

## How Our Parts Make Us Whole

*Shanah tovah!*

Sitting down to Shabbat dinner is one of my favorite moments of the week. Sharon and I place our hands on the head of each of our children in turn, reciting the traditional parental blessing. When I was a kid, I used to play a game, running away from my parents – I thought it was fun; I am blessed that my children seem to appreciate this tender moment better than I did.

And I am truly grateful to Sharon for cooking a special meal each Shabbat. These meals are the high point of our family's week.

Over the years we have shared highlights from the previous days at Shabbat dinners or simply talked, but a few months ago a guest came over with what he said was a “card game.”

He took out a velvet bag just like this one and invited us to take out a few cards.

We eagerly participated as he explained what was on the cards – each contains a *middah* – the Hebrew word for a characteristic, a personality trait.



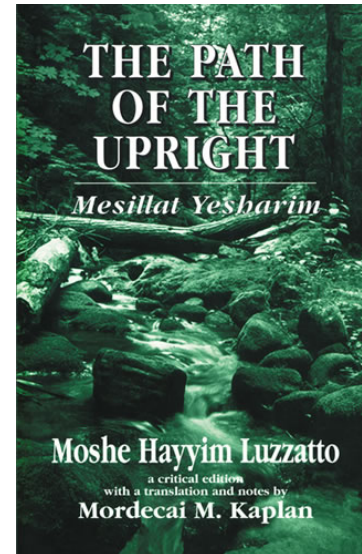
The plural of *middah* is *middot*; *middot* are an essential part of our tradition as they represent a key component of *mussar*.

\* \* \*

*Mussar* has come to mean ethical behavior. The *Mussar* Movement is a Jewish ethical, educational and cultural movement that developed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuania.

It is largely based on a magnificent work called *Messilat Yesharim* – literally, the “Path of the Upright,” written by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Amsterdam.

Its impact was greatly increased when Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, head of a *yeshivah* in Vilna, made *Messilat Yesharim* a central part of his school’s curriculum, birthing the *Mussar* Movement.



Among Salanter’s most important teachings is that the *mitzvot bein adam l’haveiro* – literally, the commandments between a person and a friend, the laws governing relations between people, are just as important as those commandments that govern our relationships with God. He elevated the moral aspects, the interpersonal laws, so they would be on par with the ritual rules about which his community was already punctilious. In other words, if we adhere merely to the ritual aspects of Judaism without focusing on our relationships with others, we are not following the whole Jewish tradition.

Even before Sigmund Freud, Salanter in 1880, fully developed and elucidated “the concept of conscious and subconscious processes and the role they play in the psychological, emotional and moral functioning of human beings.”

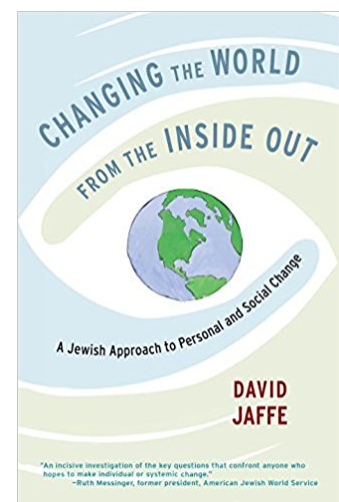
Through his letters, essays and teachings, Salanter taught that it is critical for a person to recognize his or her subconscious motivations so that we can better understand them.

After the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, with the murder of so many of his disciples, the emphasis on *mussar* waned in some Orthodox communities, [but has grown in recent decades in non-Orthodox Judaism](#).

In 2012, I had the the pleasure of getting to know a local liberal Orthodox rabbi, [David Jaffe](#), on our two-week visit with the [American Jewish World Service](#) to Ghana. David teaches local *mussar* groups, classes and workshops in our own area, [which I commend to you](#).

His book, *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change*, published last year, delineates how *mussar* and deep introspective work can not only transform one’s self, but also emanate out into the world as well. It moves from the self to others.

Rabbi Jaffe explains the *middot* utilizing the metaphor of an airplane pilot:



“If you want to see how high you are or how fast you are going, you check the instruments. As humans, we also have instruments. The instruments that give us feedback about how



we are doing are our emotional and physical states, the quality of our relationships with others, and the quality of our spiritual lives.

If our relationship with our parents is going badly or we are fighting with our spouse or children, [that] informs us that something needs to change. If a pilot sees that he or she is flying too low, he or she will not bang on the altimeter to get the plane to go up. Neither does it make sense for us to fix a relationship by banging on the other person. Just as the pilot needs to use the controls to change altitude, the first thing we need to do to fix our relationships is to examine how we are acting. (...) [We may be acting in a manner inconsistent with our values.] Our *middot* are the controls we can use to live [with] integrity. Only after taking responsibility for our own *middot* may we address the (...) [another person's] behavior. (Jaffe, pp. 102-103)

\* \* \*

Back to the Shabbat dinner.

Each of us picked out a few cards at random, laid them out in front of ourselves on the table, as each of us was invited to contemplate these *middot*.

First, there was silence. We had never played a game like this – this was not about winning.

Then one of my children began – instinctively understanding the purpose of these cards.

He drew fascinating connections between his *middot* cards on the table; how those qualities related to each other and then, more deeply, how they related to his own life.

Suddenly, everyone was sharing. We all opened up, revealing aspects of ourselves that we were proud of and aspects we needed to work on.

It was intense and powerful. We shared in a way we had rarely done before.





My cards were: compassion – *rah̄amim*, gentleness – *adinut*, and strength – *gevurah*. I shared that sometimes we need compassion and



gentleness; at other times, we need strength. There are moments in my rabbinate and in my personal life when I need to stand up for justice, when I need the strength to do the right thing or to push myself to help someone in a difficult situation. Even more

often, I need compassion to approach others with gentleness, kindness, and love.

Sharing more deeply, I reflected on relationships that need more compassion, on how I need to work on being more compassionate to myself, to know that I cannot do everything and that is OK.



Everyone at the table – my family, my children and all the guests were moved. In the end, we were all winners! We put away the cards, slipping them back into the bag, continuing the meal with dessert, some singing, and *bentching* – reciting the grace after the meal.

While normally I am grateful for the meal, the food, my family and the friendships, on this Shabbat I was even more appreciative of the deeper places we had journeyed.

Since then, over the summer, we have played this “game” many more times, bringing the cards to family, friends, and colleagues. Fortunately, these cards are spreading – our staff members here at Emunah have them and Beni Summers, our Synagogue Educator and [Moreh Ruhaniyut](#), Spiritual Teacher, brought them to Camp Tevya – a local Jewish overnight camp where kids and counselors received them positively.



In the coming months, we will be utilizing them in our religious school and in our adult programming. Called “Lights of *Mussar*,” these *middot* sets were created by a group of Jewish *mussar* leaders including Heidi Shira from our own *shul*. They will be available in our gift shop and [online](#).

\* \* \*

Although I wanted to open with the *middot* – these personality traits that can help us move ourselves into a deeper engagement with our *neshamah* – our own soul, which, in turn, can help lead us more deeply toward ethical living, through *mussar*, this past year, the larger context in which we live has had a great impact.

When we gathered last Rosh Hashanah, none of us could have imagined what the year 5777 would bring. Threats of nuclear war, rejuvenated anti-Semitism on our own soil, climate change and hurricanes, resurgent xenophobia, a proposed ban on immigrants based on their country of origin, corrosive political rhetoric, and caustic leadership.

It's enough to overwhelm someone.

But at a time like this, we pause and take stock.

\* \* \*

One month ago today, on *Rosh Hodesh Elul*, the first day of the last month of the Jewish year, we started sounding the *shofar*, a wakeup call to truly deepen our own processes of introspection, self-reflection, and *teshuvah* – repentance.



And last Saturday night, we chanted the *Selihot* service – creating a deeply spiritual mood that helps us enter this type of emotional space. And each morning we have been reciting *selihot* prayers.



Hopefully, we have been asking others for forgiveness, a process that continues throughout this coming week, through Yom Kippur.

Looking around at the problems we have or those that exist in the world, sometimes, we look to blame – we look at others, but that is not the Jewish way.

Our tradition teaches us to start with ourselves. Even if we are not the most flawed people, we begin with ourselves. We do not blame, we start by working on ourselves.

\* \* \*

I have been helped by an idea from psychotherapy: the Internal Family Systems Model or what is sometimes called Parts Work.

Here's a thumbnail, an oversimplified introduction to the principles of this theory:

- 1) It is the nature of the mind to be subdivided into subpersonalities or parts.
- 2) Each part intends to contribute something positive to the individual.
- 3) No part is inherently or intentionally bad.
- 4) The goal of therapy is not to eliminate the negative parts, but to help those parts act in less extreme ways and not take over.

There is more to this theory, but that's the essence for today. I was always taught to try to eliminate the aspects of myself that were not helpful. To rid myself of negative *middot*. But it turns out, that just does not work.

Instead, we should actually get in touch with those parts – the anxious, scared, or hurt parts, the angry or jealous parts. We need to understand them, approaching them with love because they are trying to help us.

As our member Paul Neustadt taught me: “When we do approach them with compassion and curiosity, we find out that they learned these unhelpful behaviors when we were younger, as a way to help us survive a painful situation or crisis. And they have gotten stuck doing the same thing even though it isn't really helpful anymore.”



For example, I have an anxious part – when it overtakes me, it is not helpful – it makes me so stressed that I become a less helpful husband, father, rabbi, etc.; however, it wants to help. It wants me to remember every little thing that I need to do – every phone call, text, email, Facebook messenger chat, every book I want to read, every sermon I need to write. It wants to help me become the person I aspire to be.

But it can really take over. So, Parts Work teaches that I should not try to eliminate the anxious part of myself, but instead embrace it, appreciating the work it does to help me. If I listen to and respond to its concerns, it doesn't need to take over or overwhelm me, and I can remain

more centered, balanced, and calm. Once I have more of a relationship with this part, it can actually play a more helpful role in my life.



My friend Rabbi Ebn Leader, who teaches at Hebrew College, pointed me to an amazing teaching ascribed to the *Besht*, Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism.

It is the concept of *mittuk hadinim* – literally, the sweetening of the laws or the sweetening of the parts. This doctrine teaches that even our bad *middot* are rooted in good, and therefore, when they appear, rather than reject or flee from them, one should trace them back to the place where they are positive, thus, in a sense, sweetening them.

A controversial practice related to this was dealing with *mahshavot zarot* – strange or foreign thoughts, especially when they pop up during prayer.

The *Besht* taught that if a negative thought arises, rather than rejecting the thought, one should trace it to its root. This process of tracing to the positive root transforms and sweetens the negative thought or feeling (whether it is lust, fear, anger, arrogance, etc).

[Rabbi Leader wrote](#) in *Sh'ma Now: A Journal of Jewish Sensibilities*:  
“To come that close to God is to work through every crooked brokenness that shapes who we are. To ride God’s in-breath is to face all our difficulties without turning away, to have them all seen without seeking a place to hide.”

Not easy.

A life's work to be sure, but a most worthwhile enterprise.

Once we can embrace those parts of ourselves, then we become more whole, more able to live a centered life, and then more able to be there for others and to act in a just manner.

Once we have transformed the negative aspects of ourselves, we should approach others in the same manner: seeing their challenging behaviors as rooted in something good that has become distorted. We evaluate each human being, as Yeshoshua the son of Prahiah taught some 2000 years ago “*L'khaf zekhut* – giving them the benefit of the doubt.” (Avot 1:6)

Where we look at another with the *middah* – the quality of compassion, *rah<sup>u</sup>amim* – or the *middah* of generosity, we can see that their negative behavior usually comes from suffering.

Perhaps they suffered a trauma of their own or their fear or anxiety has manifested itself in a manner where it is not in balance with other *middot*.

\* \* \*

A metaphor that underlies the liturgy of these *Yamim Nora'im* – these High Holy Days is that of God sitting in judgement while we, as sheep, file before God.

We don't actually know what judgement God may or may not make, nor do I understand much about how God works, but through this metaphor we are basically judging ourselves, thinking about the parts of ourselves we would like to work on, we would like to improve.

In essence, that is the task that lies before us: not to judge the various *middot* or parts of ourselves too harshly, but rather to try to understand how they are attempting to help us. Sometimes, that may require an “in-flight” adjustment where we lift up and develop other *middot* or parts of ourselves that will help us become more balanced and more centered in our lives.



As we select the cards of our behaviors on Rosh Hashanah, may we all find the ways both to understand our challenges and to hone the values to which we aspire.

*Shanah tovah* – may we all sweeten the aspects of ourselves that need extra love, bringing gentle compassion to ourselves, to others, and to the world – that is my wish for 5778 – may it truly be a *shanah tovah u'metukah* – a good and sweet new year and let us all take that in and say: Amen.