

Selichot – Dallas – September 2008

**“Repairing the World, Repairing Our Selves”**

a talk by Alan Morinis

It is my pleasure to be able to thank Rabbi Stern, Rabbi Hayon and Nancy Rivin for having me here to share some holy time with you this Shabbat.

Friday evening is not the time for long talks. The week has been tiring for all of us, as it seems every week is nowadays. For the same reason, I have also learned from experience not to teach meditation on Friday evening. In Hebrew, a woodpecker is a *nakker* and that well-known phenomenon of Friday evening, the bobbing head, is known as “wood-peckering.”

We will have several sessions to learn together this weekend, and I want to introduce this series by telling you that I am a student of Mussar. A few years back, if I had made that statement in a Reform temple, it would likely have meant nothing to everyone. Now it means nothing only to some of us here tonight, and that is progress.

Mussar is a spiritual tradition within the Jewish world that can be dated back at least 1100 years, though the word *mussar* itself shows up in the Book of Proverbs, so it has roots right in Torah. When I began my own journey into this ancient way of guiding life that has evolved within the Jewish world, I, too, had never heard of Mussar. In fact, when I first stumbled over this term around 1997, and I did a web-search to see what I could find on the internet, I discovered that the most common use of the term *mussar* was as the plural of “mouse” in Norwegian. Every Euro-Disney site that was promoting to Norwegians was making a big deal of all the Mickey Mussars that there were to see at the theme park.

Mussar as a Jewish practice was that unknown then. But today, in contrast, if you are a subscriber of “Reform Judaism” magazine, you may have seen that the current issue has a whole special section devoted to Mussar.

I want to give you a sense of what Mussar is and what it offers by reflecting on a strong principle that exists within the Reform community with which I am sure you are all familiar, which is the notion of fixing the world, *tikkun olam*.

I'm informed that my talk here this evening was preceded in previous weeks by a sermon by Rabbi Stern entitled "Restoring Holiness to Our World." That was followed by a sermon by Rabbi Hayon called "Restoring Holiness to Our Communities." I didn't have the pleasure of attending either of those talks, since I live in Vancouver, British Columbia, but even from these titles we get a notion of the emphasis that is so well-established in the Reform community. What is new and exciting in these titles, from my perspective, is the focus on holiness (*kedusha*). I will have something to say on this topic myself a bit later. What I want to underscore here is that the focus on the world and on our communities that I hear in these titles reflects the long-standing emphasis in the Reform community on making a positive contribution to the world and the people around us.

*Tikkun olam* is an admirable and important principle to pursue in our lives. We have an obligation to try to make this world a better place. But if we simply swing into action based on that understanding of our responsibility to the world, we are very soon going to run into an obstacle. I can predict that, and I can even pinpoint for you what the obstacle will be: it will be yourself.

Everything we do in our lives involves our inner life. In Jewish terms, this means the "soul" but I don't want you to think that the soul is some sort of shadowy or mystical entity that lives within you, like a second self. In Hebrew, the word for soul that concerns us here is *nefesh*, and the *nefesh* is made up of all the traits of the inner life with which we are very familiar, though we might not have thought of them in terms of soul.

To illustrate, let me read to you from the Table of Contents of the book called "Orchot Tzaddikim" that was written in the 1500s and is a classic of Mussar. The chapter titles read:

Pride  
Humility

Shame  
Arrogance  
Love  
Hatred  
Mercy  
Cruelty  
Joy  
Worry  
Regret  
Anger

...and so on, to a total of 28 chapters.

All of the topics listed here, with which you are very familiar, are traits of the soul or, in Hebrew, *middot ha-nefesh*. You see, then, that you are actually very familiar with the soul already. In fact, you are an expert on the soul, because if this wasn't Shabbat I'd make a very large bet that every one of us in this room has experienced every one of the qualities of the inner life that *Orchot Tzaddikim* explains, from a Jewish perspective.

Is there anyone here who has not experienced anger? How about regret? Anyone here completely unfamiliar with worry?

Going back at least 11 centuries, we find in the Jewish world a concern for what is going on within your inner life. And I assure you, that when you read the chapter on anger or the one on worry written in this 16<sup>th</sup> century text, you'll recognize that it is addressing you and me. There is no such thing as 16<sup>th</sup> century worry. There is worry, and we all have it as have all our ancestors, since human nature has not changed in the few thousand years that our tradition has been developing.

I want to share one more nugget about Mussar and then we'll circle back to see how this ties into *tikkun olam*.

The Mussar teachers through the centuries tell us that we are all endowed with the full range of the inner traits. All of us have all of them. I'm on safe ground when I say that I know that every single person in this room experiences envy from time to time. And I know

you experience impatience. And I can equally say that there are times when you are generous. The conclusion that the Mussar masters have drawn after centuries of observation is that we all have the full range of inner traits.

But...and a very important “but” this is...we don’t all have these traits in the same measure. There people who are very impatient, and others who are seldom so. Generosity comes easily to some people and is difficult for others. And so it is with all the inner traits. We are all very good at some traits and there are some traits that we carry around with us as personal challenges. I call the inner traits that particularly challenge you “your personal spiritual curriculum.”

Take as an example impatience, about which I have a lot to say because if there is one thing I am an expert in, I am an expert in impatience.

Once, when driving with my daughter behind a slow driver, I got so frustrated and impatient that I passed on the shoulder on the right. My daughter looked at me and in reproof said only one word: “Mussarman,” she said.

That means that I know that impatience figures on my personal spiritual curriculum. One of the first steps on the way of Mussar is to identify those traits that sit on your personal spiritual curriculum. The personal traits that you know from your own experience keep throwing obstacles in your way are the ones I am talking about.

If you don’t find it easy to stick to the truth, and you tend to exaggerate, if not outright lie, then “truth” is a quality on your personal spiritual curriculum.

If you are impatient as me, and you can’t drive on the freeway without ending up fuming at the person in front of you who is driving so slowly that—My God!—they are actually doing the limit, and who is delaying your arrival by 15 seconds, then “impatience” is a quality on your personal spiritual curriculum.

If you tend to worry as a general state of mind, and no sooner does one thing resolve than your mind has latched on to the next

frightening possibility, then “worry” is a quality on your personal spiritual curriculum.

And so it goes through all the traits. Each of us is incomplete in some way, and it is in those very traits where we are challenged that we have the greatest potential to grow.

Why grow? Why become more complete? The answer was already given to you by Rabbi Stern and Rabbi Hayon when they addressed the issue of holiness. In Jewish thought, there is no higher aspiration in life than to elevate ourselves spiritually, to become the embodiment of holiness that is our potential. As the Torah says in summing up our human job description: *kedoshim tihiyu*—you shall be holy.

So you have been given those aspects of yourself that are incomplete, and this is your curriculum. If you recognize it as a curriculum, and you learn the lessons, then you will grow in the direction of completeness and holiness. If you don’t recognize it as a curriculum, and you don’t learn the lessons, then you will keep facing the same tests in your life, over and over again. This perspective corresponds to our experience.

This is the nature of the human journey. We are souls on a journey of growth, and we were put here in life in order to have the perfect environment in which to be tested, to learn and to grow. That’s why this world is not perfect, so it will challenge us.

This imperfect world is its own challenge, and as we know, we all carry the responsibility to try to improve the world through *tikkun olam*. Now, I am hoping that what I have been saying about each of us having a personal curriculum of inner traits in which we need to grow has resonated with you, because where I want to go now is to point out the strong and necessary connection that exists between *tikkun olam*, which means improving the world, and *tikkun ha’middot*, which means improving the traits of your inner life.

I’ll make a bold statement: you can’t do *tikkun olam* without at the same time taking on the task of *tikkun ha’middot*. You can’t do the work of fixing the world without at the same time taking on the task of improving the traits of your inner life—mastering your personal

spiritual curriculum.

Let me back up that statement with some illustrations.

Imagine a person who is very quick to anger. We all know people like that. You might be just that person. Now when a person who has an imbalance in the trait of anger goes out to fix the world, how is he or she going to behave? How quickly will he or she run into someone or something that triggers that anger? It's assured because that's who that person is. That's a trait of their soul. So instead of fixing the world, they rage at it and are so much more likely to break the very thing they set out to fix.

Or to take another example, let's consider a person whose desires have a very strong grip on them. So this lustful person sets out to improve the world, and what do you think happens? He or she has an affair with someone else on the committee and it is a scandal. There is even a name for such phenomenon, which is "in-the-sack-tivism."

And so it goes for every single inner trait. We can't escape the curriculum we have been handed. We take it everywhere with us, and we interact with our circumstances in ways that exactly express that inner curriculum. And so, to the extent that we are not yet whole internally, the work we do in the world will be incomplete and impeded. This is why the Talmud advises, "Polish yourself, and after that polish others" (Bava Metziah [quf]7a). We will not be able to succeed in our efforts at *tikkun olam* unless we recognize and take responsibility for *tikkun ha'middot* as well.

In fact, working on yourself can be seen to be an important form of *tikkun olam* itself. If you are an impatient person and you work to become more patient, then you have made the world a more patient world. If you are stingy and you cultivate generosity in yourself, then you make the world a more generous place. If you manage to reduce your worry by learning to trust, this becomes a more trusting world. And so on. The practice does not end with yourself, but it does start there. If you are going to make demands that the world be a certain way, you have a moral obligation to hold yourself to the same standard.

I'd like to conclude this evening by pointing out an association that we find between two Hebrew words that sums up the point I have been making. The path of Mussar is one of *tikkun ha'middot*, improving the inner traits. The goal on this path is to become more holy (*kadosh*) and we do that by taking steps to become more whole within ourselves. The Hebrew word for wholeness is *shlemut*. When we become more whole, as Mussar guides, then we become *shalem*.

The goal of *tikkun olam* is also *kedusha* (holiness) as we make effort to make the world a holier place. Another way of stating the goal of *tikkun olam* is that we are working toward peace, which is *shalom*.

*Shalem* and *shalom*. *Shalom* and *shalem*. *Tikkun olam* and *tikkun ha'middot*. Improving the world and improving ourselves. Hand in hand. Because we live in an outer world and also an inner world. And because there is no reality in paying attention to one and not the other. From a Jewish perspective, both are our gifts, both are our challenges, and both are our obligations.

Shabbat Shalom. I look forward to continuing to learn and grow together this weekend and beyond.

To find out more about Mussar and to reach Alan Morinis, visit [www.mussarinstitute.org](http://www.mussarinstitute.org)