

rightfully to occupy that you need to stretch into? Your answers are the measure of your humility and define how humility figures into your spiritual curriculum.

The goal would be to have it said of you (as it was of one of the Mussar masters of the nineteenth century), “He was so humble he didn’t even know he was humble.”<sup>16</sup>

A small deed done in humility is a thousand times more acceptable to God than a great deed done in pride.

—*Orchot Tzaddikim* (The Ways of the Righteous)

## Patience

SAVLANUT

*Whatever may obstruct me from reaching my goals, it is possible to bear the burden of the situation.*

Woe to the pampered one who has never been trained to be patient. Either today or in the future he is destined to sip from the cup of affliction.

—Rabbi M. M. Leffin, *Cheshbon ha’Nefesh*

NOT A DAY GOES BY when we don’t face some sort of frustrating delay or obstacle, and too often our response is to strain against how things are. That tends to happen to me when I’m rushing somewhere in my car, but those feelings may suddenly sneak up on you while the water fills the tub ever so slowly, or as your child struggles with clumsy fingers to master the complexity of a shoelace, or on those days when nothing—not your Internet server, not your spouse, not the postman, *nobody!!*—does things when or how you want.

Impatience seldom makes things happen faster or better and usually only causes us grief. It’s like an inner blaze that burns us up without giving off any warmth. That would be bad enough, but it is also a short step from impatience to rage, and we all know what harm can come to ourselves and others because of uncontrollable anger.

I’d be remiss not to point out right at the outset that there are circumstances where we should not be patient and where patience is not a virtue. When confronted with injustice or the needs or suffering of another person or other situations where our actions could make a difference, we have no business patiently taking our time. Patience comes into play when

it is our own burden we are bearing, or when there really is no course of action available to us at that moment to alleviate the situation.

### *Walking in God's Patient Way*

Who wouldn't be delighted to deepen their ability to meet life's challenges with more patience? We get very clear support for doing so from the Bible, where it tells us that we should "walk in His ways".<sup>1</sup> This simple but forceful idea—sometimes called *imitatio dei*, emulating God—is the ultimate blueprint for the spiritual life and tells us that we should model our lives on godly virtues. That's how we move ourselves closer to the highest potential we have from birth, and when we act with heavenly virtue in our personal lives, we help to make this world a little more like heaven.

In practical terms, we emulate God by practicing virtue or, as I like to call it, living in "virtuous reality." The sages tell us: "As God is called merciful and gracious, so be you merciful and gracious; as God is called righteous, so be you righteous; as God is called holy, so be you holy."<sup>2</sup> As God is forgiving, so too should we strive to be forgiving. We are guided to emulate God in all the divine attributes of mercy and righteousness, though not the attributes of severity and justice that we can also find in the Torah. Because we want the world to be infused with qualities of goodness, we have a responsibility to become vessels for those same virtues. That prescription includes the trait of patience.

No matter how you may conceive of God or the creative force that stands behind the universe, there is no doubt that this ultimate source of life is endowed with patience, especially when compared to us. Think of the pace of earthly eras, creeping along as slowly as glaciers advancing and retreating in an ice age. Stars and galaxies are born, mature, and pass away. And as for us, what the Mussar tradition offers as evidence for God's patience is the fact that our lives are sustained, even when we do wrong.<sup>3</sup> It's not hard to imagine a universe where there is absolutely no margin for error, where punishment is instantaneous and total, but that isn't the world we live in. God is patient and preserves our lives even when our actions happen to hit way off the mark, to give us time to come to deeper realizations, make amends, and return to a straighter way.

"From this, man should learn to what extent he, too, should be patient and bear the yoke of his fellow."<sup>4</sup> Since God is patient, then we, who

are encouraged to guide our lives by "walking in His ways," should also be patient.

### *Suffering Impatience*

Where we get into trouble with impatience is in our reactivity. The problem confronting you may be entirely real: You're late. You need it now. There will be consequences. But whatever the problem, no matter how great or how small, it is one thing to face those life issues just as they are, and quite another to slop grief, worry, regret, impatience, and other such mental condiments all over the situation. Reactions like these only increase our burden by adding a whole extra dimension of inner suffering (and often hurtful behavior) to an already difficult experience.

Can you identify situations that tend to try your patience?

In the chapter on patience in the classic Mussar text *Cheshbon ha'Nefesh* by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin,<sup>5</sup> the author sets up his discussion by pointing out that there are many cases of people extracting delight from what we'd agree are painful and unsavory experiences. By way of illustration he mentions the experience of tasting vinegar and pepper, which are sour and sharp but which can add zest and flavor to food (when used in the right way) and be a delight to the palate.

But "towering above all these are the spiritual delights in which the supernal soul [*neshama*] exalts—for example, the wondrous, sublime pleasure of acting righteously with everyone." He is pointing to something that we have all experienced because it is innate within us, which is the deep and satisfying pleasure we get from doing good, especially with other people.

Continuing to work toward his consideration of patience, he points out that in many situations we can do right by planning and careful action. But for "those serious incidents which come upon us unavoidably and which we were powerless to prepare for or which we could not deal with once they transpired, God has provided us with a remedial regimen—patience."<sup>6</sup>

Patience is here depicted as a tool we can call on to help us endure when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances we did not choose and could not avoid. In this he is revealing something essential about patience as this attribute is understood in the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word

for patience is *savlanut*, which can also mean “tolerance.” The same root<sup>7</sup> gives rise to words that mean “suffer” and “endure” and also the noun for a porter who carries goods. We can learn something fundamental from this pool of words that derive from the common source: patience means enduring and tolerating, and the experience may even bring us elements of suffering.

We get a hint of the same message in the English word “suffer,” which means both to experience pain and to tolerate, or put up with. So patience is not just about waiting, it’s about bearing. A story told by a Mussar student reflects on this core aspect of patience. She had been in a car accident that caused her back problems and that, in turn, had an impact on her ability to work. “I think about all the patience I have had to have to get to this point. Patience with my back and physical limitations. Patience with the legal process. Patience with my attorney, who wasn’t always available exactly when I had a question or a need.”

She realized that the root of her problem with being patient was “accepting what I cannot control. It is not that difficult to surrender and say to myself, ‘I have done all I can; it is in the hands of God.’ What is so much more difficult is to be at peace about it and to really let go. I find that tolerating the uncertainty of the outcome, and accepting the burden of an outcome that is unwanted, are both hard.” Here is the “bearing” that is essential to patience.

The converse is that if you are the kind of person who finds it easy to be joyful in traffic jams and to whistle happily in mile-long bank lines, then you have little need for patience. You’re already well equipped with tranquillity or equanimity, and so you are not that reactive to the delays and obstacles that tend to send most people spinning into a rage. Patience comes into play when you are already ticked off, when the situation already has you starting to fume. It’s then that you reach into your pocket to pull out your patience, which helps you bear the burden that is pressing on you.

### *Opening the Space between the Match and the Fuse*

The problem with impatience is that it usually takes only a split second for its first glowing embers to ignite into flames that course through us even before we’ve become aware that they have started up. Impatience snuffs

out consciousness, and before I even know it’s happening, I’m leaning on my horn, or you’re going hoarse yelling at your child or cursing the postman. At this point we don’t even recognize ourselves, and there is little to be done but to try to rein in these feelings enough to minimize any damage we might do.

It’s so much better to be able to catch our impatience as it is arising and to nip it in the bud. To do this we need to recognize the fact that we are getting impatient and then take responsibility for our impatience. This is much easier said than done.

For example, it is common that when a couple is getting ready to go out for a pleasant evening, one of them is always ready before the other. And it is always the same one who is ready first and waiting at the door while the other one has to make one more phone call, or change shoes or tie or dress one last time, or check on something or other. Time passes, impatience grows, and by the time they are both in the car heading out for the evening or to visit friends, they are not even speaking to each other.

The tendency is for the one who is always ready first to become righteous and blame the other one for bad behavior. While it surely isn’t good to be unpunctual and to waste other people’s time, what the impatient person tends to be blind to is that he or she has the personal freedom to choose to call upon the power of patience in that moment, in order to bear the situation without smoldering and then igniting and acting out.

When you find yourself in a situation that is triggering your impatience, instead of giving all your attention and energy to finding fault with the person who is so clearly at fault, you can choose to be patient and take responsibility for your emotional response to that situation. You make the choice of whether you buckle or call on patience to help you bear the burden of the situation. My teacher, Rabbi Perr, calls this awareness and exercise of choice “opening the space between the match and the fuse.”

### *Witnessing and Naming*

Being able to call on patience in the way I am describing depends on having cultivated your awareness of the telltale signs of impatience so you can spot them right in the instant that they begin to stir. The practice is to witness and name the feelings just as they come up, which requires that you say to yourself, “I’m feeling impatient” or “There’s impatience.” Just by forming



those words, you are holding open at least a tiny crack through which the light of consciousness can still shine, and if you can do that, then at that point what is going to happen to that impatience is suddenly no longer so certain.

There are obstacles to the sort of awareness I am noting here. One is the common condition of simply being disconnected from one's own feelings. Too often people who are impatient and act it are unaware of their own behavior. When the inner lights are dimmed like that, spiritual progress is stopped in its tracks. Another equally common obstacle is denial. In this case, people actually do know their patterns but refuse to acknowledge and take responsibility for them. Rather, they deflect what is real and could be painful and difficult, and instead cling to false analyses and excuses.

Truth and consciousness are preconditions to exercising free will. Only when the light of awareness is glowing brightly can we see the truth and choose to follow a course that is guided by our values and goals, not by our "animal soul":<sup>8</sup> instincts, emotional reactions, and habits. And the brighter awareness glows, the more freedom of choice we have.

Many techniques work to increase the strength of conscious awareness to open that space between the match and the fuse. Meditation does this, and it is also one of the main outcomes of the "Accounting of the Soul" practice that is described in part 3 of this book. The challenging thing is, you have to commit yourself to doing these sorts of practices at those times when awareness is *not* being tested, so their effects will be there right at hand when it is. This tests your discipline. If you suddenly found yourself having to climb up many flights of stairs, you'd be very glad that you had kept up your physical conditioning before it was called on. If you were a gunfighter in the Wild West, you'd work on your draw before you needed it for a shoot-out. The same is true for the inner life. As my first meditation teacher repeatedly said, "Do spiritual practice now, so you'll have it when you need it!"

### *Patience and Humility*

The situations in which we can feel impatience are numberless, but there is one common factor that unites them all. We only burn with that partic-

ular fire when the focus in the situation is on *me*. You are delaying *me*, misleading *me*, berating *me*. You are interfering with *my* plan or standing in the way of *my* needs. Sometimes the only inner voice I can hear is my ego, loudly promoting all its important needs and plans and drowning out any other voice that might whisper within.

We all tend to see ourselves as the prime actor in a drama that swirls around us. Some of us believe that all that heavy action is playing out according to a script we ourselves have written. Others see it the opposite way, playing the victim to the forces that press in on their own little stronghold. Despite the obvious differences, both these attitudes see the whole of life as pivoting around a separate identity that stands at the center of a very personal universe.

But the truth is different. We are neither so central nor independent as all that. We are actually wired into all kinds of larger circuits and systems, from the molecular to the social, and we don't control many of the factors that have a role in shaping our lives. Least of all can we expect to rule the timetable according to which life takes place.

The Mussar teachers encourage us to contemplate these truths, because when we realize a deeper understanding of our rightful place in the universe, this helps us avoid getting all worked up when things don't go just precisely as we'd like. Why should everything go our way, considering how small we are and how many other agendas and needs are always involved? When we do hold in sight how integrated we are within the grand schemes that make up and sustain the world, we see ourselves situated amid the large wheels turning and rivers flowing, moved by hands that are not our own. Whatever pleasure or pain we may experience, our lives are taking place within great cycles of time, space, and material, even though we often have our eyes focused so directly in front of our noses that we don't perceive the truth of that largest picture.

We truthfully have so little control over so many features of our lives that it doesn't make any sense at all to put ourselves through useless suffering as if we did have control. And that's just what we do when we slip into impatience.

It's important to sort out what is actually within our power and what is not. And the remarkable thing is that in both cases, we are better off to be patient—patient with the things that are within our control to change, and patient with those that aren't.

*Fruits of Patience*

Patience doesn't mean that we become passive. We still need to make a genuine effort to set the pace and trajectory of our lives, but we don't need to react to every delay or deflection as if it were a denial, whether that means a denial of our selves or a denial by God. In those moments when I am good at being patient, I live in the here and the now, without straining against reality. I walk a middle path, not leaning to the one extreme of being inactive and fatalistic—because that way I negate the powers I do have, limited though they might be—nor veering to the other, where impatience reigns.

There is a story in the Talmud<sup>9</sup> about Rav Preida, who had a student who was so slow that he could not grasp a lesson unless his teacher taught it to him four hundred times. One day, while Rav Preida was teaching this student, someone came and told the rabbi that he needed his services when he had finished teaching. That day, after he had completed the four hundredth repetition, Rav Preida asked the student if he had grasped the lesson, to which the student replied that he had not. "Why is it different today than other days?" the teacher asked, and his student answered that from the moment the other person had come to speak to Rav Preida, the student had been distracted, thinking to himself, "Soon the master will have to get up . . . Soon the master will have to get up . . ." Rav Preida then replied, "If that is so, let me teach you the lesson again." He then repeated the teaching an additional four hundred times. When he had finished, a heavenly voice called out to Rav Preida, "Which reward do you want? Either four hundred years will be added to your life, or you and your generation will be received into the World-to-Come." He answered, "I request that my generation and I merit the World-to-Come." To this the heavenly voice replied, "Give him *both!*"

Such are the fruits of patience.

## 9

## Gratitude

## HAKARAT HA'TOV

*Awaken to the good and give thanks.*

Ben Zoma used to say: "A good guest says, 'How much my host toiled for me! He put so much meat in front of me, so much wine, so much bread—all his exertion was just for me!' A bad guest says, 'What did my host toil for me? I ate just one roll, just one piece of meat, I drank just one cup—all his exertion was for his own household!'"

—Babylonian Talmud: *B'rachot* 58a

## A PSALM OF THANKSGIVING

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his  
pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.  
For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

—Psalms/ *Tehillim* 100