

Compassion

BY FRAN ZIMMERMAN

When my children were born, all I knew is that I wanted to be a good mother to them—create a safe and loving home, expose them to their Jewish heritage, and help them to develop into human beings with a sense of purpose. But by the time my daughter was in the peak of her teen years, I felt totally in over my head. *How was I supposed to navigate this period as a mother? How was I not to react to her “moods,” not to take it personally when she pushed me away, not to be worried when she went out driving with friends I didn’t know? How was I to give her the space to be independent without being negligent, and to set limits with her without being overly controlling?*

It was about this time that I received an unexpected email about an online class on Mussar—which, the sender wrote, “helps you navigate your own personal path of growth, with a special emphasis on preparing for the times you will be tested.”



I enrolled. Soon, my family, too, became Mussar coaches. At key moments they would remind me of a teaching I’d shared with them—like when my son told me an hour before his band concert (which I had learned about that afternoon) that he needed to wear a new white shirt for the concert. Without thinking I started muttering my displeasure with him for not having let me know about this sooner. My

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daughter reminded me that this was a good opportunity to practice the soul trait of patience. “The past is behind us,” she said gently, “Why don’t you relax and focus on getting Jer the shirt that he needs.” I thanked her for the reminder, took a deep breath, and focused on the soul trait of gratitude—being grateful that we were able to find a shirt at the first store we went to, that my son was talented enough to play in the band, that he told me about the shirt soon enough to get to the concert on time. Responding in this way was much better than the alternative—staying angry the rest of the evening.

A few months later, shortly after my daughter left for college, I found myself continually annoyed by my son’s behavior, and frankly he was continually bothered by mine. In my heart, I didn’t want to be feeling and acting this way toward him, but I wasn’t sure how to make a shift. The answer came during one of our *va’ad* (group) study sessions on the soul trait of compassion. After reading the quotation (paraphrased here), *For our response to be truly compassionate, we must not just feel with another person, but also try to see things from the other’s perspective*, I asked myself: If I were a 16-year-old boy, how would I want my mother to relate to me? Suddenly I became more understanding of the challenges faced by a 16-year-old who had just become an only child at home when his sister went away to college. I found myself lightening up, using my humor, and expressing more appreciation when he helped out around the house or shared with me some of what was going on in his life. I became a lot less judgmental. He, in turn, softened and related to me in kinder ways.

Along with developing compassion, I also needed to strengthen my ability to trust. Mussar teaches: *You cannot love those whom you cannot trust, and when we cultivate trust, we inevitably loosen the grip fear holds on our heart*. I began to trust that my children would find their own paths in life, to accept that it was not my job to insulate them from adversity and suffering. Mostly, I realized, what they need from me is to show up, love them, and guide without controlling. To help me do this, I need prayer—to lean on and be guided by God.



Mussar has helped me stay steady during the most challenging times of my life, providing a compass when I feel lost and without direction, and a cushion of compassion in my struggle. □

Practice, Practice, Practice

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When Bev had that hip replaced and I was challenged to be patient, we were both grateful that I had learned and practiced Mussar. Of course, I’d wanted to be patient, but the intention is just not enough. I needed practices to strengthen my capacity.

At the time, my Mussar practice was focused on abstinence (or *prishut* in Hebrew), which, for me, usually means steering away from coffee, dessert, unnecessary shopping, or television. Here I had the opportunity to abstain from a different sort of thing—impatience. And so, at 4 A.M., when I was awakened for the fifth time that night and the cells of my body called out for me to pull the blanket up over my head, I had prepared myself to abstain from impatience and selfishness. As a result, I took good care of Bev, and in so doing served another human being, our marriage, and my own soul—all steps toward reaching my highest spiritual potential, which, as the Torah tells us, is to be holy. □