

## *The Musar Practices of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter*

The Musar<sup>1</sup> movement arose as a reaction to what it perceived as the superficial fulfillment of Torah dictates and to the selective practice of *mizvot* according to what was popular or conventional in social circles. The movement emphasized the development of character and sincere divine service guided by Torah law. This theme *per se* was not new; the innovation of the Musar movement was its demand that the process of developing inner sincerity be treated as an independent subject requiring its own study and methods, and even its own place of study and practice.<sup>2</sup> This article will discuss several of the developmental practices of the Musar movement with the aim of making their actual practice tangible to the reader. Historical writing about the Musar movement generally covers these practices through

---

1. For purposes of this paper, I use uppercase “Musar” to refer to the Musar movement, and lower case “*musar*” to refer to all forms of religious and ethical self-perfection, regardless of historical time-period. Hence, for example, a “*musar* text” is a religious-ethical text prescribing or proscribing various behaviors or practices, regardless of whether it had its genesis in the Musar movement historically.

2. This space was commonly known as a *musar kloiz* or *shtiebel* (room). For discussion of the need for a dedicated location for *musar* study, see Isaac Blazer, “*Sha’arei Or*”, in *Or Yisrael*, ed. Isaac Blazer (Vilna, 1900), 36-38. For general discussion, see Dov Katz, *Tenu’at ha-Musar* vol.1 (Jerusalem, 1996), 244; Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1993), 178-80; Kopul Rosen, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement* (London, 1945), 71-73. For a then-comprehensive bibliography of the literature on the Musar movement, see Hillel Goldberg’s *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, Idea* (New York, 1982), 309-29. An updated bibliography is a desideratum.

---

MOSHE J. GERSTEL is currently a student at Harvard Law School. He graduated from Touro College with a B.A. in Psychology, and subsequently completed a master’s degree in Jewish Studies at Touro’s Graduate School of Jewish Studies. This article combines his dual interests in psychology and Jewish history.

the lens of social and intellectual history.<sup>3</sup> Musar practices do indeed shed light on the philosophy, psychology, and social context of their practitioners, but their life-force lies dormant when they are described only as a means of inferring these elements and not for their own sake. Musar students often spent a significant amount of time engaged in musar practices. My goal is thus to revivify and flesh them out from a practical perspective, allowing the reader to peel them off the page into his or her life, or just to understand what they looked like in practice. Because of the rapid division of the movement into distinct and not-so-distinct schools and offshoots, as well as the plethora of behaviors that may be regarded as developmental practices, I have chosen a narrower focus—a modest survey of the primary practices advanced in one form or another by R. Yisrael Salanter himself and occasionally touching those of his leading disciples.

As *musar* study in the modern yeshivah becomes rarer and more cerebral, the need to render these practices accessible grows more pressing.<sup>4</sup> This slow extinction is a tremendous shame given the increasing potential for a healthy exchange of ideas with modern psychology and the possibility of a 21<sup>st</sup> century efflorescence of novel musar practice. Modern psychology has generated a wealth of insight into the biological and psychological nature of personal development and a host of tools to go along, while musar practice has its own novel ideas, practices, and aspirations. There is wonderful potential for a unique and mutually enriching dialogue. As a nod to this potential—and to add some *madda* to our Torah—I will introduce my survey of musar practices by providing a basic neuroscientific overview of character development, and conclude it with suggestions for enriching contemporary musar practice by adopting modern psychological tools and insights.

Human behavior arises out of a complex interplay of factors not yet fully understood, including biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. For our purposes, we may divide all of these into two categories—physical and psychological. Physical factors are those that exert influence through a physical medium. Biological processes,

---

3. Some discussion of *musar* practices can be found in Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, at 102-06, 208, and 230-35, and in Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, at 33, 37, 83, and 95.

4. A series of short articles on *musar* study for contemporary times appeared in *Jewish Action*, winter 2003. Also devoted to this theme are: Elyakim Krumbain, *Musar for Moderns* (Jersey City, NJ, and Alon Shevut, Israel, 2005), Alan Morinis, *Every Day Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Boston 2008), and Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day: 365 Days of Teachings and Practices from the Jewish Tradition of Musar* (Boston, 2010).

including eating, exercise, sleep, medication, recreational drugs, or even having a tamping iron blown through one's skull,<sup>5</sup> all fit into this category. Psychological factors include anything that exerts influence by affecting cognition in one form or another. Thought, perception, sensation, speech, reading, meditation, social environment, and behavior all fit squarely in this category. A hortatory talk by a preacher would be a purely psychological factor; a blow to the face by the same preacher, both psychological and physical; and a blow to the face while sleeping, purely physical. While modern psychology concerns itself with all such means of affecting human behavior, the Musar movement was solely concerned with the cultivation of character through the factors that have just been termed psychological. R. Yisrael and his disciples sought to develop ways in which one might affect one's psychology toward a desired end—namely, the cultivation of internal religious sincerity or the crossing of the divide between mind and heart. By way of illustration, in contemporary times, it is well known that nutrition, exercise, and certain medications have important psychological effects. It would definitely be interesting to consider what the attitude of the Musar movement towards such physical means of influence might have been. But historically, Musar primarily concerns itself with sincerity of action or the motivation and choice behind human actions. Behavior modification per se, though essential, is important to the movement insofar as it is an outgrowth of internals. Physical means of affecting psychology or behavior, while potentially important or even necessary, are historically out of the bounds of the movement's concern.

For the present discussion, I define a developmental practice as any behavior carried out repeatedly with the primary intention of influencing one's character in a natural manner. In modern psychological parlance, effective developmental practices work by creating new patterns of cognition or by strengthening already existing patterns, a process known as neural or synaptic plasticity.<sup>6</sup> Neurologically, repeated practice

---

5. This is a reference to a famous case in the annals of psychology in which a tamping iron blew through the skull of a railroad worker by the name of Phineas Gage. Incredibly, he survived with minimal loss of physical ability. Gage did, however, exhibit significant behavioral and personality changes and has thus achieved fame in many psychology textbooks.

6. This account relies partially upon James W. Kalat, *Biological Psychology* (9th ed., Belmont, CA, 2007), 405-11. Any introductory neuroscience textbook should provide a basic overview of the process of neural and synaptic change. An accessible popular account of neural plasticity is Norman Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself* (New York, 2007).

of a given sort causes the associated neural pathways to form stronger connections and increases the likelihood and speed of specific neural activation in these pathways. Less-used neural networks, on the other hand, tend to decay and lose their potency over time. Psychologically, we would say that these changes cause the intended attitude or habit to be more or less deeply ingrained, thus changing the individual's character.<sup>7</sup>

I will explain below how R. Salanter emphasizes emotional involvement in one's *musar* practices. Contemporary neuroscience shows that emotionality can exert unique influences on neural, and hence behavioral, change.<sup>8</sup> All such practices, although very different in nature, are merely different manners of evoking cognitive repetition of one sort or another, resulting in the modification of neural networks. This does not eliminate the value of a variety of practices, as different practices elicit different forms and patterns of cognition, each with its own slew of effects. The cognitive correlates of acting compassionately, for instance, are going to be very different from those of philosophical contemplation, and their effects on cognition, and thereby character, will likewise be different. Repeated and varied practice strengthens or creates anew an array of different cognitive patterns that influence character and behavior in myriad ways. Although not framed in this way, repeated and variegated focus is a part of the conscious philosophy of the Musar movement, and this paradigm provides a good general framework for understanding the effects of *musar* practices in light of modern neuroscience.

Incidentally, this focus on repetition and variation as a means of creating character change was not in itself new. Rambam, for one, had already outlined such a program based on the Aristotelian doctrines of *habitus* and the "golden mean."<sup>9</sup> Musar's uniqueness lies in its particular implementation of this kind of program. I would also be remiss if I did not mention that such religious elements as one's relationship

7. In general, there appears to be a scarcity of research on the specific relationship between human character and synaptic plasticity. For a general account of human development and neural plasticity, see Adriana Galvan, "Neural Plasticity of Development and Learning," *Human Brain Mapping* 31 (2010): 879-90.

8. Helmut W. Kessels and Roberto Malinow, "Synaptic AMPA Receptor Plasticity and Behavior," *Neuron* 61,3 (2009): 340-50.

9. See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De'ot*, ch. 2 and *Shemonah Perakim* (introduction to the commentary on *Avot*), chap. 4. For discussion of the relation of Rambam's discussion to Aristotelian doctrine, see Bernard Septimus, "Literary Structure and Ethical Theory in *Sefer ha-Madda*," in *Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, 2007), 307-25.

with God, fear of Heaven, proper fulfillment of the commandments, and so on, were essential goals of the Musar movement. Accordingly, the practices described herein are of a very religious nature and were not intended merely for self-development in a secular sense. Musar philosophy also recognized supernatural effects on development, “whose reason [i. e., *modus operandi*–MJG] man’s intellect and senses strain in vain to understand.”<sup>10</sup> My intention, however, is not to evaluate the various religious attitudes and philosophical beliefs of the movement, but simply to describe and clarify the practices in which the Musar movement engaged in *natural* pursuit of its goals. R. Salanter writes clearly that his methods are intended to work through a natural medium, comparing them extensively to medical remedies.<sup>11</sup>

As a rule, I will attempt to present the general flavor of a given practice. Musar practices normally do not have a canonized or “authentic” form, but rather take the loose form of a general practice that varies with individual expression. Many Buddhist meditative practices provide an instructive contrast. These often have very traditional forms, which prescribe both the manner and content of their practice. In *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation, for instance, variations on four phrases are traditionally repeated: “May you be free from danger,” “May you have mental happiness,” “May you have physical happiness,” and “May you have ease of well-being.”<sup>12</sup> Musar has very limited formalism of this sort, if any. The need for individual adaptation is consciously advanced in the writings of R. Salanter. He stressed that one should practice according to one’s own nature and temperament, writing in a postscript to one of his *musar* letters that *musar* practice would be effective: “. . . particularly [if the practice is done] in a manner appropriate to the individual’s nature and situation”.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, it is important to note that although the following practices are presented individually, in actuality they were not necessarily delineated in time or practiced separately. Part of conducting a *heshbon ha-nefesh*, for example, might be engaging in what he called *hitbonenut*. Nevertheless, being clearly distinct elements of practice, they are most appropriately described independently.

---

10. Yisrael Salanter, “*Iggeret ha-Musar*,” in *Or Yisrael*, ed. Blazer, 106-08 (letter 30).

11. See *ibid.* at 103-08.

12. See Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston, 2004), 76.

13. Salanter, “*Iggeret ha-Musar*,” in *Or Yisrael*, 30<sup>th</sup> letter, 92.

### *Musar be-Hitbonenut and be-Hitpa'alut*

An abundance of *musar* texts were extant for many centuries prior to the birth of the Musar movement, and such texts were commonly studied by the learned. R. Yisrael Salanter called for renewed emphasis on these texts and a new manner of study that would be effective in penetrating the heart and changing thought and behavior.

This brings us to the first Salanterian practice—*musar be-hitbonenut* (literally, with contemplation) and *be-hitpa'alut* (literally, in an emotional manner).<sup>14</sup> In the context of the Musar movement,<sup>15</sup> this practice originated with R. Yosef Zundel of Salant,<sup>16</sup> R. Yisrael's teacher, and was then promulgated by R. Yisrael. *Hitbonenut* refers to extensive contemplation and elaboration of an idea. *Hitpa'alut* refers to the emotional manner in which one studies Musar.<sup>17</sup> Both elements were intended to help abstract ideas travel from mind to heart. R. Salanter felt that with regard to the semi-conscious elements of man's nature, what he referred to as the "subtle forces" ("*koḥot ha-kehim*"),<sup>18</sup> it is insuf-

14. As will be seen, these are two largely distinct elements and can equally be classified as two practices. I have presented them together as they are so described in R. Yisrael's words and were probably so practiced.

15. As this practice is rather straightforward it was likely engaged in previously. Indeed, the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 7b, describes the *amora* Rav as engaging in such a contemplation prior to entering his court of law, as well as when he was being accompanied by a mass of people where there was potential for arrogance.

16. See the testimonies of R. Naftali Amsterdam and R. Isaac Blazer quoted in Katz, *Tenu'at ha-Musar*, 123-24.

17. The term *hitpa'alut* is already widely used in a *musar* context in R. Menaḥem Mendel Lefin's *Ḥeshbon ha-Nefesh* (this work will be discussed below). See R. Menaḥem Lefin, "Introduction to the Thirteen Chapters," *Ḥeshbon ha-Nefesh* (Kaidan, 1937), 30-35. The terms *hitbonenut* and *hitpa'alut* also appear prominently in the philosophy of Ḥabad. Indeed, R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch (1773-1827), known as the "Mitteler Rebbe," wrote two monographs titled *Kuntres ha-Hitbonenut* and *Kuntres ha-Hitpa'alut* respectively. Their use in Ḥabad, however, is in the context of mystical prayer. In brief, Ḥabad's usage of *hitbonenut* refers to contemplation of God's immanence in the world and *hitpa'alut* to ecstasy in prayer. These uses have limited relationship to their usage in Musar circles. For an extensive discussion of these concepts in Ḥabad, see Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York, 1978), 84-92, 98-103; Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1997), 291-300, and index there; and Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken, NJ, 1999), 174-75. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for alerting me to this parallel.

18. See Salanter, *Or Yisrael*, 6<sup>th</sup> letter, 49-50. For general discussion of this term/idea see Katz, 230-35, and Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 304-12. For discussion of the relationship between the *musar* philosophy of R. Lefin's *Ḥeshbon ha-Nefesh* and that of R. Salanter, see Etkes, 123-34. Compare Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 300-01 n.110. Also see

ficient to consider ideal attitudes and behaviors only occasionally and intellectually. Rather, he asserted, it is necessary to engage in frequent elaborative and emotional contemplation in order to affect these deeper, less accessible parts of the psyche. In discussing this practice, he writes:

So that one become accustomed to this [*musar*] wisdom, whose ways branch into two, the first being to inflame the souls through the purification of thought, through these sublime studies [the study of *musar*]; to learn with lips on fire, with correct apprehension, depicting each idea in a broad manner, and bringing it close through familiar imaginings, until the heart gets excited, whether to a great or small extent. And thereby it will be empowered to prepare the limbs, to actualize every good deed on its behalf, whether by desire or by strength of will.<sup>19</sup>

In practice, an individual might choose a text or a saying on which to focus, and then contemplate the idea therein in as extensive a manner as possible, carefully considering its consequences and broadening it with tangible depictions to fully understand its significance.<sup>20</sup> This constitutes *hitbonenut*. The practitioner might then chant the text or the saying over and over in an emotional manner with an evocative sing-song, attempting to profoundly feel its significance. This emotional recitation is intended to evoke *hitpa'alut*. This repetition is not done in the manner of a monotonous mantra, but rather with an ebb and flow reflecting the fluctuations of the person's inner state. Regarding this chanting, R. Isaac Blazer, a foremost student of R. Salanter, writes:

And therefore it is appropriate to repeat *musar* sayings many times over. And specifically, when one comes across a saying of the sages or some other words of *musar* by which he feels he would be affected and that would penetrate into the chambers of his heart, he should review and repeat it with deep affect many, many times. . . .<sup>21</sup>

A similar idea is expressed in R. Yisrael's words: "And he should repeat them many times over to be emotionally affected at the time."<sup>22</sup> R. Blazer attests that R. Salanter was wont to engage in such practice "in a very sweet tone that evoked sadness, at times repeating a saying with deep affect many, many times."<sup>23</sup> It was anticipated that by evoking such focus

---

R. Lefin, 30-31, §52-55 specifically.

19. *Or Yisrael*, 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, 42-43. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

20. Blazer, "*Sha'arei Or*," 33, §9.

21. Blazer, *ibid*.

22. Salanter, *Or Yisrael*, 92, postscript to 30<sup>th</sup> letter.

23. *Ibid*.

and emotion, a practitioner would be instilled with an emotional sensibility or even develop an instinctual response for the trait being developed. Concerning this, R. Yisrael writes: “From this will be born *subtle forces*<sup>24</sup> to help against the outstretched desire” (“מזה יולד כוחות הכהים” (“לעזור כנגד התאוה הפרושה”).<sup>25</sup> One who, for example, uses the value of seeking peace as the focus of this form of practice, would create greater emotional interest in its attainment, thus making it more likely that this person will act in a peaceful manner.

### *Heshbon ha-Nefesh*—Accounting of the Soul

*Heshbon ha-nefesh*, an “accounting of the soul,” is another classic *musar* practice. In its general form, the practice consists of setting aside a portion of one’s day to critically consider one’s way of living. The idea of such an accounting has ancient Jewish roots. In *Avot* (2:1), the *mishnah* already cautions us to “reckon (*hevei mehashev*) the loss incurred through doing a *mizvah* against its benefit, and the benefit of a transgression (*averah*) against its loss.” A similar admonition appears in *Berakhot* (5a): “Said Rava or perhaps Rav H̄sida: If a person sees suffering coming upon him, he should examine his deeds.” R. Moshe H̄ayyim Luzzato (Ramhal), writing in the early eighteenth century, places great emphasis on the need to make such an accounting daily.<sup>26</sup> Shortly thereafter, R. Mendel Lefin, the religious *maskil* from Podolia, wrote a work titled *Heshbon ha-Nefesh* outlining a program for such an accounting.<sup>27</sup> R. Lefin’s curriculum consisted of a weekly rotation of thirteen character traits, with each practiced in total for four weeks per year. These were of necessity to vary according to the needs of the individual.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, R. Lefin apparently based his system on an identical program of character development advanced by Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) in his autobiography.<sup>29</sup>

24. See note 22 above.

25. Salanter, *Or Yisrael*, 6<sup>th</sup> letter, p.50.

26. Moshe H̄ayyim Luzzato, *Mesillat Yesharim* (Jerusalem, 1988), chs.3, 32.

27. R. Lefin was born in 1749 (d. 1826), some 61 years before R. Salanter, in Satanow, a town in Podolia. Upon relocating to Berlin in 1780, he came under the influence of Moses Mendelssohn. For background information on R. Lefin and his work, I am indebted to Aharon Friedler, “The Thirteen Middos of . . . Rav Yisroel Salanter?,” unpublished manuscript. For more on R. Lefin, see Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (Atlanta, 2004), 1, 6-13.

28. See *Heshbon ha-Nefesh*, 20-21, par. 22.

29. See Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Charles Eliot (New York, 1909), 76-82. Accessed via <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/>

The need to critically examine one's deeds was the credo of the Musar movement, and the *Heshbon* naturally became a trademark *musar* practice, in one form or another. R. Yisrael was very familiar with R. Lefin's work in particular, and even encouraged its republishing in 1845.<sup>30</sup> He is reported to have instructed his students to maintain a diary wherein they focused on thirteen traits.<sup>31</sup> The thirteen reported are identical to those delineated by R. Lefin except for one deviation: the version attributed to R. Yisrael has "Honor[ing others]" (*kavod*) in place of R. Lefin's "asceticism" (*perishut*).<sup>32</sup> R. Yosef Zundel had also made extensive use of R. Lefin's work, and large parts of it were found copied in his notes.<sup>33</sup>

The general intention of this practice is that the practitioner make a thorough reckoning of his character, attitudes, and behaviors, developing an intimate familiarity with the nuances of his character, his strengths and weaknesses, and keeping track of his daily activities and progress or lack thereof. Presumably, he would then proceed to lay out a plan of action for the coming days or weeks. Such foresight and advance planning was the "second branch" of *musar* wisdom, "whose ways branch into two."<sup>34</sup> R. Yisrael stressed that it is necessary to cultivate foresight and to prepare in advance strategies with which to handle challenging circumstances.<sup>35</sup> If one knows, for instance, that one is likely to get angry in certain situations, one might prepare in advance to intentionally speak slowly, or to count one's words while speaking, in those situations. R. Yisrael compared this to the strategizing appropriate for conducting warfare and emphasized the need to train "prior to the battle,"<sup>36</sup> that is, prior to the actual time of challenge.

franklin/a\_b\_benf.pdf (The Electronic Classics Series: Pennsylvania State University, 2012; ed. Jim Manis). This contention is well founded. See Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 125 and notes 19-21 there. Also see Katz, 260, n. 15.

30. Katz, 259, n. 12. This is also reported in the introductory pages of many of the reprints of *Heshbon ha-Nefesh*.

31. R. Barukh Epstein, *Mekor Barukh*, vol. 2, p. 111, cited in Katz, 259-60. Maintaining a diary was a classical part of the *Heshbon ha-Nefesh* practice, and even R. Yisrael maintained such a diary; see Katz, 290.

32. See Katz, 260.

33. See Eliezer Rivlin, *Ha-Zaddik Reb Yosef Zundel mi-Salant ve-Rabbotav* (Jerusalem, 1927), 49, 148, quoted in Katz, 127.

34. See the passage from *Or Yisrael* quoted above in the section on *Musar be-Hitbone-nut*, which constitutes the first branch.

35. Salanter, 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, *Or Yisrael*, 42.

36. *Ibid.*, 80. See also Katz, 260.

## Practical Exercises in Times of Challenge

R. Yisrael espoused the necessity of ingraining theoretical attitudes by applying them to the challenges of daily life “through growing increasingly accustomed to enacting these in practice.”<sup>37</sup> He emphasized that the mere cultivation of an attitude is insufficient; it is necessary to be able to evoke that attitude and behave accordingly under the pressures of real life. Indeed, the concern with the nitty-gritty of daily action is a signature characteristic of the Musar movement. This is probably in part a reflection of Judaism’s obsession with correct action. Additionally, Alan Morinis notes insightfully that the practices of the Musar movement could not of necessity be inordinately time-consuming; the time of the *musar* student was already prioritized for Torah study.<sup>38</sup> Anything of the month-long, week-long, or even day-long genre was out of the question, certainly for the masses.<sup>39</sup> The focus was thus on the myriad small and “insignificant” actions that take place daily. It is thus very characteristic of the *musar* devotee to engage in a virtually infinite number of little actions throughout his day so as to cultivate and enhance desirable character traits and ways of being.

For the most part, these practices are spontaneous, not following a set schedule, order, or format. It would be impractical, even impossible, to describe all these practices individually—they are essentially infinite, limited by the individual’s ingenuity and perseverance. What follows is an array of specific examples intended to provide a general idea of the nature and application of these practices. I have considered such actions

---

37. Salanter, *Or Yisrael*, 93. See Katz, 258–59, for further discussion.

38. Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, 268.

39. R. Yosef Yoizel Hurvitz, the *Alter* (elder) of Novarodok, is a notable exception to this: He isolated himself in a room for about one and a half years to work on self-development. While there, he received his meals delivered through one of two windows—one for meat, the other for milk. This was not the only incidence of such seclusion. Indeed, over a period of many years, he spent most of his time in seclusion. For a wonderful summary of these retreats, see Katz, *Tenu’at ha-Musar*, 4:157–63. This type of “retreat” is very rare in Musar circles—his may be the only such case. Indeed, the negative, surprised reactions of the *maskilim* and the government to his hermit-like practices would indicate that these kinds of practices were rare in the region in general. For comparison, it would be informative to survey the Christian monastic practices of the period, although even if similar practices were to be found, we would need to pay attention to whether these occurred behind monastery walls or in the public eye, as were those of the *Alter*.

developmental when they are engaged in for the purpose of inculcating a certain attitude or behavior. The same action performed as a natural expression of such an attitude has not been considered developmental. To illustrate, one can give charity as a means of nurturing generosity, or one can give charity out of compassion. The conscious motive of the former is to change one's character, and hence it is developmental; that of the latter is merely to alleviate the suffering of another, and is thus not developmental.

An inspiring exemplar of this type of practice is R. Salanter himself. Dov Katz reports that at times when R. Salanter seemed irate, he was observed to turn his face towards the wall and whisper to himself "anger of the face, not anger of the heart," a kind of impromptu self-admonishment intended to prevent misstep.<sup>40</sup> Some of R. Salanter's *kabbalot* (literally, assumed commitments) also serve as good examples. Among these are the commitment "to become accustomed to paying attention daily to the holy names [of God] at minimum during the evening prayer" and "that statements of Ḥazal which struck a chord in his heart should be readily on his tongue."<sup>41</sup> R. Yosef Zundel writes a similar admonition to his son: "And you should constantly repeat verses of Divine Providence, *bittahon* [trust in God] and salvation."<sup>42</sup>

A rich array of these exercises is provided by R. Simḥah Zissel Ziv, the *Alter* (elder) of Kelm.<sup>43</sup> The following are some of these practices: "When one closes a door, let him look back to ensure it is closed properly"; "When you walk through a group of people, take care not to push another"; "Don't look out the windows unnecessarily"; "If one has news to share, let him restrain himself for a quarter hour at minimum"; "If one asks you for your counsel, do not answer immediately, but rather wait five seconds"; "If one must articulate something, let him first contemplate and arrange his words." A legendary practice of the *Alter* of Kelm was to don and button up his coat prior to reacting when angered.<sup>44</sup> The *Alter* and his school in Kelm were in general famous for their insistence

40. Katz, 1:309-10. This whispered statement is probably based on Maimonides, who forswears any form of anger and states that one should manifest anger only externally and never experience it internally. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot De'ot* 2:3. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

41. *Or ha-Musar*, 11; *Sha'arei Ziyon*, Kislev-Shevav 1933 (5693); both quoted in Katz, 1:248.

42. Letters 24-25 in *Or Yisrael*, 69-70.

43. This collection of examples is found in Katz, 2:126.

44. Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day*, 90.

on order and precision, and on the similar demand for one not to touch something which was not theirs.<sup>45</sup>

The most radical examples of these exercises are to be found in the Novarodok school of Musar, a likely reflection of the very radical nature of its founder and leader, R. Yosef Yoizel Hurvitz.<sup>46</sup> The “*peules*” (in the Yiddish pronunciation) or “developmental acts” of its students were an oft discussed topic in Jewish Eastern Europe. The proverbial *peuleh* had the student walk into a hardware store and ask for some milk or into the grocery and ask for some nails. Another form of this would be a yeshivah student approaching a couple in the street and asking them to inform him what the Torah portion of the week was.<sup>47</sup> Reflecting the rather unique and radical approach of Novarodok, these particular practices had somewhat of a different focus than most of those previously described: they were intended to develop the student’s ability to function independently of others’ opinions. One eyewitness reports that he saw these radical acts completely transform the comportment of students.<sup>48</sup> Reserved students who previously were quiet introverts rapidly became significantly more extroverted and entirely comfortable in public settings.<sup>49</sup>

### **Intensive Study of Halakhic Texts Pertaining to Areas of Weakness**

Another practice recommended by R. Salanter was the intensive analytical study of the *halakhot* germane to a given area of weakness.<sup>50</sup> This is best done, he says, when the learning is focused on determining what is actually permitted and forbidden and when one learns with the intention of actualizing this learning in practice (*al menat la’asot*).<sup>51</sup> For instance,

---

45. There is a famous legend about an item that was left on a window sill in Kelm and which remained there for many years. Those cleaning the yeshiva—a task for which students competed—were said to lift it up, clean beneath, and replace it.

46. See note 39 above.

47. Every Jewish preschool child would be able to answer this question; it is roughly the equivalent of a college student asking someone for help in calculating the sum of  $2 + 2$ .

48. See Moshe Silberberg, “Novarodok,” in *Memoirs of the Lithuanian Yeshiva (Pirkei Zikhronot Yeshivot Littá)*, ed. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski (Jerusalem, 2004), 365-66.

49. The reader interested in reviewing more of these practices is encouraged to consult Morinis’s *Everyday Holiness*, and idem, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, (Boston, 2002), both very accessible and informative lay works.

50. Salanter, “*Iggeret ha-Musar*,” *Or Yisrael*, 106-8. See also Katz, 1:256.

51. Salanter, *ibid.*

R. Salanter advocated popular study of *Hoshen Mishpat*, the section of the *Shulḥan Arukh* that deals with monetary law. He writes that such study would slowly influence the masses towards more upstanding and honest conduct in monetary matters.<sup>52</sup> This halakhic study, he says, should be commensurate with the degree of deficiency in the given area, “as in the manner of remedies for physical illness, in which according to the degree of the illness is the degree of the remedy, in both quality and quantity.”<sup>53</sup> R. Yisrael felt that such sincere study serves as a “physical remedy” for the maladies of the soul, one that operates completely through a natural, rational medium.<sup>54</sup>

### Prayer as a Musar Practice

Prayer has always been a central part of the Jew’s religious life, and as such appears in some form in all Jewish spiritual movements. The purpose of prayer can be framed very generally in one of two ways. Prayer can be viewed as a means of causing an external effect, a method of “influencing God’s will” and/or changing the natural progression of events through some supernatural means. It can also be seen as a means of influencing one’s character, the nurturing of an internal change through the various contemplations involved. Take, for example, praying for the sick. One can pray for the sick in an attempt to effect an improvement in their condition through intercessory prayer; this would be an external focus. One can also pray for the sick as a means of deepening compassion and concern for the suffering of fellow human beings. These two goals need not be mutually exclusive. In considering prayer as a developmental practice, however, it is important to distinguish between these two viewpoints. Prayer as a means of affecting one’s character is surely a developmental practice. Whether prayer conceived of as a means of affecting some external or supernatural effect is to be considered such is highly doubtful.

One first encounters a form of prayer with a uniquely Musar bent in the writings of R. Yosef Zundel of Salant. We possess copies of numerous prayer texts composed by him, beseeching God for help in changing his

52. Ibid. See also Katz, 1:246.

53. Ibid.

54. In this letter, R. Salanter also stresses that Torah learning exercises a protective effect through a spiritual medium, “which man’s intellect and senses strain in vain to understand its reason [i.e. *modus operandi*].” But this effect, he emphasizes, occurs with study of any Torah area and not just with study pertinent to the given area of weakness.

character and/or confessing his failings to God. Here is part of the text of two such prayers:

Teach me, God, your way, I shall go in your truth; unify my heart to fear your name, uncover my eyes so I may see wondrous things in your Torah. And with regard to that in which I have already erred, place me on the truth. To do your will, my God, I desired, and your Torah is in my innards. . . . My soul yearns and even pines to heed your commandments.<sup>55</sup>

God! You are my Deity, I shall hope to you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh pines for you. Hear O God, be gracious to me, and lead me along a path of integrity. Turn my heart to your directives, and not to monetary gain. . . . Return, O God, liberate my soul, for my life dwindles in anguish, and my years with groaning.<sup>56</sup>

Prayers of this genre appear in older Jewish literature as well, the most obvious example being the many psalms that request God's help in self-purification. A prayer containing similar elements is Bahya ibn Pakuda's *bakkashah* (supplication) at the end of his *Hovot ha-Levavot*.<sup>57</sup> Admonitions to pray for assistance with acquiring spiritual knowledge, arguably a form of development, are found in Maimonides as well.<sup>58</sup> While the content of these prayers seems to fit prayer in the first sense—namely, attempting to influence God's will—it surely serves to naturally affect one's psychology as well, intentionally or otherwise. These deeply emotional requests are certainly a very powerful exercise in values contemplation, a powerful meditation sure to deeply affect one's emotional character. R. Yosef Zundel, or for that matter anyone so involved in this type of prayer, was probably very much aware of the effects of constant refocusing through such prayer, and this activity thus fits our criteria for a developmental practice.

Turning to R. Salanter, we find him exhorting his students to assemble periodically with a *minyán* to pray together regarding their spiritual desire (*yezer ha-ruhani*).<sup>59</sup> A lengthy description of this form of prayer is found in a report by R. Isaac Blazer.<sup>60</sup> At one time, R. Yisrael secluded himself for

55. See Rivlin, *Ha-Zaddik*, 61-62, quoted in Katz, 125-26.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, ed. A. Ziphroni, (Jerusalem, 1928), 280-92. This *bakkashah* is not found in all editions, having first been restored from manuscript in 1854.

58. See his *Introduction to Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:4-5. See also Marvin Fox, "Prayer and the Religious Life," in *Interpreting Maimonides* (Chicago, 1990), 301.

59. 6<sup>th</sup> letter, *Or Yisrael*, 50.

60. Blazer, "Netivot Or," in *Or Yisrael*, 121.

a lengthy period in Aleksot, a suburb of Kovna, where he remained for the course of the week, returning only on the Sabbath. In Aleksot, he would be visited once a week by enough students to form a *minyán*, to whom he would then deliver an intense sermon. R. Blazer writes:

In the middle of the sermon, he would begin to say words of reproof and spiritual awakening with great excitement, until our hearts melted, and he would weep a great deal. He would repeatedly arouse us to prepare ourselves to beseech mercy from Him [God], may he be blessed, concerning spiritual matters. Then, in the middle of the “awakening,” he would recite a verse in praise of God, and then some verse imploring mercy, such as “Return us to You, O God.”<sup>61</sup> . . . And we prayed together with him in public concerning the spiritual Evil Impulse, to remove the heart of stone from our flesh and to purify our hearts to serve Him in truth.<sup>62</sup>

R. Yisrael is seen here exhorting his students to first prepare themselves “to beseech mercy from Him”—an admonition which probably served to increase the focus and seriousness with which the actual prayer was approached. He would then proceed to pray in an impassioned manner along with those assembled for God to “Return us” or “to purify our hearts to serve him in truth.” One can almost hear the plaintive, piercing supplications emanating from the suburbs of Kovna.

## Conclusion

Developmental practices are potentially innumerable in their diversity, and the sampling provided above offers a glimpse of this diversity. In the history of R. Salanter and the Musar movement in general, such practices are to be found in an almost endless variety of forms and locations, limited only by the creativity and persistence of the individual practitioner. Religious self-development was the central preoccupation of *musar* students, and every opportunity for advancing this program by using old practices or creating new ones was understandably used.

I conclude this essay with a short discussion of the possibilities offered by contemporary psychology for expanding *musar*’s understanding of character development and for creating new *musar* practices. R. Yisrael was not averse to learning from secular sources, and it is a fair presumption that R. Yisrael would have been happy to adopt and

61. “*Hashivenu Hashem elekha ve-nashuvah*,” Lam. 5:21.

62. Translation is from Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, trans. Chipman, 233.

adapt contemporary psychological understanding and techniques to the *musar* cause. In the view of some, R. Yisrael's *musar* philosophy itself borrowed Kantian concepts and terminology.<sup>63</sup> It is immaterial whether this came from direct reading of Kant: there is sufficient evidence that R. Yisrael studied and requisitioned secular works, at a minimum for the purpose of clarifying Torah subjects.<sup>64</sup>

Psychology can contribute to *musar* by sharing its understanding of character development in general, as well as through sharing many specific practices for personal development. Regarding the former, psychological research has vastly expanded our understanding of the roots of the adult personality. While it seems R. Yisrael believed that character traits were to a large degree inborn or given by God,<sup>65</sup> modern psychology has demonstrated just how much a child's environment ("nurture") plays a critical role in shaping that person's nature and behavior for life.<sup>66</sup> For example, some very good research shows that the manner in which children are praised and criticized plays a seminal role in developing their sense of self-worth and shaping their motivation.<sup>67</sup> Briefly, praise that is person oriented—"good girl," "bad boy," "you're so smart"—leads children to link success to their intrinsic qualities, and to develop a "fixed mindset," that is, the belief that people have fixed, inherent qualities, and that success or failure are a product of these qualities. Children—and adults—who think this way find failure threatening (in their view, it says something about their inherent capabilities and worth), and are much less likely to persist in the face of challenge. Correlatively, they will find the success of others

63. See Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 304-05.

64. See *ibid.*, 244 and 287 n. 14. But cf. Mark Steiner, "Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 42-57, for a portrayal of R. Yisrael as decidedly not engaged in or inclined towards secular philosophy.

65. As implied, for instance, in this quote: "Do not say that what God has made cannot be altered, and that because He, may He be blessed, has planted within me an evil force I cannot hope to uproot it" (*Kitvei R. Yisrael Salanter*, ed. Mordechai Pechter [Jerusalem, 1972], 125, quoted and translated in Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 289).

66. It would be facile to believe that R. Yisrael, or for that matter, many thoughtful people before Freud, did not believe that environment shapes a child. This was already stated in Proverbs (22:6)—"*Hanokh la-na'ar al pi darko gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimmenu*" ("Train the child in his manner, even when he ages he shall not stray from it.") Psychology, however, has clarified just how influenced people are by their childhood environment, and revealed many nuanced and previously unknown ways in which it shapes them.

67. This account is based on Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York, 2007), 3-12, 172-82.

threatening, rather than as an opportunity to learn or a merely neutral occurrence. By contrast, praise that is process oriented—"I like how you tried so hard," or "You used such nice colors"—causes children to adopt a "growth mindset" linking success to process or effort. In the growth mindset, failure is just part of learning, not a statement about your inherent capabilities, and these children find a challenge exciting. These mindsets go a long way towards explaining much of adult behavior. Why are some people more likely to be jealous of others' successes? Why is one person more likely to give up or lose motivation in the face of challenge? These are critical questions for the *musar* student in the quest for character perfection. It would seem natural then for the *musar* devotee to be concerned with adopting insights of this type and allowing them to shape his or her behavior as a religious imperative.

An example of a specific psychological tool very suitable for use as a *musar* practice is a technique often used in addiction for dealing with strong impulses called "urge surfing."<sup>68</sup> R. Naphtali Amsterdam relates that he asked R. Yisrael for a cure for anger. The latter told him to nurture goodness towards others, and that this attitude of lovingkindness combined with the good reputation one procures thereby will enable one not to get angry. Urge surfing offers an entirely different approach. In urge surfing, one acknowledges the strong impulse—say an urge to act angrily—and recognizes that it is not in accord with one's values, and then allows oneself to experience and observe the urge, "making room for it" until it subsides. Originally developed for addictive urges, it can be used for any problematic impulse, and would be a very useful practice for the *musar* student trying to control and channel impulses and behaviors.

These are two illustrations of the potential cross-fertilization between *musar* and contemporary psychology. While the dynamism of pre-war *musar* study and practice has largely been lost, this pairing offers the possibility of a renewed and enhanced *musar* program for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Acknowledgements***

I am very thankful to David Shatz and Meira Mintz for their wonderful editorial assistance and their patience in bearing with me while I finished this paper. The comments of an anonymous reviewer were also very helpful.

---

68. See, e.g., Sarah Bowen and Alan Marlatt, "Surfing the Urge: Brief Mindfulness-Based Intervention for College Student Smokers," *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 23,4 (2009), 666-671.