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Mussar students find balance

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Jews have been practicing Mussar, a system of personal spiritual development, for more than a thousand years. With origins in the 10th century, Mussar became popular with Jews in 19th-century Lithuania. Until recently, only Orthodox Jews practiced Mussar, but it has enjoyed a renaissance in the 21st century across all branches of Judaism.

Alan Morinis, founding director of the British Columbia-based Mussar Institute, has contemporized the practice and developed a curriculum that helps participants work on balancing their inner traits, or middot, through contemplative practices and exercises. He founded the institute in 2004 and serves as its dean.

Morinis will give a lecture 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 7, at Temple Chai.

According to mussarinstitute.org, the practice of Mussar helps "to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives."

The Mussar Institute offers several ways for spiritual seekers to study Mussar. Participants can sign up online for "A Taste of Mussar," an introductory four-week Internet course that guides them through exercises based on four themes: Mussar as a guidance system for the soul on its journey in this life; humility; trust; and discovering your unique spiritual curriculum.

Participants can continue taking courses online or take part in an in-person program through a synagogue, JCC or any group who would like to study together. The institute offers introductory, intermediate and advanced courses.

Several Valley groups have purchased Morinis' book, "Everyday Holiness: the Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar," and study on their own, according to Sharona Silverman, director of Temple Chai's Deutsch Family Shalom Center.

The Mussar Institute also offers a training program to prepare qualified candidates to guide a va'ad (Mussar group) and to lead The Mussar Institute's "A Season of Mussar" course.

Silverman explains Mussar as "a study of values and ethics through a Jewish lens." She has practiced Mussar for about eight years and participated in one of the first groups put together by the Mussar Institute. In her va'ad, they studied a different character trait (middah) each month. Within the group, every person had a study partner, or chevruta.

The object of the va'ad, according to Michael Burnham, executive director of the Mussar Institute, is to have a group of people focused on the same material looking through similar lenses, but bringing their own perspective.

The Mussar Institute sends va'ad and chevruta "deep and personal" questions to ponder, according to Silverman. "It really makes you relate the material to your personal life."

In addition to the questions, Silverman says, practicing Mussar includes meditation, chanting and journaling. "With each trait, you get a listing of different mantras to keep in front of you at all times."

Now Silverman participates in "Middah a Month," a program for those who have completed at least one Mussar course. Silverman meets with her chevruta, Lisa Gildar, once a month. They receive materials by email to review and discuss.

Gildar says it's great to have someone to grapple with about character-trait issues. But, she says, "Mussar is all about action - not just intellectualizing. It's taking steps toward developing your own personal character traits to be more in balance, whether it's empathy or compassion or whatever the trait is you're studying."

Burnham says Mussar looks at all of us as "souls on a journey toward wholeness and it provides tools for practical, everyday spiritual growth."

For example, Burnham says, one of the Mussar exercises might ask, 'Is generosity only good?' The answer, he says, is "No, not really, because you can spoil your children." And, to be too tight-fisted is not good either, he says. "For some of us, opening our hand and giving is very easy. For most of us, that takes a little encouragement."

Another exercise examining generosity might be to look at the different ways you can be generous: with money, time or wisdom. Burnham gives the example of a person who gives a donation to his or her synagogue once a year, and after examining the trait of generosity may say, "What I'm really doing is giving a donation once a year and calling that generosity." Then, the person may begin to realize that there are other ways to be generous. The next time he or she passes a homeless person, Burnham says, he or she might ask, "Do I walk by or do I give him a dollar to help him out?"

Mussar is very individualized and allows you to work on areas in your life that are in need of balance or wholeness, he says.

Gildar says practicing Mussar has been life-changing. "It's something I can incorporate into my life on a daily basis. It develops a consciousness on personal behavior and helps you move forward on your goals to be a better person and to bring yourself in balance. It's part of the way I move through the world now."

Details

- What: 'Seeing Your Life as a Soul Journey: An Evening of Mussar with Alan Morinis'
- When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 7
- Where: Temple Chai Deutsch Family Shalom Center, 4645 E. Marilyn Road, Phoenix.
- Cost: Free to attend
- Contact: Sharona Silverman, 602-971-1234 or ssilverman@templechai.com