

Shavuot: How Mussar makes us mensches

The holiday of Shavuot has many fascinating associations for the Jewish people, including celebrating the agricultural harvest and receiving the Torah. Some communities celebrate Shavuot with the beautiful practice of staying up all night learning Torah. I want to share some thoughts about a Jewish practice that gives us a roadmap to strive to attain the proper balance of humility within ourselves, and the subsequent practical benefits this practice can have on our everyday lives.

Imagine peering into the deepest of the depths of outer space to discover and see a black hole, something never seen before. Some experts probably opined it was not possible. Earlier this spring, scientists accomplished this magnificent feat when they captured a picture of a black hole within the galaxy known as Messier 87 (no relation to Mark Messier 11 for those Ranger hockey fans out there), located 55 million light-years away from Earth. It was possible. A network of eight telescopes across our planet assembled the first image of a black hole. We are fortunate that we have access to such telescopes that made viewing the first black hole a reality.

Now imagine accessing a telescope to aid us in peering into the deepest of the depths of something right here on earth – ourselves. Our Jewish tradition has long known about such a telescope – called Mussar character development – and the Mussar va'ad or group to help us cultivate a Mussar practice is making a revival in many Jewish communities.

The goal of Mussar is to provide us with practical tools to help us do the work of looking within ourselves, helping us to learn more about ourselves and how we relate to others, one character trait at a time.

Proverbs 1:8 defines Mussar as “instruction,” when it states “[m]y son, hear the Mussar [instruction] of your father, and forsake not the Torah of your mother. It is fascinating to note that in this sentence in Proverbs, the words “Mussar” and “Torah” are both being used linguistically as synonyms to express the same concept of “instruction.” In other words, just as our Torah is an instruction book for how to lead a Jewish life, so too is Mussar.

I teach Mussar character development and hockey at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires (inspired by one of my mentors, Spencer Rockman, who teaches Mussar and soccer with NJ Rovers Soccer) and have found that campers appreciate experiencing the practical benefits of working on the various middot or character traits, not as an abstract teaching, but rather within the actual context of the hockey game. The campers experience the tangible benefits of how the practice improves teamwork and affects the game. For example, we worked on the middah or character

trait of “anavah” or “humility,” and experienced how teammates in game situations strive to find the right balance of humility in terms of deciding when to take a shot on goal yourself and when to pass to a teammate. Balance is the key. Neither extreme is usually beneficial, meaning that it usually does not benefit the team for a player to always shoot or to always pass, but rather to work on humility by finding the correct balance and practice it within the parameters of the hockey game. The top three career National Hockey League (NHL) leaders in assists, Wayne Gretzky (1,963), Ron Francis (1,249) and Mark Messier (1,193) were iconic players because they found a balance

between shooting and passing.

Humility has been identified as the gateway to all other character traits. Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda, lived in Al-Andalus in the 11th century (modern day Spain) and explained in his classic work Duties of the Heart that all character virtues or traits are dependent upon humility and how humility is at the core of teshuva or repentance. He describes one method of acquiring humility by explaining how human beings leave behind all possessions at death, including a visualization of imagining one's face in the grave “without its radiance and his

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people." She has donated the copyrights for her books to the shul.

Nothing has particularly pleased her over her almost 50 years of marriage. Saly said she has had "a reasonably happy life and a good husband. That pleased me." What bothers her now are the late crimes.

She is as strongly in the power of education and said she is sure that her estate would be used to perpetuate the shul. She brought up the idea of the donation during a Purim party at the shul.

"We're longtime members," Rabbi Mark said, noting that he and his wife joined the shul in 1990, soon after they moved to the new shul. They lived in Paterson and Elmwood Park. It is the rabbi's custom to check in on homebound members of the congregation and bring them mishloach manot. During his Purim basket, "We were sitting and chatting about the change in tax laws, rather than leave a bequest, she wanted to give it to us now."

Of the gift, "In the coming year, members won't have to pay on top of dues," Rabbi Mark said. "The board also has to support our religious school to nonmembers of the shul." This is wonderful news for the synagogue, "If her generosity inspires others to give, we'll be in a much better place."

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complexion darkened, how he will become wormy, decayed, and putrid, the marks of his physical beauty gone, his corpse emitting an increasingly foul odor. . . when these and similar thoughts enter his mind, he will feel humbled and bowed. He will not become proud or arrogant, haughty or self-important." See Duties of the Heart, The Gate of Humility Chapter 5:3.

About 700 years after Bachya ibn Paquda, Ben Franklin (1706-1790), identified 12 virtues or character traits as part of an ethical code, which held both individual improvement and contributing to the greater good of society as goals. Franklin added a 13th virtue of humility to his 12 character traits when one Quaker friend helped him realize he was too proud. It is recounted in J.A. Walwik's book Rewarding Virtue (Hamilton Books, N.Y. 2008) that Franklin's excessive pride came across as overbearing and insolent in conversations.

Franklin embarked on his own Mussar practice, albeit with a different name, to work on the proper balance of humility, by striving to avoid the use of the words "certainly" and "undoubtedly"

in conversations, and substitute them with words like "I conceive," "I apprehend," "I imagine," or "it appears to me." Furthermore, when someone asserted something Franklin thought was error, Franklin would strive to "deny himself the pleasure" of contradicting the person abruptly, and instead be more gentle in his response to the other. Franklin admitted that pride was difficult to subdue.

I have found that the fleeting moment of gratification and feeling the sheer power of expressing the comment containing too much ego, is often-times followed by extended, sustained periods of sadness, remorse, and regret.

Let's pray together that this Shavuot and beyond we venture to access this powerful telescope of Mussar character development, to help us peer into our own depths, to help us become more aware, and to help us attain our proper balance of humility. Hopefully our Mussar practice will provide us with practical insights to facilitate attaining our own inner sense of peace and improve our relationships with others, by giving us a practical roadmap and tools to strive every day to be the best mensches we can be.

Government

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(Kachol-Lavan) party. Here, the promises are fewer than five ministries and various ministries. Blue and White representative Prina Taubman, the first Ethiopian woman to sit in the Knesset, promised a renewed effort to bring the diaspora from Ethiopia to Israel if she would join the government. Haaretz columnist Bradley Burston wrote that it was a desperate Netanyahu sent word to MK Gadi Yevarkan that if the Ethiopian minister agreed to desert his centrist opposition party and become the deciding 61st vote in a new Bibi-led government, the prime minister would name him Immigrant Absorption Minister. Yevarkan was clear: Agree to the thousands of family members – some of whom waited decades in Ethiopia for rescue to remain as hostages to a government hostile to their plight. Sure that his far right-wing would "stick with him" Bibi even offered immunity, in an appeal to Gadeer Mreeh, a member from Kachol Lavan, to change the constitutional law that Netanyahu had championed recently guided to passage.

The government and stewardship of the government had to be the trading of baseball cards in the play. Bibi was buying what Bibi was selling. At 11:29, and the clock was running out. Netanyahu had only three hours left if he was to form his government, and none of his gambits were working. At the clock reached midnight, the law of the power President Rivlin to assign another minister. Bibi's former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, the centrist Kachol-Lavan list, a chance to form a government. If Gantz would succeed, after 10 long years in Netanyahu would no longer be prime minister. Bibi would no longer be in any position to shield Netanyahu from the long arm of the law. He finally would be freed.

Only one option left, so the right-wing and centrist parties combined to dissolve the 21st Knesset, and call for a new election.

after only a month and a half, and to make a snap election necessary.

In another controversial decision, Mandelblit acceded to a request by Bibi's legal team to defer the pre-indictment hearing until October, giving Netanyahu a potential second bite at the immunity apple.

Whether he gets that bite or not largely will be decided by the Israeli electorate. A number of interesting questions now arise – questions that won't have answers until after the votes in the new election are counted. But those questions form the challenges for Likud and Bibi.

What will happen to the sponsors and voters for slates that failed to breach the 3.25 percent vote threshold? Israelis do not vote for candidates in Knesset elections. They vote for party-sponsored lists. The number of representatives selected from each list is determined directly by the percentage of the total vote each list receives. Election rules establish that a list must receive at least 3.25 percent of the total vote. Lists that fail to reach that threshold are denied representation; the votes cast for those lists are discarded and the Knesset seats are reallocated. A large number of lists running in the last election failed to reach that threshold, but three came close. They controlled a significant number of votes, votes that if directed elsewhere could change the results of the future election drastically.

The largest of these lists, which garnered about 139,000 votes, just narrowly missing the threshold, was a right-wing party led by two ambitious politicians, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked. Will these politicians run their list a second time or will they try to merge with another group? Bennett and Shaked sought to appeal to a modern Orthodox and secular right-wing constituency – a similar voter demographic to Likud's supporters. Those voters might favor Lieberman and his views about military service. But they also might want to support a right-wing government generally.

Will Netanyahu court their favor during the four months until the next elections? What can he offer them to secure their votes and strengthen his ability to stay in power?

The second party that failed to earn even one seat in the Knesset was a right-wing libertarian party with a program of West Bank annexation and recreational drug decriminalization. Will it run again? If not, which lists will

its 118,000 voters support?

The third list is a centrist party led by Orly Levy, a daughter of the late Likud politician David Levy. Will its roughly 75,000 voters support the Likud or the centrist Kachol-Lavan list? Will Netanyahu try to create a marriage of convenience with either or both of these parties as well?

Will Arab voter turnout change? The April election featured a low turnout driven by disaffection, disunity among Israeli Arab politicians, and a blatant campaign of Arab voter intimidation. But there was an active debate about electoral participation among Arab Israelis. If Arab voter turnout is materially higher, election results could be affected significantly.

Will secular right-wing voters support or reject Avigdor Lieberman? Bibi has blasted Lieberman as a "leftist" for his refusal to support the formation of a Netanyahu-led government. Anyone who knows anything about Lieberman will find this charge laughable. Lieberman supported the dissolution of the Knesset rather than permit President Rivlin from passing the authority to form a government to another party, and he is on record as saying he will not support the formation of a government under Gantz after September's election. But he has not ruled out joining in a coalition with Gantz and the Kachol-Lavan party at any time. Lieberman likely is looking to a post-Netanyahu future, and he sees himself as playing a prominent role in that future. In any case, early indications are Lieberman's constituency supports his stand. Early polls show his list gaining, not losing representation.

Finally, how will the votes of the electorate reflect the corruption charges, the efforts to manipulate press coverage, and the attempt to evade accountability through the proposed shield law unchecked by Court review? More than Bibi's future hangs in the balance.

Recently, we have witnessed a broad assault on democracy and the rule of law, an epidemic now raging in Western democracies. Like the measles, this epidemic was thought to be contained, but it requires the inoculation of transparency and civic involvement in every generation. Let us hope that Israel's voting public is sufficiently inoculated to thwart the potential of an immunity bill that would threaten the rule of law and offer new playgrounds for the corrupt.