

Spiritual Insensitivity *By Abraham J. Twerski*

During the past forty years that I have spent treating alcoholics and drug addicts, I have found the most effective method of healing them to be the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Interestingly, some of the ideas in this recovery program can be found in the works of *musar*. For example, the notion that one should make a fearless moral inventory of oneself (*cheshbon hanefesh*). Or that one should make amends, whenever feasible, to people one has harmed. Or that one should promptly admit when one has done something wrong.¹

However, while I observed many recovering alcoholics to be profoundly moved by the Twelve Steps, and tears are not a rarity, I cannot help but notice that often in *musar shiurim* people may listen attentively, but they do not appear to be moved by, or emotionally engaged in, the ideas. The *musar* does not appear to be effective, and it is questionable whether it results in any significant changes in one's

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behavior or lifestyle. What is it that causes an intense emotional reaction in the recovering alcoholic? Why does a *shiur* in some of the great *musar* works often remain but a superficial exercise?

A person does not seriously recover from alcoholism until he reaches what mental health professionals call "rock-bottom," i.e., a stage of desperation. He comes to the realization that he cannot possibly survive in his present lifestyle. Only then is he ready and willing to institute the changes essential for recovery.

This sense of desperation enables one to implement change. However, many people who are *shomrei Torah umitzvot* are insensitive to their own spiritual destruction. This is because one of the tactics of the *yetzer hara* is to make a person unaware of his spiritual failings.

The Rebbe of Kotzk once told his *Chassidim* that a person must always be aware of the *yetzer hara* leading him astray. "You must visualize the *yetzer hara* as wielding a great axe, threatening to chop your head off."

One *Chassid* asked, "What if I cannot visualize that?"

The *rebbe* answered, "That indicates that [the *yetzer hara*] has already chopped off your head."

A person may be in full compliance with the ritual laws of the Torah yet not be spiritual. Ramban states in his interpretation of "You shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:2) that it is possible for a person to be physically indulgent "with the permission of the Torah." To

be holy, one must do more than observe the ritual laws.

The Torah says, "You shall seek God, and you shall find Him" (Deuteronomy 4:29). The Rebbe of Kotzk said:

The seeking is the finding. As long as you are looking for a relationship with God, you have one. The moment you stop seeking Him because you think you have already found Him, it is then that you have lost Him.

Musar can help us become holy and spiritual only if we realize that we are not yet there. The feeling that we lack spirituality and that we cannot live a life without it will provide the motivation that will enable *musar* to have an impact.

Our *tzaddikim* were very attuned to their spiritual lives. They fought life-long struggles to improve their *middot* and would often cry bitterly to Hashem to enlighten them to the truth. These great Torah personalities felt they were grossly remiss in their *middot*. The Vilna Gaon, before stepping out onto the street, would review the second chapter of *Mesillat Yesharim* thirteen times because he felt the need to reinforce his spirituality against the threats posed by the outside world.

The biographies of our *tzaddikim* serve as teachings in *musar*. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner writes that while we have great admiration for the saintliness of the Chofetz Chaim, we have little awareness of the intense battles he fought to develop his stellar *middot*

and the anguish he experienced when he felt he had fallen short of what was expected of him.

The great works of *musar* are incomparable guides for proper Torah living. But to accept this guidance we must realize that we are totally lost, immersed in a culture that sees comfort and pleasure as the definitive goals in life.

In *The Nineteen Letters* (letter no. 5), Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes:

When man's entire effort will be devoted to the gratification of physical desires, and the mind of the ruler will lower itself to be the slave of one's animalistic drives, employing its skill only to secure the gratification of physical desires, the result will be the depth of degradation.

We are the beneficiaries of marvelous technological advances that have eliminated so many of the difficulties that our ancestors experienced. We may, therefore, be at risk of spiritual degradation, of seeing comfort and pleasure as the only goals in life. We may remain unaware of our lack of spirituality and holiness.

It is our job to avoid complacency and strive for greater spiritual heights. *Musar* can help us do so. But it will only work if we make ourselves receptive to its messages. **JA**

Note

1. This theme is developed further in Andrew R. Heinze, "The Americanization of *Musar*: Abraham Twerski's Twelve Steps," *Judaism* 48 (fall 1999): 450-469.

