

Mussar Institute's Morinis to visit Shaarie Torah

By ROCKNE ROLL

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Dr. Alan Morinis' first book in 12 years takes a little explaining.

"I've written a book about Shabbat, and also not about Shabbat," he said.

"The part that's not about Shabbat is about the intersection of religion and spirituality in the Jewish world."

"The Shabbat Effect: Jewish wisdom for growth and transformation," is the fifth book Morinis, the founder of the Mussar Institute, has penned about Jewish spirituality and *Mussar*, the pursuit of personal spiritual development through a Jewish lens. He'll be presenting on the book at Congregation Shaarie Torah in Portland Sunday, May 10 at 5 pm.

The part that's about Shabbat is straightforward enough, as Morinis explains.

"Through observing Shabbat, you have the opportunity to cultivate certain states of mind or certain conditions," he said. "By cultivating them on one day a week, it has an effect the other six days of the week as well."

The part that's not about Shabbat delves into the difference between religious practice and spiritual experience, and the difference between a spiritual experience and a spiritual life.

"I think what Judaism is about is not spiritual experience as much as a spiritual life. And there's a difference between the two," Morinis explains. "Spiritual experiences are like high moments that are just transient, but a spiritual life is a climb. It's a step-by-step spiritual ascent that requires a structure and a discipline."

That structure, he continues, comes from religious practice.

"I often use the example of the Kiddush cup, because the blessing is on the wine, and the poor cup doesn't get a mention," Morinis said. "So clearly the priority is the wine, and wine represents the spiritual. It's liquid, it's transient, it's not solid, and also, it's transformed. Because it's not grape juice, it's a transformed product. But it needs a cup. I look on religious structure as the vessel."

While it's entirely possible to have spiritual experiences without any sort of methodical pursuit, it's certainly easier to find them when you're looking for them, and doing so in a thought-out, detailed way. Morinis' premise is that Shabbat observance is a great way to do that – thus that part of the book that isn't about Shabbat ends up being about Shabbat after all.

"My idea of the Shabbat effect, this lasting impact that goes over the other six days of the week as well. It requires certain kinds of practices, and they do turn out to be the traditional ones," he said. "If that day is just like every other day, it's not going to have an effect,

because every day is every day. Six days of the week, we're plugged into shopping, building, fixing, news, politics and all kinds of stuff which nobody would call spiritual, not in the positive sense. The way a traditional Shabbat is structured is that it clears out of the way. It creates a vessel."

The exact details of the vessel are up to the person who owns it.

"I don't tell people how they should observe Shabbat, but I do want to explore what happens to people who use Shabbat to cultivate certain environmental realities that have a deep internal impact," he said.

Morinis earned his doctorate in Social Anthropology from Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship. Later, he began studying *Mussar* under the tutelage of Rabbi Yechiel Perr, z"l, one of the leading figures of contemporary *Mussar*. He wrote his first book on the subject, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder: One Man's Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition," in 2002 and founded the Mussar Institute in 2004.

The ideas and traditions of *Mussar* ("ethics" in Hebrew) root back to *Haredi* communities in Eastern Europe in the early 1800s. While many of the communities which cultivated *Mussar* study were nearly wiped out during the Holocaust, the literature and ideas survived and have experienced a resurgence of interest in the 20th century, with Morinis as one of the modern movement's leading figures.

One of those who has been interested is Mimi Berlin. A Chicago native, she's studied every facet of Judaism she could from an early age but has found particular meaning in the ideas of *Mussar*.

"I understand prayer and ritual and Mishnah and Torah, and I've done a lot of study there," she said. "But this is personal. This is your own personal place in the world and how to be a better person. That really spoke to me."

She'd read Morinis' previous works and has been part of Rabbi Gary Oren's *Mussar* classes at Shaarie Torah since their inception nearly two years ago – she explained that Rabbi Oren had also studied with Morinis. When Morinis announced his latest book and its accompanying tour, she spearheaded the effort to bring him to Shaarie Torah, with the help of fundraising from a sponsor secured by Morinis and CST's Rabbi Yonah Gellar Lecture Series Fund.

"It's very special that he's decided to come to Shaarie Torah," Berlin said.

"[Berlin] started getting the organizational process running and then she contacted the temple, and she raised a bit of money," Morinis said. "Mimi was the key. She was the instigator."

Preregistration is required for the May 10 event at Shaarie Torah, with a suggested donation of \$18 per person and a light dessert reception to follow. For more information or to register, email est@shaarietorah.org. Find more information about Morinis and his work at alanmorinis.com or at mussarinstitute.org

