

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MUSSAR AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

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What is the difference between Mussar and other forms of personal growth?

I've been asked any number of times how Mussar differs from Covey, Pransky, Positive Psychology and a host of other self-improvement programs and concepts. You may find yourself asking the same question and I'd like to save you the call.

Mussar, the Torah's approach to personal growth has, at its most fundamental core, the call to utilize the entire physical world in the service of the transcendent, eternal world. The Torah calls upon every human being (both Jews and Gentiles in different ways) to recognize this world as the place to activate G-d's Will through the use of the physical world of things, feelings, thoughts and actions. The Torah teaches us how to harness the material world in the service of transcendent connection to eternity.

By contrast, other forms of self-improvement are aimed at capitalizing on the transcendent aspect of a person in the service of the physical world. Being calmer, meditating, looking beyond the moment, understanding values, prioritizing and so on are all seen as tools in the pursuit of a better physical existence, whether that means a better marriage, friendships, a job or even a vacation. The point of self-improvement is to harness the transcendent world of a person in the service of his physical existence.

The difference is 180 degrees.

There are those self-improvement programs (notably in Eastern Religions) that have placed such a value on transcendence that they put the physical world at the service of their push for transcendence. If you push for the answer to why, the answer is because it's a better way to live. Again, transcendence in the service of the physical world is the message.

Torah is the G-d-given recipe for being closer to Him, eternally. It is not about avoiding damnation nor is it about being redeemed from sin, though those are certainly included in the Torah recipe. Mussar is the arm of Torah that focuses on the specifics of how a physical, created, conflicted human being can transcend and utilize the limitations which are imposed by his base-physicality to become G-dlike, G-d-emulating and ever more closely attached to the pleasure of proximity to Him. The person doesn't need to be redeemed; he needs to be activated.

Without the revelation of His Will on Mt Sinai all of the other self-improvement programs run just

fine. With no directive from G-d there is nothing to do but try to improve your life here. With the revelation at Sinai the only program is Mussar. Everything else is abusing (sorry for the extreme term) spirituality in order to achieve a more blissful life in this world. Torah is about utilizing (indeed, abusing, from the perspective of one who is trying to achieve a blissful world here) this world in the service of His Will.

We are striving to become better and better servants of Hashem, using only this life and this world to do so, while self-improvement is about using all of the transcendence latent in a person to make our lives in this world better and better.

I cannot be a scrooge and say that I'm unhappy with the programs which help people have better marriages, more successful jobs, be happier, have less depression, etc. I'm not a scrooge and my service to and relationship with G-d includes my celebration of everything and anything which lightens the load of another person, Jew or Gentile. So I am happy when I hear that people go off to retreats and come back calmer, have a better marriage or get/keep a life-sustaining job. That's great news. Period.

What all that does is give us more material to transform into service of Hashem. Don't stop when your life is better; that's not the goal; it's a tool and its value is measured in terms of how it is used. Use your good marriage to emulate Hashem and His kindness. Use the peace of mind your improved job security affords to focus with more clarity on your Torah study, your performance of Mitzvos, on your freedom to live with honesty and integrity according to the Torah's definitions of those terms, your ability to stay focused and undistracted by the myriad attempts of mischief to distract you. If you're exercising regularly then you have more stamina to serve Hashem. If you are eating well then your body is less sluggish, less demanding and now you are freer to put your body to work in the Divine Mission. Mussar is about the process of doing that.

Self-improvement may be included in the long list of tools to put to the service of the Divine Mission. However, failure to put them in their proper perspective runs the risk of leaving the person feeling like he/she has activated his/her transcendence without connecting Soul to Source. That is a terrible tragedy. I see it daily with people who get involved in Kabala, pseudo-mussar, and a host of other attempts to drain the wellspring of transcendence in each of us so that the Soul is fooled into serving the Body and fails to connect to the Source. I almost wish the person had remained in his/her hedonistic rut until ready to wake up to Sinai instead of having the Soul-craving slaked at a mirage fountain.

If I've not hammered it home enough here, please ask. From where I'm sitting, I've repeated myself more times in this article than I have in virtually any piece I've allowed to go past my screen.

I hope I've saved you a call.

