Rosh Hashana-5778 Rabbi Nina H Mandel

Judaism can be understood as an ideological system. It conveys ideas about God, the world, and the people who inhabit it, and those ideas are formulated into values and direct action and feeling. These, in turn, shape our society and our individual responsibility to one another. During this Holy Day period, perhaps more than any other time, we are asked in the Jewish tradition, to examine our how we put our values into action and feelings. We then can evaluate how we are doing—do our actions and feelings match our values? If not, in which areas do we need to improve, and finally, how do we go about doing that.

And our tradition emphasizes the importance of doing this kind of work both for ourselves and for our world. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander teaches: As individuals, each of us is responsible for the unique purpose for which we are created. Our actions performed in fulfillment of that specific purpose influence the entire world. (*Rinas Chaim*) In our era of turmoil and anxiety, I often get asked the question: What can I do to help? In addition the the many actions we can take out in the world, in the end, we have to live with ourselves. Putting time and energy into our spiritual, physical, and psychological well-being allows us to more clearly assess and respond to the big and little challenges we encounter.

This is a difficult task, which is why we are asked to do it again and again each year. As mere human beings, we have a tendency to get overwhelmed and distracted by the things that get in the way of our achieving our goals.

Fortunately, the traditions of Judaism give us a roadmap of how to do that individual and communal work that helps us match values with actions and feelings.

Translating values into direct action is relatively straightforward: we have the mitzvot, the commandments inspired by the Torah which give us the rules, and the halakha, the Jewish law expanded on in the Talmud up until today, which give us the how-to of the rules. But, there is often a difference between what Jewish tradition teaches and what individual Jewish people do. That’s why it is helpful to remember that we are also encouraged to recognize the metaphoric aspect to Jewish law. This allows us to understand the underlying value of a law, not just its execution. That’s how Jewish law evolves and adapts to new or unexpected changes in our world.

When we understand that Kashrut is part of a value system that asks us to treat our bodies, and what we put into them, as holy, we might incorporate things like responsible farming, clean eating, and fair trade into our definition of what it means to keep kosher.

As I discussed last night, translating values into feelings is a little more complex. And yet, managing our feelings so that we can act in balanced and appropriate ways, is essential for us to elevate our actions to their best possible heights. For help in doing that, we often look to our liturgy, our prayer tradition, and to the examples of individuals whom the rabbis hold up as worthy.

For example, the High Holy Day liturgy includes what is called the 13 attributes of God. It is actually a verse from the Torah that is put into a prayer setting. These attributes include mercy, patience, kindness, forgiveness, and forbearance, as well as eight others. We recite them during this period when we are seeking atonement, in part as a reassurance of the forgiving nature of God, and to remind us that we ourselves should strive to be godly in these same ways.

In our Haftarah reading today, we hear about Hannah, who goes to the Temple to pray for a son. She prays so fervently that, even though her words are very quiet, her mouth is moving, so she appears to be mumbling. When Eli, the High Priest, sees her, he assumes she is drunk and yells at her to move on. When she explains herself, he tells her that her prayers will be answered, and they are.

For the rabbinic sages, Hannah becomes the model for the Amidah prayer. Rashi says that Hannah is speaking the language of devotion: both private and discernable. To engage in prayer like the matriarch Hannah, is to channel the feelings of devotion, longing, and gratitude into our worship. And if we do the work asked of us in preparation for Rosh Hashana, the things for which we express our longing, devotion, and gratitude, are the ones that will be truly fulfilling.

In talking about the meaning of the books of life and death in which we are inscribed on Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler reminds us that these categories refer to being *spiritually* alive or dead, and that we are inscribed according to our deeds. He writes: “A person who wants worthless things, ‘dead’ things, is, in a deeper sense, dead himself. Only one who desires the things of the spirit is truly alive.” (Strive for Truth, vol 4)

Another Jewish guide for applying values to feelings comes from a category the Rabbis call the *middot*. Meaning *measures* in Hebrew, the middot are the inner character traits with which each of us is endowed at birth. While there is no one, definitive, list of these middot, they include things like truth, humility, diligence, order, and tranquility; as well as anger, jealousy, and greed. What sets us apart from one another is the extent to which we cultivate these traits and manifest them positively in our feelings and actions. The rabbis taught that each of us, in our deepest core, are inherently holy and “whole” or complete.

But each of us also struggles with extremes of emotions, desires, and bad habits that skew our innate middot, preventing us from fully flourishing.

Take the middah of patience. We all know what impatience looks like in ourselves: getting angry, rushing carelessly, ignoring details, lashing out at others, or giving up. These are examples of a deficit of the character trait of patience. But there is also the other extreme, when patience becomes an excuse for inaction and we are unable to find the motivation necessary to do what would be best for us and those around us. As I stated last night, the real work is figuring out how to find a balance so that we have just enough patience to be effective and productive, but just enough impatience to be able to identify our priorities and get them done efficiently.

Similarly with anger, we can be so angry that we are incapable of anything but destruction, but real change and action often comes from the anger we feel at an unjust condition.

So how do we recognize and balance our own middot? As early as the 10th century, in Babylonia, one of the places the Rabbis found guidance is in the book of Proverbs in the verses: *(1:8) “Hear, my child, the instructions of your father and Torah of your mother,”* and *(15:32): “He who rejects instruction despises his life, but he who pays attention to reproof, acquires sense.”*

The word used for “instruction” is *mussar*, which in the biblical and spiritual context is translated as “discipline,” and it also shares the root of the same word Rashi used for devotion when he described Hannah’s prayer. In modern Hebrew, mussar means “ethics.” It is from all these meanings that the spiritual practice known as Mussar is developed.

Originally, Mussar was an introspective endeavor, practiced privately by those who sought to sharpen their middot and their personal devotions. But in the mid-1800s in Lithuania, an Orthodox rabbi, Yisrael Lipkin, more commonly known by the name of the yeshiva in which he studied, as Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, changed that. Recognizing that the modern world of nationalism, immigration, and opportunities for secularization, presented Jews with unprecedented spiritual challenges, and he feared that growing spiritual isolation would weaken us and create what he called the “solitary human heart.” He laid out a Mussar Movement which encouraged individuals to rigorously strengthen their middot, their spiritual cores, in order to prepare them to face modern-day challenges.

His followers, who brought this movement to Jewish communities around Europe and North America, earned the reputation of being strict task masters. Their students were required to engage in rigorous self-examination of their actions, and they were often harshly scrutinized.

This reputation obscured much of the original intent of the Mussar Movement, which was to enable people to find the wholeness and holiness which they inherently possess.

In recent years, rabbis and Jewish spiritual seekers have revisited and revived the Mussar Movement and its original purpose. I’m talking about this today because in November, I will be offering a 10-session Mussar class here at the synagogue, and I think it might be of interest to many of you.

I first became aware of the contemporary iteration of Mussar through a few of my most respected senior rabbinic colleagues. As they shared what they were teaching and learning, I was most impressed by the idea that it offers is a combination of spiritual reflection and practical exercises to help you work through it. I know that my own middah of consistency is helped enormously by having assignments and guidelines to help me stay on track.

Last winter I had the opportunity to go to a training for rabbis being hosted by an organization called the Mussar Institute, to learn about Mussar practice, and be trained to lead the class. I was surprised that this practice of Mussar jibed so well with mindfulness, another spiritual practice I have been engaging in lately.

A mindfulness practice teaches you to slow down and pay attention to the things you are most likely to do by rote, whether that is eating or talking or even breathing. For me, it works in the same way that saying blessings throughout the day does. It helps me to be intentional in my actions and to connect to the gratitude I feel at being able to do them.

Mussar asks us to be equally mindful and provides a format in which to do so. Broadly, the curriculum is taken from our individual lives. By identifying the things which repeatedly challenge us, as well as our strengths, we are ideally able to bring about a balance that will help us act in the world in the most positive way and to our unique, highest potential.

Let’s go back to the middah of patience. A typical mussar exercise might go something like this: Take a moment and think about someone who habitually tries your patience. Now think of your last interaction with that person and how you felt before during and after. It probably was not pleasant, perhaps it made you unable to interact with that person. Maybe you remained irritated even after the interaction ended, and that threw you off for a greater part of the day. It’s hard to make someone else be easier to tolerate, but we can develop ways to help ourselves breakthrough the impatience so that we don’t have to carry the burden of emotions that come along with it.

Being a patient person means seeing the whole picture, the parts we like and parts we don’t like. We might not like the person we are dealing with or a specific situation, but we can learn to identify that moment when the impatience caused by the encounter begins to affect our behavior and interfere or distract us. In that way we can stop the behavior early, preventing further distress. A balanced practice of the middah, the character trait, of patience, encourages us to calmly confront every situation and navigate all that life brings us.

The 20th century psychiatrist, neurologist, and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl writes this: “Personal transformation requires developing the capacity to notice and expand the space between stimulus and reaction, and to respond from a place of wisdom, not react from a place of pain.”

In the language of Mussar, that capacity to notice is cultivated in the recognition of what is called the point of “*Bechira*”, or choice. What we are trying to recognize is that moment when we make the choice to act in one way or another. Am I going to snap at the person trying my patience or am I going to take a deep breath and count to 10 to remind myself to calm down? Am I going to be too passive and avoid conflict, or am I going to speak up for what I believe in?

It is important for us to recognize that we do have a choice, and if we don’t choose the most productive path one time, we will probably have the opportunity to do so the next.

I want to close with a quote by Maimonides about why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana: Even though the blowing of the *shofar* is a Biblical decree, there is a hint in it as if to say, ‘Wake up, wake up, you sleepers from your sleep, and awake you slumberers from your slumber. Search your deeds, repent, and remember your Creator.’…Look to your souls, mend your ways and your deeds.”

May the sound of the shofar this year inspire each of us to look within ourselves, so that we can best bring wholeness and holiness to our world.