

**How to Be a Mensch:  
Bringing the Jewish Tradition of Mussar to Life  
Taught by Alan Morinis, PhD**

**Talk One: Introduction to the Mussar Method**

I am Alan Morinis, and it is my pleasure and honor to join with you as we open up an exploration of the distinctly Jewish spiritual path known as Mussar, taking as our guide my recent book, *With Heart in Mind*. I am also the dean of The Mussar Institute, a growing international organization that offers many sorts of opportunities to explore the path of Mussar.

I am assuming that you are taking this course to find out something about Mussar, but what I really hope is that you're taking this course in order to learn some of the teachings and practices of Mussar in order to apply them in your own life. As one of my early teachers taught me, "You don't study Mussar; you *do* Mussar." When you see in your own experience the impact Mussar can have, then you'll understand why it has been a venerated tradition for over a millennium.

Part of what makes Mussar distinctively Jewish is that it was developed over the last 1,100 years by Jews living in Jewish communities who were endeavoring to lay out a path for spiritual growth that incorporated Jewish principles and teachings. I'll come back to that idea a bit later when we look at some of the details of what that entails.

Another factor that makes the path of Mussar distinctively Jewish is the way the spiritual quest is situated right in the midst of everyday life. Judaism has not developed a spirituality that calls for withdrawal from the rough and tumble of the lives we live in our homes, in the street, and in the marketplace. Quite the opposite. Judaism mistrusts a spirituality that requires any kind of controlled, artificial environment. The theology that underpins Judaism says that the spiritual source conventionally called "God" is everywhere, and so no place or circumstance is better than any other for seeking spiritual elevation and growth.

On a more practical note, the Mussar teachers identify that the difficult, trying challenges we all encounter in life are the great instigators for our growth. So when we seek out a perfectly calm, controlled environment in which to pursue our spiritual lives, we are effectively stepping away from the very place that offers us the greatest stimulus to learning and growth, which is everyday life. That idea lay behind my answer to a person who attended one of my talks who was interested and asked, "Are there any Mussar classes around here I could attend?" I replied, "Yes, there are many Mussar classes—in the grocery store, Starbucks, on the freeway, at your family dinner table . . ." The challenges that

come at us in everyday life reveal the path to our spiritual growth, and we do ourselves no favor by stepping away from them in search of a more “spiritual” way of life.

So the context is everyday life, and the purpose is transformation. This thesis is stated in the first paragraph of the introduction to *With Heart in Mind*, which reads,

The central concern of Judaism is that you and I accomplish a personal spiritual transformation in our lifetimes. That core intention can be lost in the welter of rituals, festivals, liturgy, and other performative aspects of the tradition. It becomes even less visible when buried under the weight of buildings, institutions, campaigns, and political struggles that are, for some, the face if not the totality of the Jewish world. But the fact remains that, at its core, the driving concern of Judaism is personal spiritual transformation.

I wrote *With Heart in Mind* to probe that little-exposed side of Judaism that exists to guide us on a journey of personal change and growth. Although I wrote the book in 2014, it is really a commentary on a Jewish text that was first written down about 1,800 years ago. The source text upon which *With Heart in Mind* is based was written when the Jewish people were still living in the land of Israel, where life was guided by two sources. One was the written Torah, the books of law that have come down to us as the five Books of Moses and the related books of prophets and writings—what we would call the Bible. The other was the oral Torah, which was the rabbis’ elaborations and explorations of the Bible and how to apply it in actual situations.

Israel at that time had ceased to be an independent nation, having been conquered by Rome, and the Romans were ruthlessly and effectively suppressing religious and educational activities. There was a real fear among the rabbis that the chain of transmission of the oral Torah would be broken and the wisdom it contained would be lost. And so, despite the weight of tradition that forbade them from doing exactly what they then went ahead and did, they wrote down the oral Torah.

The first written compilation of the oral Torah is called the Mishnah, which dates from about 200 CE, and the later compilation that came to be known as the Talmud was written down in about 500 CE. The text upon which I based *With Heart in Mind* and this course is part of the Mishnah, which as I said is about 1,800 years old.

Most of the Mishnah is a code of law. When is the proper time to do a certain ritual that the Bible prescribes? What is the proper measure with which to fulfill one of the commandments? And so

on. Amid this legal code we find a long chapter called *Pirkei Avot*, which is unusual in its context because it consists for the most part of ethical and spiritual teachings, not laws. Indeed, the name *Pirkei Avot* is best translated as “chapters of first principles” because what we find there is a handbook for living a life that is guided by the most profound Jewish principles and oriented toward goals that Jewish tradition tells us are the highest potential we have in life.

With that handbook of “first principles” we find a section that lists forty-eight practices that bring about spiritual transformation—what the rabbis called “acquiring Torah.” All those forty-eight transformative practices are explained in the forty-eight chapters of *With Heart in Mind* and provide the focus for this course as well.

Many of the subjects dealt with in *With Heart in Mind*, and before that in *Pirkei Avot*, that we will feature in this course are really very universal in nature. For example, there’s a chapter praising joy and another cautioning against sleeping too much. The truth is that there is nothing particularly Jewish in these sorts of subjects. The pathway that we are embarking on together gets its distinctive Jewishness from the goals that lie at the end of the journey. Even though many of the steps we will take may be familiar from other contexts, what is unique to this path is the destination toward which our journeying is aimed.

Let’s explore what the Mussar teachers tell us are the goals toward which we should direct our hearts, our minds, and our feet in this lifetime. We’ll keep coming back to these goals because they are the cardinal points toward which everything else we will be exploring is oriented.

The first way the goal for our living is expressed is “inner wholeness,” or *shlemut* in Hebrew. Hebrew words are constructed based on root letters, and another word that shares its linguistic root with *shlemut* is the more familiar *shalom*, meaning “peace.” The transformative journey of life is a path to peace, and true peace is not just an absence of conflict but an outgrowth of inner wholeness.

A great Mussar teacher of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, wrote about this life journey from partialness to wholeness. He asks, “Once beings were going to be created, why make us so imperfect?” And then he responds:

God is certainly capable of making people, and all creation, absolutely complete.

Furthermore, it would have made much more sense for God to have done so, because insofar as God is perfect in every way, it is fitting that God’s works should also be perfect. But in His great wisdom God ruled it better to leave to people the completion of

their own creation. So he cut short His own trait of perfection and out of His greatness and goodness withheld Himself from His greatness in these creations and made creations incomplete. This was the way He wanted them made, according to his sublime plan.<sup>1</sup>

From Rabbi Luzzatto's perspective, the journey from partialness to wholeness that we are discussing is actually built into the design of life. In future sessions of this course we will explore the Mussar paradigm of the inner life, and that will make it clearer in what ways we are partial, or broken, and what it means to cultivate inner wholeness.

*Shlemut* describes the ideal condition of the inner life as something complete. When that condition is met, the person transforms into an ideal status—what the Torah calls “holiness,” or *kedusha*. The Torah makes it very clear that this is a goal we are meant to pursue in our lives because it instructs us very directly, “You shall be holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

There is no easy definition for “holiness.” It's an exalted spiritual quality that rabbis have been struggling to define and describe for millennia. The same Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto addresses holiness. He says,

Holiness is two-fold. Its beginning is labor and its end reward; its beginning, exertion and its end, a gift. That is, it begins with one's sanctifying oneself and ends with one being sanctified.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, that's not a definition. It's like saying, “Walk this path and you'll be rewarded in the end.” Later he resorts to allusion to convey the elevated quality of one who has gone the distance: he writes that a holy person is “considered a tabernacle, a sanctuary, an altar.”

From the partial to the whole; from the mundane to the holy. For the rest of this course, we'll be getting down to the mechanics of how to walk a path in our own everyday lives that will lead us toward these goals.

In this course the structure and content reveal something ironic about the journey to holiness. Although we will undertake a journey, in a very significant sense you are already at the destination. The Jewish view of the human being affirms that each of us is innately imbued with a holy soul. Holiness is,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Path of Mussar* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2007), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *The Path of the Just*, trans. Shraga Silverstein (New York: Feldheim, 1966), 327.

in a sense, our default position. This is a wonderfully positive view of the inherent nature of the human being: we already possess every scintilla of radiant holiness that we could ever hope to develop.

Since we don't suffer from a holiness deficit, how are we to become holy? The answer is that holiness is not something to acquire but rather something to reveal, something to uncover. The resplendent light glows within each of us, but it is obstructed to some degree. Our focus in this course falls on the qualities and behaviors that are responsible for occluding the light of holiness, preventing it from shining fully into our lives and, through us, into the world.

Every human being possesses the same inner holy light, but we differ as to the obstructions that block that holy light from shining freely. With that key fact about our individual uniqueness in sight, in every unit of this course I will give you a choice of focuses, as represented by different chapters of *With Heart in Mind*. At the end of the video I'll briefly explain the various choices, and you can choose the one that seems most applicable in your life.

When you choose a focus for that unit of the course, your work is to read the chapter from *With Heart in Mind* and then to do the practice that comes at the end of that chapter.

For this current unit, your assignments are to read two sections from *With Heart in Mind*. Read both before we meet again for the next session. Read the introduction and read chapter 7, which deals with the topic of humility. *With Heart in Mind* is our guiding text for this course, and reading the introduction to the book will fill out the introduction to the course as well.

And there is one chapter assigned: chapter 7, on the topic of humility. There is a specific view of this trait that has developed in the Jewish world that doesn't correspond to the general view in the culture that humility is synonymous with "meekness" or being "retracting." After all, the Torah in the book of Leviticus tells us that the most humble person on the face of the earth was none other than the prophet Moses, who was hardly a shrinking violet.

Just to give you a glimpse into the sorts of insights into ego we find in the Mussar tradition, consider that a Jewish definition of humility would be "occupying your rightful space." Occupying your rightful space, as a definition of humility.

I want you to read and consider the chapter on humility, because that will give you a good illustration of the fact that the reservoir of wisdom we are dipping into for this course is unique, and it has much to teach you.

But there's another reason as well. It's traditional to start Mussar study and practice with the trait of humility because this inner quality brings into focus all aspects of ego. Our sense of self is like a

lens through which we perceive ourselves and all of life, and so if there are any distortions in this trait, that will affect how we see ourselves and every other subject or focus we will look at in this course. It's therefore a fundamental place to start the journey.

I'm truly delighted to begin this journey that we will take together.