, and in a few seconds find some fault with just about every person there ("he's dressed inappropriately," "she needs a haircut," "he has terrible posture," "she's stuffing her face"). If this sounds like you, a Mussar practice is suggested by a comment in the Talmud: "It was said of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai that he was always the first to greet others, even a stranger in the marketplace" (Berachot 17a). Assign yourself the task of offering a prompt and gracious greeting to every person you meet in the office, supermarket, or temple. This doesn't have to involve anything flowery or creative; it just means being quick to offer a "Hello, how's your day?" or "It's nice to see you."

This Mussar practice involves both external and internal reflection and action. To develop desirable traits in ourselves, we must work toward improving the lives of others—as one great Mussar teacher puts it, we must "bear the burden of the other." At the same time, social change without simultaneous attention to one's inner life is futile. For example, a person overly endowed with anger who sets out to fix the world is likely to be easily provoked. He or she may lash out and not only hurt others, but also undermine the very effort to do good.



Still, Mussar practice reaches even deeper than personal and social change. The third level of Mussar practice, called *tikkun*, usually translated as "repair," might better be understood as "transformation." At the first two stages of Mussar practice, the negative impulse remains and is countered with behavioral techniques. At the third level of *tikkun*, we aim to transform the impulse itself and thereby reach our highest spiritual potential: as God says, "*kedoshim tihiyu*,"

## RJ'S GUIDE TO MUSSAR

Author Alan Morinis has created a special Discussion and Study Guide to this issue's Focus on Mussar to guide you in contemplating and discussing Mussar in your home and/or synagogue; and in beginning practices designed to sharpen your own "personal spiritual curriculum." For this free Guide visit the *Reform Judaism* magazine website: [www.reformjudaismmag.org](http://www.reformjudaismmag.org).

"you shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:1).

The body of Mussar practices designed to bring about *tikkun ha'middot* (transformation of soul-traits) are powerful and intense, and as such are best done with a teacher, partner, or group. Meditations, contemplations, visualizations, and chanting all employ images, concepts, sounds, and emotions to leave traces deep within. Over time the traces accumulate and work the transformation until a negative impulse is uprooted and replaced by a positive one.

And so, seeking to become more generous, I undertook a visualization

## Equanimity

BY HENRY WODNICKI

Visualize the flame of a match touching a fuse. See how the flame moves to touch off the fuse. Now, in your mind's eye, imagine the flame moving more slowly toward the fuse. Next, try to picture yourself in control of the flame, in charge of how quickly, or how slowly, the flame will ignite the fuse. You, and you alone, can control when the explosion will occur.

The flame represents your anger. The explosion is your anger engulfing those around you. You, and you alone, can control how and when your anger will affect yourself and other people.

Recently a close friend and I went to a concert that I'd waited a very long time to attend. Ten minutes into

the performance, my friend began complaining about the venue and the music and insisted we leave. As we were walking out, I felt my anger welling up. I began to visualize the match and the fuse...and soon calmed down.

Whereas in the past I might have exploded and unraveled this friendship, now I could take stock: friendship was more important than a concert. I could always go to another concert.

Mussar exercises have strengthened my self-discipline, allowing me to recognize and control those parts of my character which otherwise make the

stresses of daily life more difficult or uncomfortable. When I feel myself becoming angry, I visualize the match touching the fuse. Just the act of creating this mental picture is often enough to slow me down, buying me the few seconds I need to think before I allow myself to react.

Most responses to emotional triggers are automatic. Through Mussar I've come to understand that destructive responses

to myself or others can be transformed into actions that produce positive results.

Mussar is the Jewish way to become that ideal good soul, a real *mensch*. □



"I visualized the flame of a match touching a fuse, pictured myself in control of the flame...and calmed down."

*Henry Wodnicki is a surgeon and member of Temple Beth Shalom in Miami Beach, Florida. To read the full text of his story visit [www.reformjudaismmag.org](http://www.reformjudaismmag.org).*