

Heshbon Ha-Nefesh— **An Accounting of the Soul**

The Va'ad and the Middot

The transformation that Mussar can effect takes place in and through the work of *tikkun* and *kibbush ha-yetzer*. As explained in chapter 6, *tikkun ha-yetzer*, the transformation of the *yetzer ha-ra*, takes many years of dedicated Mussar work. However, in the present context, it is important to recall that a person can reach a very high level of spiritual-ethical consciousness even in the short term, as the process of *kibbush* is refined. Merely suppressing evil impulses can, if ingrained as habitual behavior, completely remove the impulse under normal circumstances. Our Mussar discipline aims to establish this habit of proper behavior in service to others. And it is through the rectification of the character traits that *kibbush* is accomplished.

In order to begin to explore the practical nature of *middah* work we begin with a chart that describes the *middot*. One should note that there is more than one such list of character traits in Mussar literature. The one we have selected, the thirteen *middot* (character traits) as outlined by Rabbi Mendel of Satanov in his

book *Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, is recommended by Rav Yisrael Salanter and has been one of the most widely used. There is a good deal of overlap between other lists and this one, and no single list can include all of the nuances of character that may need rectification. As one progresses in *middah* work, one becomes aware of additional areas of character that may require work, even when those areas may be so subtle as to resist naming.

1. Equanimity	<i>Meivhat Ha-nefesh</i>	Rise above events that are inconsequential—both bad and good—for they are not worth disturbing your equanimity.
2. Patience	<i>Savlanut</i>	When something bad happens to you and you do not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.
3. Order	<i>Seder</i>	All of your actions and possessions should be orderly—each and every one having a set place and a set time. Let your thoughts always be free to deal with that which lies ahead of you.
4. Decisiveness	<i>Haritzut</i>	All of your acts should be preceded by deliberation; when you have reached a decision, act without hesitating.
5. Cleanliness	<i>Nekiyut</i>	Let no stain or ugliness be found in your possessions or in your home, and surely not on your body or clothes.
6. Humility	<i>Anavah</i>	Always seek to learn wisdom from every person, to recognize your failings and correct them. In doing so you will learn to stop thinking about your virtues and you will take your mind off your fellow's faults.
7. Righteousness	<i>Tzedeck</i>	What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.
8. Frugality	<i>Kimmutz</i>	Be careful with your money. Do not spend even a penny needlessly.
9. Diligence	<i>Zerizut</i>	Always find something to do—for yourself or for a friend—and do not allow a moment of your life to be wasted.

10. Silence	<i>Shetikah</i>	Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect: "What benefit will my speech bring to me or to others?"
11. Calmness	<i>Nihuta</i>	The words of the wise are stated gently. In being good, do not be called evil.
12. Truth	<i>Emet</i>	Do not allow anything to pass your lips that you are not certain is completely true.
13. Separation	<i>Perishut</i>	Strengthen yourself so that you can stop lewd thoughts. Draw close to your [spouse] only when your mind is free, [occupied only] by thoughts of fulfilling your conjugal duties and procreating.

The following is a very brief outline of how the we do the *middah* work individually and as a *va'ad*.

1. Commit yourself to the study of Mussar for at least thirteen weeks. Work on each of the thirteen *middot* above for one week.
2. On awakening, remember the *middah* on which you are currently working. Recite a phrase that you have found, in Scripture or in the *siddur* or even from other literary sources, to help you remember that *middah*.
3. Set a specific time and place for daily Mussar work by yourself. Late at night or early in the morning, when most other people are asleep, may be a time of least distraction. Whatever time you set, keep it consistently. Use the time to review your previous day in terms of your *middah* goal. As part of your reflection the following steps are important:
4. Focus on how your practice of your *middah* affects others in your life.
5. Keep a daily journal in which you record an incident or two from the day that showed when you did (or did not) apply the *middah* of the week.
6. Engage in private study of Torah, Tanakh, Talmud, and the works of Jewish spiritual writers. Examine these texts through the lens of your *middah*.
7. Keep a journal in which you write quotable passages from books

that you are reading, along with your reflections on those passages. Record phrases that you find in your reading that you can recite to help you to remember your *middah*.

This outline describes the daily personal work that must be undertaken in the practice of Mussar, in addition to learning Mussar texts as described in chapter 7. In that chapter we emphasized the importance of learning in a *shiur*, a group lesson, whenever possible. When there is a Mussar *shiur*, then the same group can function as a *va'ad*—that is, a workshop to monitor members' progress (or lack thereof) in aligning their behavior during the week with the goals of the particular *middah* or character trait that the group has chosen to focus on. The group's self-scrutiny is facilitated by keeping Mussar/*middot* journals. Each member is required to choose a Mussar moment, a fixed time each day to do the work of introspection, and then to share the results of this introspective work with the *va'ad*.

Mutual support and constructive criticism are offered by the group members under the supervision of a trained group leader. Group members are encouraged to find for themselves appropriate verbal cues, whether quotations from Scripture, traditional texts, or even secular texts. These are to be memorized and used by group members to remind themselves of their obligations regarding each *middah* throughout the course of the week. In order to deepen the group's members' connection to Mussar and their Mussar group during the course of the week, members agree to a weekly study appointment with a *hevrita* (study partner). This entails a 15- to 30-minute text study session in which the members are expected to generate questions to be brought back to the *shiur* that precedes the *va'ad*. The *shiur* and *va'ad* always go together. In the *va'ad* part of the meeting, members report on whether they have met their responsibilities for the week—namely: daily Mussar work, daily

Torah study, and weekly *hevrita*. The *va'ad* becomes, in a sense, the model of the “other” to whom each member is responsible. Once each member has reported, a member of the *va'ad* is asked to share their experience about the particular *middah* during the week. Was it particularly difficult? Did the person experience a sense of success in controlling their behavior in regard to the *middah*? And most importantly, did control of the *middah* result in a measurable impact in service to another? As feelings of trust and safety increase among members of the *va'ad*, the support and criticism of the members can be profoundly helpful to each member in focusing on the work at hand.