



Climbing Jacob's Ladder: One Man's Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition

By Alan Morinis
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Reviewed by Hillel Goldberg

Question: Why have all manner of Chassidic courts reestablished themselves after the destruction of the Holocaust while schools of *musar* have not? Ger, Breslov, Amshinov, Viznitz, Belz, Satmar and many other Chassidic groups—all of which suffered grievous devastation in World War II—are now flourishing in the

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United States, Israel and, in many instances, even in Europe. Where is Slabodka, Kelm, Navardok? Clearly, the answer is not in any Nazi predilection for *musar* adherents; the evil ones killed any Jew they found. While it is true that adherents of a given Chassidic group may have fortuitously survived in relatively large numbers, this cannot explain the contemporary, widespread efflorescence of Chassidism, a handful of whose adherents survived. Nor is the answer to be found in the correct observation that the prewar *musar* adherents numbered far fewer than did the Chassidim, but here, at least, we have a clue.

The Musar Movement was always small. In fact, it is unclear in what sense it was a movement after the initial efforts of its founder, Reb Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883). Reb Yisrael envisioned a movement, that is, the improvement of personal character traits by men and women, learned and unlearned alike. He worked hard toward that end in Vilna and Kovno, from 1841 to 1858, and met some success. But then began his long and mostly mysterious sojourn in Western Europe, where he was mostly cut off from his disciples. His students concentrated their efforts within *yeshivot*; there, Reb Yisrael's *musar* program evinced staying power. (It is worth noting, however, that *musar* never

completely died out as a popular effort. I was once shown a *sefer* with the official stamp of the populist Beis HaMusar of Kovno, dated in the late 1930s. I don't know how it survived the War.) In *yeshivot*, the demanding discipline of *musar* had a chance to take root. Students had time to devote to it; *musar* masters had the opportunity for the requisite concentration. Reb Yisrael once said that it takes twenty-five years to perfect a single character trait; alternatively, one can study the entire Talmud sooner than one can perfect a single character trait. Clearly, the spiritual discipline of *musar* takes time and tremendous motivation. Given its essence, *musar* was not a popular movement; its adherents were never numerous.

After the Holocaust, with most of the *musar* role models deceased, there was little chance for a quick revival. The mastery and the motivation within the one setting in which *musar* showed some success—the *yeshivah*—could not be rapidly recreated. Then, there is a *musar* methodological catch-22: In the nature of things, most *musar* role models would not announce themselves, would not promote themselves, once they emerged. The inclination of *musar* is to hide, to avoid display. True, the Navardok branch of the movement did make it a point to reach out—and now, *davkah* from a scion

within Navardok, comes an unexpected book that shows that *musar*, while hardly rebuilt to prewar proportions, does demonstrate maturity and resonance within a new cultural setting.

Reb Yisrael always saw *musar* as a potential bridge, capable of linking the most devout circles of Jewish piety with the most assimilated societies of the Jewishly ignorant. In part, that is why he devoted the last twenty-five years of his life to teaching assimilated students and communities in Western Europe, particularly Germany. *Musar* preaches purity of intent; as such, it can identify both the spiritual flaws in the most Orthodox and the genuine spiritual strivings in the most unobservant. *Musar*, under Reb Yisrael's fine scalpel, could turn rabbis in on themselves, searching for defects in their punctilious observance, and could attract the assimilated to the Torah, validating their instinctive elements of ethics or spirituality. To Reb Yisrael, *musar* was a ladder. Those on the lowest rung could eventually reach the highest, while those on the upper rungs, if not careful, could slip downward. Alan Morinis, in *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, seeks *musar* from assimilated, unobservant moorings; his search begins on the lowest rung—precisely the place that Reb Yisrael and the Alter of Navardok thought that *musar* could be effective. Morinis seeks to demonstrate that even without a prior grounding in Talmud and other Torah knowledge, one can find God within the quest for honesty and integrity in human relationships—including one's relationship with oneself.

Only a few years ago, Morinis was like one of the Jewishly ignorant students whom Reb Yisrael would have met in nineteenth-century Germany. Morinis' eloquent and spiritual record of his quest is, perhaps, the ultimate verification of the potential reach of *musar* beyond the Orthodox Jewish society in which it originated.

Morinis, a former Rhodes Scholar with an expertise in Hindu pilgrimage and a former film producer with a personal history of deep inner doubts and financial failure, modestly subtitles his book *One Man's Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition*. There are, of

course, idiosyncratic elements in Morinis' journey, but he more than opens his soul for us to view. Not that the courage to communicate one's deepest anxieties and triumphs is a small thing, but *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* goes further. Morinis succeeds in making the psychological teachings and exercises of Reb Yisrael alluring. From within the specificity of his own life, Morinis strikes a universal chord. The essence of *musar* is not the contours of a personal struggle but the idea of struggle. The thoroughness of Morinis' struggle becomes a transparency, enabling others to see that if he can succeed, they can too.

Essential to Morinis' struggle are his two *musar* teachers, Rabbi Yechiel and Shoshana Perr of Far Rockaway, New York. By turns insightful, colorful and compassionate—and always expansive and expressive—the Perris invited Morinis into their lives because of a phone call. Morinis' journey begins in earnest when he, a total stranger to the Perris, asks them whether they would be his guides in *musar*. No questions asked, the Perris accept the challenge. Morinis had no idea of his good fortune. Mrs. Perr is the great-granddaughter of one of Reb Yisrael's major disciples, the Alter of Navardok, Rabbi Joseph J. Hurvitz. Rabbi Perr was ordained by Mrs. Perr's grandfather, Rabbi Abraham Joffen, the son-in-law of the Alter of Navardok. Both Rabbi and Mrs. Perr studied extensively under Mrs. Perr's father, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Nekritz, whose storied life includes unwavering adherence to the *musar* disciplines even during six years of exile in Siberia during World War II.

While his family is puzzled but supportive, Morinis, full of trepidation and expectation, flies from his home in Vancouver to New York to meet the Perris. How would a *yeshivah* dean like Rabbi Perr, rooted in the black-hat mold

of Orthodoxy, receive a secular and confused but highly motivated and intelligent searcher? Morinis' description of his travels and anxieties in advance of his first meeting with Rabbi Perr is masterful. This is the surprising denouement:

Slowly he [Rabbi Perr] crossed to me. Then, taking my hand in both of his, those soft eyes gazing directly into mine, he asked, "May I give you a kiss?"

A kiss! I had thought that, in my anxiety, I'd rehearsed every possible greeting I might conceivably receive from this man, but a kiss hadn't even crossed my mind. I must have given some sign of consent, however, because he cupped my face in his hands and, through the rasp of his beard, I felt his warm lips on my cheek. In that moment, relief coursed through my entire body.

Climbing Jacob's Ladder is three books in one: an account of Morinis' inner journey; a portrait of two *musar* practitioners (the Perris) and of Morinis' interaction with them and a description of nine *musar* disciplines.

The effectiveness of the descriptions of the disciplines derives from the liveliness of his relationship with the Perris, who alter his journey in ways that sometimes are wrenching and sometimes so indirect that it takes Morinis months to realize the effect of a seemingly offhand comment. The pivot of the book, then, is the Perris.

Rabbi Perr is Talmudist and preacher, logician and counselor, adept at rigorous analysis and penetrating allegory. Rabbi Perr's total effect is to catch one off guard, to maneuver behind one's defenses in order to hold one's attention—an effect buttressed by his imposing stature, which, however, conveys warmth more than intimidation. "May I give you a kiss?"—vintage Rabbi Perr. Master of the unexpected yet not manipulative, Mrs. Perr, as short as her husband is tall, is neither Talmudist nor preacher. A trained counselor, she is a listener and encourager. Her *musar* is inherited, genetic, so to speak; her husband's is learned, articulate, pedagogic. Neither the rabbi nor his wife is judgmental. Clearly, they delight in learning of

Morinis' spiritual forays as much as he delights in their guidance and support. One of Reb Yisrael's *musar* disciplines was the *musar* friendship: the brutally honest yet also supportive relationship between two people, each trying to discover his own unconscious motives, each trying to shape these motives according to the ideals of the Torah, each relying on the other for insight and grounding. This book is an unflinching and loving record of just such a friendship.

What does Morinis take from this friendship? The *musar* disciplines he describes include meditating to develop a focused mind; using various techniques to read a spiritual text; reciting holy phrases; using mental images; developing self-awareness; contemplating the grandeur of God; employing exercises to improve personal qualities; practicing right speech and removing obstacles that obstruct the flow of love. Neither Morinis nor the Perris devised any of these disciplines; at the very least, in their essentials they are found in the centuries-old *musar* literature. What gives these disciplines power is not primarily the talented pen of Morinis (though that certainly helps); their real power derives from the fact that their description represents decades of personal work by the Perris. Having brought these disciplines to life in their own lives, the Perris can convey their inner essence even to a twenty-first-century Jewish searcher with little prior knowledge of the Torah or other Jewish lore. On a larger canvas, the disciplines show that *musar* indeed survived the Holocaust.

As such, the *musar* disciplines can reach a broad spectrum of readers. More than any work I know, Morinis' book makes the *musar* approach to personal growth and spiritual integrity accessible. Readers who are familiar with *musar* can benefit too. Perhaps inured to the *musar* techniques (too often, in the Orthodox world, they are presented as frozen formulae rather than living realities), Orthodox readers can learn from Morinis' determination to confront his despair under the dispensation of *musar*; and from the Perris' persistent and loving exploration of *musar* in their lives. 