

# THE INGREDIENTS OF MUSSAR : CRITICAL THINKING, SELF-HELP, AND TORAH

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*'That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone. 'When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra.'*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter 6

I have noticed over the years that the term Mussar is getting used more and more broadly. It seems to have become much of what the authors want it to be, which is fine by me, I suppose, as long as they pay it extra.

What seems to pass as Mussar is anything Jewish-sounding which inspires me (or, more commonly, what I think will inspire you) to do or be more of what I think it is a good idea to do or be.

There are some ingredients missing from this definition, though. I'm loathe to sound like Scrooge for pointing out the lapses in something that sounds as warm and fuzzy, nay, as 'nice' as the above definition of Mussar. Nevertheless, I think that some clarification is in order.

Mussar lies at the nexus of critical thinking and self-help with Torah as the referee. Here's what that looks like: First I must ask myself if the Torah source I am attempting to learn from really says what I think it says. That requires all of the skills of critical thinking so that I am not quietly imposing my biases onto the Torah but rather allowing the Torah to teach me its message. Most of what passes for Mussar unfortunately drops out right there. It is just not compellingly drawn from the Torah source. That's not to say that it isn't true. If I testify that Abe stole from Sol on Wednesday, and it turns out that I was out of town on Wednesday, that does not mean that Abe did not steal from Sol. It just means that I cannot be the one to say that he did. So I am not saying that these well-intentioned thoughts might not have some basis in Torah. They might, or they might not. But a truism of Mussar is that we are only moved to change ourselves (which means finding out that our goals were not correct) when we are absolutely certain that the thing we are changing towards is, indeed, true. The only folks who are impressed with something which is not solidly grounded in Torah are the folks who thought that whatever they are reading/thinking was true even without having read it in the Torah. In which case they can be pleased to discover that they were right all along and can even demonstrate that to you if you are willing to buy. Mussar is the tough process of finding out that I am wrong in my thinking, or at least in discovering that there is something here that I did not think of and

would not have thought of had the Torah not taught it to me. For that to happen, we need critical thinking, and lots of it.

A difficulty arises because one of the key ingredients to critical thinking is fairness. Here is an example taken from [http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/define\\_critical\\_thinking.cfm](http://www.criticalthinking.org/aboutCT/define_critical_thinking.cfm)

*Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.*

Now, the reason why critical thinking is such a rare commodity is because of that nasty last word, fairness. We have to be able to transcend our biases in order to consider something honestly. How are we to do that given that every one of us suffers from biases (here is not the place for the analysis of that statement, but let it suffice that Rav Yisrael Salanter is reported to have said that nobody is so influenced by his biases as the person who believes that he has none)?! The answer is to have a standard or benchmark for what is true. That's where the Torah steps in. Careful analysis of the Torah, to the point where the new insight I am learning from the source synthesizes with the rest of Torah, lends credibility to the new insight. I now have a Mussar thought which can be relied on, studied, reviewed, challenged and struggled with until it is internalized. It is now the Torah that is challenging an assumption of mine and that is not the same as one man, one vote. If that does not sound democratic, that is what tends to happen when the Creator steps in and reveals His Will. That's why it is so dangerous when people challenge the Torah instead of learning from it. In the end the intellectual honesty that they feel that they've gained (could G-d really have taken the Jews from Egypt and given them the Torah) they actually lost (now I'm back to believing what I always believed and I'm permanently enslaved by my biases because there is no standard to rescue me from them).

So, while critical thinking is good (and we must promote it whenever we can as the world is being held prisoner by those who fail to uphold its tenets) it will not produce Mussar, which requires being true enough to be useful in shaking my own beliefs.

If we are going to share ideas that seem to move us, that seems like a lovely conversation, and one surely worthy of praise. But if it is not solidly grounded in the text (I can hear the groans and moans saying, 'who has time to analyze rabbinic texts?') and compatible with the rest of the text (a single statement which implies something contradicted in many other sources is suspect of being in error or of being misunderstood), then it will not shake me from my well entrenched beliefs (nor, I might say, should it). Mussar is about shaking me, changing me, offering me the opportunity to rise above the noise of popular truths to attach myself to the attributes of the Creator. If all I have is a good idea,

then I may well be creating the Creator in my image, rather than aligning myself to His.