

The Importance of Mussar & Self Improvement

What happens when you go back to a place where the very culture is the anti-thesis of Torah? We want to be a lawyer, you want to be a ben torah that happens to be a lawyer. In America, we are not talking about things that have obvious dangers to it. We're talking about even jobs. Even in places where you think you're safe, you're really not. We don't understand how dangerous it is, what threat it is to being a ben torah, to our avodat Hashem. How can a guy win? How can you go back and be strong and keep the spiritual level? A person has to have a half hour of mussar every day. What does that mean? What is mussar? People have a strong reaction to mussar. For some it's very positive, for some it's a turn-off. It's not for me. But how could you not have mussar? How could you not talk about having a passion for G-d? The Vilna Gaon asked the Dubne Maggid to give him mussar. Many people run away from mussar. How do we do mussar? What is it? Mussar went under many transformations. It started by R' Yisroel Salanter and his 3 students the Alter of Kelm, R' Itzele Peterberger and R' Naftali Amsterdam (a walking kiruv machine- anyone that met him wanted to become religious, the were so impressed even non-jewish people would think he was an angel). There were people that were against mussar, in the Voluzhn Yeshiva they didn't allow mussar. Some people took it to the biggest extreme. Many rosh yeshivas thought it wasn't healthy. But mussar has changed, today there is no yeshiva without mussar. Yeshiva is a place with spiritual growth and there has to be mussar. Someone that wants to change himself without mussar, is like a person who wants to see but has no eyes, perosn who wants to hear but has no ears, it's impossible.

If you don't have mussar, you're not going to grow. Rav Wolbe says relationship between halacha and mussar is the relationship between an architect and a builder and a music composer and a conductor. Halacha is the law, mussar is the ability to implement that law. At the center of the halachic system is the mitzva, at the center of the mussar system is the man. That is the basic difference between halacha and mussar. You need both. You have the plans to build the building so how are you going to build it? In regard to mussar, in halacha, halacha is the blueprint of how to live life. The purpose of mussar, is that Torah needs to be a fire, it's not just wisdom. If your not looking to grow in the relationship with G-d, the Torah that you're learning is worthless. Mussar transform it into a fire, a system of living. Mussar bridges between the mind and the heart. That's the furthest distance. The

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only way to get something from your mind to your heart is mussar. Mussar is supposed to take away the distorted glasses of the yetzer hara. We have to recognize the connection we have to Hashem through mussar. A medresh in tehillim, “When a person judges themselves in this world, you make it seriously, then Hashem doesn’t need to judge you.” A person who constantly judges himself, Hashem doesn’t need to judge him. Cheshbon Hanefesh is opening up your heart. The purpose of Torah is to bring a person to cheshbon hanefesh. We don’t think, that’s the source of all sin. We don’t contemplate, focus and meditate what our relationship with G-d is. The introduction to Mesilas Yesharim says (Ramchal was a screen/playwriter. People were afraid of him. They couldn’t understand him. He understand human nature very well.) “I’m not telling you anything new in this book, because it’s so obvious, the benefit of the book is to read it many times.” Just to refocus on reality, to remember what life is really about. How can you read the first perek and be the same person? It tells us it’s going to be hard. You’re going to have to fight, to push.

Mussar’s about reminding, recognizing reality. A person can finish shas, and he could be an am haaretz. People learn torah but it just doesn’t affect them. Mussar, is a step by step process. Mussar is supposed to take a person and make them into a ben torah. There has to be effort in mussar. The essence of Torah is about toiling, not knowing it. Yegiah in mussar is just like in Torah. Mussar is not just talking a mussar book and just reading it like any other book. Your lips have to be raging with fire, a passion, a fervor, when you learn mussar. It’s only going to happen with an excitement. Scream it to yourself. “Kol asmosai tormarna” All my limbs scream out to G-d. Every word in the Mesilas Yesharim is telling you a message. We have to be very careful how we learn mussar. Don’t overlook the important messages. Another important thing is to have a chavrusa. Every night, try to review what you did in that day. It’s better to do it with a friend that really knows you. Go over a mussar shmooze with a chavrusa. Take the words and apply them to yourself. Let the words get into you. The only way to be able to survive is with the half hour of mussar. Life as a frum jew doesn’t only mean learning torah, going to yeshiva, going to minyan. You should have a passion of striving and growing every day of your life. The day you stop growing is the day your dead. The Gemara in Berachot says that reshaim are dead in their own lives. Life is a battle for growth, mussar replenishes it. That’s why it has to be passionate. There will be times in your life where you will not have time to learn. It’s going to be difficult. Be always have to make time for mussar. Remind ourselves of who we are, we’re are going and how we will get there. People in America just don’t think; whats my direction in life, why am I doing what I’m doing? Don’t be one of the walking dead who stops growing. Specifically with mussar,

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questioning yourself, those are the things that will keep us going. Be'ezrat Hashem, wish should remember this and go higher and higher every day.