

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

For the past several years on Monday evenings, I have been teaching a weekly class on Mussar. Mussar is roughly translated as Jewish ethics, although a better definition could be: *a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life, based on the idea that by cultivating inner virtues, we improve ourselves.*

Mussar is a discipline within Jewish learning and practice, focused on the development and refinement of character traits. The list of positive character traits we should work on includes, among others, patience, generosity, alacrity, self-control, simplicity, diligence, compassion, humility, and gratitude.

Over the last years we have studied the anonymous book *Orchot Tzadikim* (the Way of the Righteous), *Everyday Holiness*, by Alan Morinis, and now we are focusing on *Pirkei Avot* (The Ethics of the Fathers), with Maimonides' commentary. You are more than welcome to join us!

One premise of Mussar is that human beings can change; that you don't have to be today the same as you were yesterday. Another premise, related to the first one, is that character traits can be taught, that with effort and application, you can learn to be generous, humble, and diligent, the same way you learn science or a skill.

Over the last weeks, during my *divrei Torah*, I focused on the virtue of gratitude. Feeling gratitude is not only an ethical necessity – the right thing to do – but also a source of contentment and happiness. People who feel gratitude are, by and large, happier people. They believe that God, life, society, and parents don't owe them anything. On the contrary, they feel indebted to God, life, society, and parents for their blessings.

Another characteristic inherent to the development of character traits is that it leads to action. If you work on developing simplicity, you can expect that your life will look simpler as a result. If you work on the character trait of courage, you will be able to take risks, when necessary, to speak up, for example, or to save someone in need.

People who cultivate the virtue of gratitude, feel they need to do "something" to express their appreciation. A simple example is someone who writes "thank-you" notes after receiving a gift. Another example, is someone who makes a donation to say "thank-you." In this case, a donation, a gift, is a way to pass it forward, to express with actions, in the words of King David (Psalm 23): *my cup overflows.*

This past month at Hillcrest Jewish Center we received a generous donation from a non-member who participates in one of our small groups. The donation came with a note that said (and I am paraphrasing): *thank you so much for having this activity open to the community. It gives meaning to my week. Enclosed is a gift, which I know you will put to good use.*

The person who wrote the note and sent the gift, felt she needed to express gratitude. In other words, she needed to do "something" to give back, to translate her appreciation into action.

We all can and should become better human beings today than the way we were yesterday. I shared this simple act of gratitude and generosity, among countless others that inspire me daily, to show you that developing positive character traits is not only possible, but also praiseworthy, dignifying, and rewarding.

How do you build a better world? One person at a time; one step at a time. We are all human beings "under construction." Let's work on building ourselves, one step at a time.

From my heart,

Rabbi Manes Kogan