A Responsible Life

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IRA F. STONE

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The Spiritual Path of Mussar
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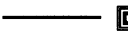

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"I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity. It is I who support all. The I always has one responsibility more than all the others."

—Emmanuel Levinas

In honor of our teacher, Rabbi Stone

Through his teachings and his actions, he has shown each of us the path toward a more conscious and compassionate life.

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In Memory of Emmanuel Levinas

The word I means *here I am,*
answering for everything and for everyone.

—*Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*

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I am always grateful for each breath of life vouchsafed me by the Holy One of Israel, *barukh hu u-varukh shemo.*

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Introduction

What prevents me from doing what is good? If I know what is right, if I espouse a set of values that describe the good, why is it so difficult to act on that knowledge and those values? Faced with a world where there is so much evil, what can I really do to make a difference? These are questions that most of us ask ourselves at one time or another. Sometimes we ask ourselves these questions because we are disappointed with how we've acted in a particular situation, such as when we've turned down an opportunity to help someone because it was inconvenient or uncomfortable (for example, passing a panhandler on the street). Sometimes these questions occur to us because our involvement in various activities suggests it ought to be easier, or perhaps more natural, for us to be the kind of people we want to be—and yet we still seem to fall short of our aspirations, never fully living up to the ideals enshrined in our deepest values. For example, while working in a hospital or nursing home, we might feel resentful when a patient or resident makes a demand upon us. Or we may be very involved in the life of our religious community, and yet still experience an unsettling "disconnect" between the rituals we practice and the texts we learn, on the one hand, and the people we'd like to be, whose actions exemplify the values we hold dear, on the other hand.

This is neither a new or unusual phenomenon. It is not

unusual in that the compromises we make with our ideals are compromises that people make all the time. It is not new in that, at least within the Jewish tradition, an entire literature and school of thought has addressed these questions before us. Both that literature and that movement are called Mussar. "Mussar" means "correction," or "instruction" in the sense of correction (like the English word "discipline," which refers not only to corrective measures but more generally to the pedagogic objectives the corrections seek to achieve). However, "Mussar" has come to signify moral education more generally, and it is the simple Hebrew word for ethics and morals. As a literature, Mussar can be said to extend back to the exhortations of the biblical prophets and biblical wisdom literature (such as the Book of Proverbs). More specifically, it describes a genre of spiritual-ethical exhortation that emerged in the tenth century and has continued to grow to our own time. The Mussar movement developed primarily in Lithuania in the second half of the nineteenth century. Founded by Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant, it sought to explore the composition of the human soul and provide a series of techniques to help minimize the "disconnect" so often experienced between our actions and our ideals.

If the questions with which we began resonate for us, then Mussar can provide a structure for beginning to address them. It demands that our day-to-day actions be suffused with a concern for doing the good. It also demands that the good that we do be grounded in communal norms and obligations, rather than left to the whims of the individual. Mussar grows out of the soil of Jewish experience. It was, and continues to be, shaped by the central pillars of Jewish consciousness: Torah and *mitzvot*. Mussar takes for granted immersion in Torah and is, at its core, inseparable from this traditional Jewish context. There is much that one who does not share these commitments can learn from the theory and practice of Mussar, but it will be most meaningful to the committed Jew.

Different people will be enriched by Mussar in different ways. It might deepen one person's experience of Jewish ritual, challenging them to uncover the values at the core of that ritual. It might draw another person closer to an understanding of the purpose of Jewish ritual, challenging the notion that the limits of one's responsibility are defined by each of us for ourselves. This book is intended for all such seekers.

I first became interested in Mussar as a beginning rabbinic student. I had come to the seminary after a short but intense career as a social activist. Called to conscience by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, I worked for a time in that movement, specifically agitating for fair housing policies in New York City. Later I became active in the student movements of the time and was a participant in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. During this time and prior to enrolling in the Seminary I had been a street outreach worker among teenage drug abusers. The concern to carry my social consciousness into the fabric of my religious commitments was self-evident to me. This concern deepened as I soon learned that the two commitments did not always go together. I learned that the beauty of the ritual practice I had come to love was often seen as an end in itself, rather than as a context for doing good. My discovery of Mussar was both discouraging and encouraging. It was discouraging, in that it meant that *mitzvot* (namely, Jewish religious observance) and *middot* (ethical self-discipline) did not always go together. It was encouraging, in that it provided a methodology within the tradition for addressing this fact.

Integrating Mussar theory and practice into my life and my religious observance was impeded by the fact that the traditional Mussar texts grew out of a Jewish theology that was problematic for me. The ideas that these texts espoused about God, reward and punishment, life after death—not to mention their essentially fundamentalist view of sacred Scripture—were at odds with my post-

Holocaust, post-Enlightenment sensibilities. But Mussar remained in the back of my mind as a spiritual option that I wanted to explore.

Emmanuel Levinas: A Modern Jewish Thinker

I spent a great deal of my intellectual energy over the course of the next twenty years as a rabbi in two congregations trying to find a theology that was both compelling in itself for a post-Holocaust, post-Enlightenment Jew and would also support a practice modeled on Mussar teachings. The culmination of that search for me was the discovery of the work of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's thought has only recently entered into the world of the rabbinic seminary, and still rather marginally—even as his import as a thinker has become widely celebrated in the academic world. Levinas, who came from Lithuania and lived his early years in the shadow of the height of the Mussar movement's influence over Lithuanian Jewry, was born in Kovno in 1906. His parents were "enlightened" Jews of the time. His father was a bookseller and Levinas was given the best secular education available to a Jew at the time. He was privately tutored in Jewish studies and cites Bible and Hebrew as having constituted the core of his Jewish education. Levinas left Lithuania in 1923 in order to study in Strasbourg, France. He never returned. In 1928 he became a student of two of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Under their influence, and in critical dialogue with them, Levinas began to create his own philosophic system in the late 1930s.

Tragically, Levinas spent the war years as a French prisoner of war in a Nazi labor camp, while his wife and infant daughter were hidden in a French monastery. Both his wife's and his own parents,

and the rest of their extended family in Lithuania, were murdered. The profound effect of these events found powerful expression in his later writings, which explored the philosophical roots of political totalitarianism.

After the war Levinas continued to develop his earlier thought with renewed urgency. At the same time he turned to a serious study of Talmud. While he had not studied Talmud as a youngster, he began to study it with a rather unique and mysterious figure in post-war France called Monsieur Shoshani. Monsieur Shoshani has been described in more detail by Elie Wiesel in his autobiography, *All the Rivers Run to the Sea.* Levinas integrated insights from his philosophical work into his talmudic studies and vice versa. In addition to publishing a number of the most demanding and important works of twentieth-century philosophy, Levinas also published a series of talmudic commentaries as well as important essays on other areas of Jewish thought. Full descriptions of either his philosophy or his Jewish writings are beyond the scope of this book. However, the relevance of Levinas's ideas to my growing interest in Mussar is not.

Levinas's thought emphasizes not the primacy of the self, but the primacy of the other—that is, other human beings. He taught that the self comes into existence by virtue of the other; therefore, the self comes into being indebted to the other. This other, the other person, is presented to the individual through a face-to-face encounter that commands a response in action. For Levinas, this face-to-face encounter shatters the self-containedness or insularity of the self. Therefore a philosophy that begins with this intersubjective encounter can shatter the totalitarianism implicit in Western philosophy. In other words, questions of ethics precede questions of being. To put it another way, the question "What is being?" is asked only after we ask the question "What is my responsibility in being?" Western philosophy has been nearly obsessed with the

question of being, while relegating the question of ethics to a secondary role. Levinas strongly suggests that the political atrocities of the last century derive from this misplaced emphasis. More importantly, an ethics that begins by recognizing our obligations to others as prior even to those obligations we have to ourselves suggested to me the same radical power I had always suspected in Mussar.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy has been formative for my own theology. For Levinas, God is able to re-enter the post-Holocaust discourse as a command. For him, it is blasphemous to conceive of a God limited to the arena of being—that is, the world that is comprehensible to us in thought and language. Worse, any attempt to foist onto God the responsibility for the vicissitudes of our lives—let alone the culpability for the tragic events of the twentieth century—is an even more blasphemous evasion of our own responsibility. The grandeur of Jewish thought thus lies in its *ḥutzpah* in assigning responsibility for others to humans, both individually and collectively. God, for Levinas, is not a presence but an absence. That absence is not simply emptiness, but rather a trace of God—God's "back," if you will, alluding to Exodus 34:6, a favorite biblical passage for Levinas. That text describes the inability of Moses (and hence of any human being) to "see" (i.e., to comprehend) God. Instead, God offers to Moses a vision of God's back in passing: "Adonai passed by before him and proclaimed: Adonai, Adonai, mighty, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in love and truth, keeping truth to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty . . ." Levinas locates this trace of God on the face of the other person. The face of the other is not the face of God, but rather it is the place of the *trace* of God's having passed by, thereby leaving us responsible. For Levinas, to be "chosen" or "commanded," two essential Jewish theological terms, means to recognize and act on this commanded responsibility vis-à-vis the other person.

This philosophic program, with its emphasis on responsibility for the other, turned my attention back to Mussar with a clearer understanding of what I could mean when I used words like "God" or "*mitzvah*."

As a result of finding a theological comfort zone by way of Levinas's philosophy, I was able to turn back to Mussar texts and begin to envision a contemporary Mussar practice. The writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter were a starting-point, as were other classical Mussar texts that preceded the Mussar movement per se. Most important in this regard is *Mesillat Yesharim* by Rabbi Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto. These and other Mussar texts will figure in our description of both the theory and practice of contemporary Mussar. However, one set of writings stands out for its impact on the development of my thinking and practice of Mussar. That is the work *Ḥokhmah U-Mussar* by Rabbi Simḥa Zissel Braude of Kelm, who was one of the three primary students of Rav Yisrael Salanter, each of whom established a school of Mussar: Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel founded the Slobadka school, Rabbi Joseph Yozel Hurwitz founded the Navaradock school, and Rabbi Simḥa Zissel Braude founded the Kelm school. These were all traditional *yeshivot,* with the usual Torah curriculum, but they also included an emphasis on Mussar. Each was a "school" in that it followed the particular philosophic and pedagogic principles of its founder, although all were ultimately based on the ideas of Rav Yisrael Salanter.

Philosophy of Mussar

Rav Yisrael Salanter was the founder of the Mussar movement in the nineteenth century and several of his key ideas have been crucial for the development of my own thought. First and foremost, Salanter believed that Mussar—the quest for ethical perfection—is

a process. In addition, he taught that this process encounters opposition from our personalities, since the very traits that are required to establish our individual identities impede this quest. Therefore, Salanter's educational goal is to transform personality or human nature. Critical to Salanter's Mussar is the idea that service to and responsibility for other human beings is the single most important human value.

As radical as the theory of Mussar that Rabbi Salanter propounded was, its method was considered even more radical. He dared, first of all, to raise the study of traditional Mussar texts (such as the tenth-century *Duties of the Heart* and the eighteenth-century *Path of the Upright*) to a level just below that of the study of Talmud. In Jewish Lithuania this was revolutionary. Texts that had been regarded as ancillary, exhortative, and useful only to the weak-minded were raised to the highest imaginable levels on the basis of the fact that the message of these texts had not yet been mastered by even accomplished scholars. Mussar texts, according to Salanter, were to be studied daily just as legal texts were: in groups, aloud, and with passion and intensity. Rav Salanter used the methods that had succeeded so well in developing a culture of extraordinary erudition in attempting to create a culture of equally extraordinary ethical behavior.

However, since the goal was to transform behavior, more was necessary than simply book-learning. Behavior had to be monitored, and the impediments to changing behavior that are deeply rooted in people's personalities had to be addressed. Salanter's method was based on an implicit understanding of the forces "unconsciously" at work on human beings; just as startling as Freud's theory was, Salanter's method also required, like Freud, a type of therapeutic talking. This was to include first a talking to oneself, and then the dynamics of what can only be called group analysis. Salanter called for students to sequester themselves for a period of time every day,

and to use this time to review (aloud and passionately) the values found in the Mussar texts. Students were to utilize a behavioral checklist with which to measure their progress or lack thereof. In addition, Salanter created Mussar groups in which individuals would gently point out ethical failures among the members and then, just as gently, help them find the strength to change such behaviors. The most important method of correction was called *hitpa'alut*. This means "self-work" and refers to a process by which the student would search through traditional texts for statements that addressed the particular character trait being worked on. The student was urged to memorize such statements and to have them at hand when confronting situations where the character trait was in play. If, for example, I were tempted to falsely value myself and lose sight of the ethical importance of humility, then I should repeat to myself a statement such as this one from Pirke Avot: "Whoever seeks fame, destroys one's own name." This could remind me (or, more importantly, my subconscious mind) of all the hard work and difficult introspection in which I had already engaged, in order to come to terms with my real worth in the world and leave behind the need for false worth. To put it simply, Salanter believed that the process of transforming ourselves into ethical, responsible beings was too difficult and too important to leave to happenstance. It required active effort.

Simḥa Zissel and the Mussar Movement

Simḥa Zissel was born into a prominent rabbinic family in Kelm in 1829, and he received a thorough traditional education in the Lithuanian mode—and, uncharacteristically, a substantial general education as well. His Jewish education consisted of Bible studies as a boy, followed primarily by Talmud studies. The program of

study most prevalent in Lithuanian *yeshivot* at that time included mastering Jewish legal norms and acquiring the skills for making halakhic (i.e., rabbinic legal) decisions, but it also focused intensely on the skills to enable the student to engage in the minute dialectic known as *pilpul*. Rav Simḥa was also, no doubt, initiated into the secrets of Kabbalah—not the ecstatic mysticism of the Ḥasidim, but the contemplative mystical tradition of the Gaon of Vilna and Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin.

Recognized early as a gifted student, Simḥa Zissel left his own teachers and their rigorous program of study to investigate the growing popularity of Rav Yisrael Salanter and his Mussar teaching. Initially he approached this new movement skeptically, or so he later claimed, but upon hearing Salanter speak he decided to stay the year studying with him. He never left the movement, becoming a life-long adherent of Mussar. Simḥa Zissel's embrace of Mussar study must have mirrored the same factors that attracted so many other young Torah students to the Mussar movement. Buffeted by the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) among the Jews of Russia, he must have been sympathetic to the enlighteners' critique that *pilpul* and rote observance of Jewish law had dried the soul of Jewish culture. Certainly, a spiritually sensitive young man might have viewed the burgher Jewish establishment with some suspicion. In any case, Salanter's message of ethical renewal captivated Simḥa Zissel, who was soon to become one of its ablest spokesmen. Moreover, he would become a prime architect of its pedagogy, with its revolutionary emphasis on general education in addition to Mussar and Torah.

The relationship between Yisrael Salanter and Simḥa Zissel soon flourished. Simḥa Zissel became one of Salanter's closest confidants. Salanter left Russia in 1857 for Prussia—at first for health reasons, but he eventually settled there to continue building his movement. Simḥa Zissel, however, remained to establish the insti-

tutional framework to perpetuate Salanter's ideas and methods. Simḥa Zissel's outstanding administrative skills combined with his Torah scholarship, kabbalistic wisdom, familiarity with general education, and extraordinary personal ethical qualities—his *menschlikheit*—enabled him to reach beyond his teacher's modest beginnings in establishing a Mussar school.

Initially, Rav Simḥa Zissel established Mussar houses in both Kovno and Vilna. These were primarily for lay people, both adult men and women, and laid the foundation for the widespread popular success of the movement. He based his program on the ideas originally put forward by Rav Salanter: that one's education ought to include the study of Talmud, the study of Mussar texts with passionate intensity, the use of peer-groups to scrutinize and improve the student's ethical posture, and a general educational program. For Rav Salanter, the openness to secular education was considered necessary in order to understand and refute the adherents of the *Haskalah*. However, Rav Simḥa Zissel went even further, considering all knowledge (even of secular subjects) to be sacred and therefore appropriate for Jews to study. His outlook more closely resembled the view of the *Haskalah* itself. He believed that knowledge of the workings of the world, particularly of science, would result in a heightened appreciation of God's handiwork—and such intellectual pursuits were therefore to be encouraged. The fact that he quotes Aristotle in his own work indicates that the scope of this education went beyond the merely practical. This was a significant shift from the accepted Orthodoxy of his time.

In 1874, Rabbi Simḥa Zissel returned to Kelm after many years in Kovno and established a *yeshiva* there called Bet Ha-talmud. The *yeshiva* moved from Kelm to nearby Grobin in 1876 because of growing opposition from the Kelm Jewish establishment to Rav Simḥa Zissel's innovations, in both the curriculum and in religious practice. On Shabbat, for example, contrary to traditional Jewish

practice, the *yeshiva* community would conclude the morning service *(Shaḥarit)* and take their lunch before returning for the additional *(Musaf)* service, followed by a session of Mussar study. Many townspeople in Kelm thought that too much time was being spent on Mussar, to the detriment of Talmud study. There was also growing harassment from the Tsarist government, in response to what they deemed revolutionary activity in the *yeshiva*. Rav Simḥa actively attempted to provide religious succor to the many young Jews conscripted into the Tsar's army (often for up to twenty-five years); it is also likely that students were hidden from conscription in one way or another. The *yeshiva*'s involvement in these efforts led to growing government threats to close its doors.

The *yeshiva* in Grobin was the crowning achievement of Simḥa Zissel's life and the leading Mussar center of its time; its influence spread throughout Russia and reached even as far as Palestine. Rav Simḥa left the *yeshiva* in 1886 because of ill health, itself a consequence of his dedication to the school and the movement, and he died in 1898. The *yeshiva* continued as an important center of Mussar until the Nazis destroyed it, together with its teachers and students, during World War II. However, the legacy of Kelm's Mussar school survived the war, primarily in the community of Gateshead in England as well as at various *yeshivot* in Israel. Although Mussar has survived in all of its forms (and continues to flourish even today within the Ḥaredi, or so-called ultra-Orthodox, community), it is the methods of the Kelm School that are fundamental to the contemporary Mussar I practice—in no small measure because in Rav Simḥa's work we find an authentic, traditional expression of ideas, which I had taken from Levinas. The thematic and linguistic similarities between Levinasian ethical thought and the Mussar of Rav Simḥa Zissel brought me full circle.

In the opening chapter of *Ḥokhmah U-Mussar* Rav Simḥa writes:

> Our Sages taught: One of the methods by which the Torah is acquired is by carrying the burden with our fellow. Each of the [48] steps which they enumerate there [Avot 6] are like preliminary goals, achieved by following each step, in order to bring about the ultimate goal. All of them taken together instill in one a new nature—that of being "Master of a fine soul." One then becomes fit for Torah and wisdom to be attached to, as a result of which one's soul is bound up with the bond of eternal life. Without this it is impossible to acquire Torah, for it is a spiritual entity and cannot attach itself to one who does not merit it on account of one's continuing pre-occupation with material matters.

Rav Simḥa begins his essay by focusing on one of the forty-eight personality qualities *(middot)* that Pirke Avot sees as necessary for one to "acquire" Torah (i.e., binding the spiritual force of Torah to the human soul). It is a common Jewish mystical notion that the physical Torah is but a "cover" for a spiritual (or supernal) Torah: the literal Torah "hides" a more purely spiritual vehicle. Simḥa's reading of Avot is no more literal than his understanding of the Torah. Although Avot seems to consider these *middot* as all equally important, Rav Simḥa claims that "carrying the burden with one's fellow" is the goal of all the rest; reaching this goal testifies to the transformation of one's human nature into a spiritual nature, transcending even death itself. It is to this transformed infinite soul, whose infinity is effected by bearing the pain of others, that the spiritual Torah adheres.

This description of Torah implies that the relationship between the enclosed self and the other person bridges the gap between the finite and infinite, between each of us and God, by our assuming responsibility one for another. The introduction of infinity, or eternity, into this equation, though not unexpected in a religious document, is effected by the reference to eternal life and suggests an