



Taste of Mussar – Lesson 2

Focus Phrase

In cultivating the trait of humility, you need to become aware if and when you are acting with too much or too little humility. To that end, it's helpful to have a reminder of the basic concept, a vision of the ideal way you would like to be. To do this, the traditional Mussar method is to choose a simple phrase that captures the ideal of that quality. The phrase we recommend for humility is No more than my place, no less than my space.

Your assignment: Every morning, repeat this phrase.

Although we want you to use the assigned phrase in this program, in general it is possible to select other phrases, usually from Torah, Talmud, and rabbinic writings. Phrases can be in Hebrew, English, or any language that is meaningful to you. The point of the phrase is to capture your ideal image of the trait. Choose a "focus phrase" for each middah that you work on.

Every morning, soon after you have awakened, read over to yourself the focus phrase for humility. It might be helpful to write the phrase on a card that you set up right beside your bed, and in other places where you are sure to see them and be reminded, whether in a room where you do morning meditation or taped to your coffeemaker or on a post-it on your bedroom mirror.

Read over the phrase slowly and with full concentration. Read it aloud. Say it several times. Chant it. Go over this reminder in whatever ways cause it to be so clearly illuminated in your mind that it seems to have been written in neon.

If you meditate or are familiar with meditation, you can use the phrase in your meditation. Or you can practice it as a visualization, visualizing yourself in situations in which you are acting in accordance with the phrase.

Once you've really experienced the phrase in so penetrating a way, go on with your day. Of course, during the day try to live up to the ideal stated on your reminder card, but not with strain or by repressing tendencies. Just do your best.



Journaling Prompt

At the end of the day, look back in reflection to see what you can note in yourself that you can record in your journal. Do you notice yourself having an excess of humility, putting yourself down or not bringing forward the skills and abilities you have? Too much pride, focusing on how important your ideas are, or taking up others' time for no real purpose?

When you do write in your journal, it is crucially important that you not beat up on yourself for the slip-ups you identify, nor heap praises on yourself for your victories. What you're after is just a factual and accurate picture of the play of your inner life as it shapes your thoughts, words and deeds in action. The details contain the underlying patterns that recur in your life, and by examining them, you get nothing less than a read-out on the contents of your unconscious, as these express themselves in the particulars of your life. In the interactive card activity below, you will find examples of journal entries by former participants of this course.

Your assignment: Journal your experiences of humility (or its absence) daily.

Visualization

We want to add one practice for this lesson, which is a visualization. Visualization is a traditional Mussar practice that involves the active use of your imagination. The Mussar masters realized that what brings about deep and lasting change is not intellectual learning but experiential learning, and the images you see and experience in your imagination in a visualization give you experiences that have transformative potency, just like actual experiences do.

Your assignment: Listen to and experience the audio recording of the humility visualization below at least once every day for the rest of this week.



Additional Journaling Prompts

Have you noticed any resistance to doing the Mussar practices we have assigned? Resistance is one way a lack of humility shows up: "I don't want to, I am too tired, this doesn't make sense" can all be indicators of lack of humility. Do you find yourself saying some of these things to yourself or your friends? If that is true for you, then we suggest adopting a stance in which you say to yourself: "These masters said this has value, so I am going to put aside my judgments and do what they say." Or, "Can I really know what is right and true? Perhaps I should open myself to another way, particularly from someone who is held in such high regard?"

Perhaps there are aspects of humility that you can work on which will help you be more consistent in your Mussar practices.

Can you identify in which circumstances you find yourself getting angry? Mentally prepare yourself for those situations by repeating to yourself the focus phrase for humility from this course: "no more than my place, no less than my space."