

about my teacher, Rebbetzin Shoshana Perr, whose family was living in Poland at the start of World War II. They escaped to Lithuania, but in 1941 the Russians who controlled Lithuania began rounding up “clerics and clerical students” for deportation, among them Rabbi Nekritz (Mrs. Perr’s father and so Rabbi Perr’s future father-in-law). His wife wouldn’t hear of being left behind, and so the entire family, with babies, was shipped out to endure the rigors of life in Siberia. This apparently stern judgment concealed divine compassion, however, because their exile removed the Nekritz family from the path of the Nazis only weeks before they invaded Lithuania, where they killed all the remaining Jews. Exile at the hands of the Russians ensured that the Nekritz family all survived. A later agreement between Stalin and the Polish government-in-exile freed all Polish refugees, and the Nekritzes eventually made their way to the United States.

Modeling our own pursuit of wholeness on the traits of God requires that we, too, need to be capable of acting in both ways—with compassion in the form of compassion and compassion in the form of judgment. We aspire to having the spiritual dexterity to shift from one type of compassionate action to the other, as the situation requires and according to how our sensitivity guides us.

We get a hint that our wise ancestors wanted us to grasp the multiple layers embedded in compassion because the Hebrew term they bequeathed us—*rachamim*—is unique among the soul-traits: its name has no singular form and is always stated in the plural. Or possibly they wanted us to understand that despite our apparent duality, compassion is one and so are we.

One’s compassion should extend to all creatures, and one should neither despise nor destroy them, for the wisdom above extends to all of creation—inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans.

—*Tomer Devorah*

Order

SEDER

Order creates inner alignment, peaceful and prepared.

Take time, be exact, unclutter the mind.

—Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm

THE SOUL-TRAIT of order¹ is all about the middle way. Too little order gives birth to chaos, while at the other end of the range, too much order ties us up in obsessive rigidity. The best in life lies between these extremes, and we are well-advised to seek that moderate course.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler² provides three reasons why we should make an effort to bring order into our lives. First, knowing that things are well arranged creates a feeling of inner satisfaction and confidence that everything is under control. Another reason is even more practical—order helps you find things when you need them and saves you the time you would lose looking for them. And a third reason is that many things will function only if they are arranged correctly, like a machine that requires every one of its parts to be in good working order, often in a specific sequence, to run properly.

That such practical guidance emanates from a Mussar teacher of Rabbi Dessler’s stature reveals something about our spiritual life as the Mussar masters see it. The path to spiritual growth they illuminate is hidden right in front of us, right there *within* the ways of this world. The order you create on your desk, in your car, and with your clothes, your financial papers, your tools, your kitchen utensils, and so on is not just good management, it is actually bona fide spiritual work. Nothing less.

Spiritual Order

Rabbi Dessler was the product of the famous Mussar yeshiva located in Kelm in Lithuania, which was founded in 1862 by Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv.³ Rabbi Simcha Zissel was one of the primary disciples of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, and he grew to be the person who did most to propagate his teacher's thought and methods.⁴ In 1906, at the age of fourteen, the boy who became Rabbi Dessler entered the Kelm Yeshiva, becoming one of its youngest students. Except for several years during World War I, Rabbi Dessler would reside at the yeshiva until 1928.⁵ In 1920 he married Bluma, the great-granddaughter of the Alter of Kelm, founder of the yeshiva, and in total he passed eighteen years living and learning in Kelm.

At Kelm, Rabbi Dessler was immersed in an environment that made a high priority of order. The Alter saw this quality as a major aid to self-perfection, so order became a pillar of the Kelm way of Mussar. His views on this soul-trait were based on the Torah, which he saw standing entirely on principles of order. After all, only one moment separates Shabbat from the weekday. One hairbreadth is the difference between a kosher and an unfit slaughtering. A small volume of water can render a kosher *mikveh*⁶ unfit. Details are small, but they matter, often crucially.

Mussar in the Kelm Yeshiva focused primarily on the cultivation of inner attitudes and states. External disorder was taken to be a reflection of internal disarray. A person whose possessions are messy is likely to have thoughts that are also jumbled. If you are not careful about the cleanliness of your house, you are also likely to be lax about the purity of your spirit.

The Alter highly valued order in his own life. He allowed nothing to interfere with his fixed times for learning, even when people would bang on his door. At home and even while traveling, he followed a schedule of learning. He would say: "People set aside fixed times for their personal business, for resting, and for eating, and they receive people only at certain hours—and no one complains."

There is an oft-repeated story that Rav Simcha Zissel once went to visit his son Nachum Zev, then a student in a distant yeshiva. The first thing the father did was visit his son's room. On inspection, he found the boy's possessions in order. From this alone, he could tell that his son was doing well in the yeshiva. Only then did he go to see his son.

The Alter's successor and son-in-law, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Broide, was a

classic product of this devotion to order that characterized Kelm. His daily timetable was arranged with almost military precision to such a degree that it was said that you could set your watch according to Rav Tzvi Hirsch's comings and goings.

Even Rabbi Dessler's appearance conveyed Kelm's emphasis on order. His clothing is reported to have been simple but always immaculate. While his wife was alive, she used to inspect him and brush off his hat and tie before he departed for the yeshiva. After she passed away, before leaving the house Rabbi Dessler would always carefully examine his beard in the mirror to make sure it was neatly combed.

Servant of God

Kelm Mussar recognizes the practical consequences of disorder, and even more, its spiritual costs. Spiritual living requires order just as much as does our material life.

In the Jewish view, the spiritual seeker is meant to be a servant of God. Our paragon here is Moses, who is called just that: *eved HaShem*, a servant of God.⁷ The first line of the book of Joshua repeats this phrase, again calling Moses *eved HaShem*. Psalm 36 begins: "To the chief musician, A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord." In Leviticus God says: "For to Me are the Israelites servants, My servants that I have redeemed from Egypt."⁸

That the proper attitude for spiritual living should be that of a servant is very counter-cultural to the modern mind. The French, Russian, and American revolutions that set the course for the modern era, as well as innumerable anticolonial wars of independence, were all attempts to overthrow regimes that propagated servitude. So too the American Civil War. Not many national constitutions laud the value of being a servant. But the Jew is meant to serve. Our answer to God's commandment is "We shall do and we shall hear." Doing comes first. We will serve.

We'll circle back to see the connection between being a servant of God and perfecting the inner trait of order. First, though, we need to understand what it is to be one who serves God.

Being a servant of God means striving to align my will to that of the Master. I desire to unify my will with God's will within my own life and to delight in that unification. Rabbi Gamliel used to say: "Do His will as if it

were your will that He may do your will as if it were His will.”⁹ The servant of God seeks an alignment of what he or she wants with the divine will and submerges personal will into the divine will.

Serving in this way requires that I strive to rise above my own personal habits of thought, speech, feeling, and action. I also need to pull myself back from following my eyes and heart in pursuit of unsanctioned and unsanctified personal gratification. The divine will that I seek to know and follow is good and true in a much larger way than whatever serves my own narrow self-interest.

Being a servant who aligns his or her will with the divine will makes you a very useful human being. In time, your efforts will be judged to have been right and good. Right alongside, the doors to personal happiness will be opened wide to you. There is no long-term satisfaction to be gained by pursuing and even temporarily gratifying the desires of the little personal will. Contrast Moses, *eved HaShem* par excellence, who is described in the Shabbat Amidah prayers as “Moses will be happy with the gift of his portion because a faithful servant You have called him.”¹⁰

Happy. A servant.

It is because being a servant of God can be described so well as an alignment of your will with the divine will that practicing order becomes a key step in spiritual life. Alignment without order is inconceivable. As humans we are endowed with free will and so it is perfectly possible for us to choose to be chaotic, but when we make it a conscious practice to be orderly, we are aligning ourselves outwardly—and inwardly—with the universal order.

The essential value of practicing order is that by voluntarily aligning ourselves with an orderly way of living, we draw ourselves closer to the divine way of being. When we are orderly, we emulate one of God’s intrinsic characteristics, and that draws us closer to God.

Rabbi Aaron Kotler¹¹ taught along these lines. He saw that practicing order in time and space replicates the deep pattern of organization in the universe. It’s that order we see in every aspect of creation, which has many parts, all interrelated and perfectly suited to one another. The sun rises at its appointed time and traverses its annual cycle, the oceans stay within their borders, the animals have the food that they need to eat, water evaporates, rain falls, and the physical world operates in an orderly way. Even change happens according to orderly principles. If rivers run higher and

faster, the rate of erosion can be measured. Even tsunamis obey the laws of physics. Because all of creation runs on orderly¹² principles, the Torah, which embodies the blueprint of the world, is orderly as well. The opening chapter of the Torah describes creation itself in terms of the emergence of order from primordial chaos.

Order also helps us with other forms of divine service because it is impossible to track one’s service to and emulation of God without order. The rabbis who have drawn the commandments from the Torah have enumerated the ways to serve God and have given us the *seder* (order) according to which each should be performed. For example, we are commanded to eat matzo and drink four cups of wine on Passover. At one point it is **matzo**, and a second later—beyond the eighteen minutes that it takes to **leaven**—the matzo would be forbidden on Passover. There are measurements for how much matzo is the minimum required to fulfill the commandment,¹³ and how much wine constitutes a “cup.”¹⁴ And of course, all of these acts are organized in a specific sequence, which takes place at the Passover Seder (the same word: “order”).

There are rules to guide how large a *tallis* (prayer shawl) must be and how much charity one must give. A *mezuzah* is always placed at an angle to the doorpost on which it is hung in order to reconcile those who said the mezuzah should hang upright and parallel to the doorpost and those who said it should be placed horizontal and perpendicular to the doorpost.¹⁵ Prayers must be said in a specific order, by a specific time, as laid out in the prayer book, which is called the Siddur (from the same root, meaning “order”). To develop a deep feeling of connection with God in your prayers, you must focus all your attention on your prayers, and this requires orderliness. All in search of order. All in commitment to the divine service.

An Image of Disorder

Consider the consequences of disorder, and you will be strengthened in choosing order in your life. The Torah gives us a direct teaching in this regard in the famous story of the Tower of Babel.¹⁶ The Hebrew word for sin, *averah*—like its English counterpart *transgression*—means “straying across a boundary.” The tower builders’ efforts to reach out to touch

heaven were sinful because they transgressed the limits and constraints that are laid into the deep structure of the universe. Stretching for heaven, they failed to honor the distinction between the human and the divine. Since they flaunted order, their punishment was to suffer disorder, as represented by their inability to communicate with one another. Failure to honor the need for order brings on chaos.

This cautionary tale applies to our lives, too. How much time, energy, emotion, and life is diverted into the channels that spring from disorder? Where are the Haggadot for the Seder? Where is my *tallis*? Who forgot to set the clock? Why didn't you take the soup out of the freezer? Why would I buy milk if it wasn't on the list? It's in here somewhere. I almost got there.

How many relationships are challenged or even destroyed by lack of attention to order?

Without order, you are bound to be wasting something—whether time, resources, things themselves that get lost, relationships, and so on. Not wasting is a Jewish ethical principle.¹⁷

Any management consultant will tell you that you have to get organized if you want to be effective, but our concern goes far beyond that. Our concern is how living in chaos throws up impediments to being attentive to the divine will. And isn't a life at the other end of the spectrum, which would be obsessively rigid, every bit as much an obstacle to spiritual living?

Picture chaos, with stuff flying and piles of junk and cluttered thinking and a clanging ruckus: who could possibly hear the fragile voice of truth whispering in the midst of the tornado? And in contrast, but equally disabling, where order has been taken to the point of extreme inflexibility, even if you heard the divine will, would there be anything you could do to meld your own personal will to the will of God, so unbending would your ways have become?

Practical Order

Mussar is inevitably and insistently a practical discipline, and so if all we did was assert that the soul-trait of order is essential to practical living as well as divine service, that would be like saying "don't steal" and expecting to have put an end to theft once and for all. Knowing something and liv-

ing that truth are not one and the same thing. The gap between the two is where Mussar plays its most important role.

Ask yourself whether disorder is one of your handicaps. Some of us know right away because the mess is visible, maybe right from where you are sitting at this moment. On the other hand, you may have to look a bit, since more of us have figured out ways to keep the clutter out of sight, whether that means in a certain closet or in the secret of our private lives.

Or are you one of those rarer hyperorganized people, who take extreme fastidiousness beyond the golden mean and have made the soft flesh and pliable sinews of life into cement and iron?

Slovenliness and obsessiveness are two extreme qualities that we seek to avoid. The healthy range lies in the middle.

Next you must wonder how you are going to learn to get a grip on that room, those drawers, that pile on the floor, the boxes in the basement, your bank account, your priorities. Or, in the less common contrary case, how can you loosen up that iron fist that has you organizing every paper clip on the desk with obsessive precision?

It is common (though insightful) Mussar guidance that to control or diminish one trait, our efforts are not to be focused on that trait itself but rather on one of its corresponding partner traits. This is an important and not-obvious principle that makes a great deal of sense when you think about it. It applies very well to the soul-trait of order. Telling a disorderly person (who could be yourself) to clean up his or her act and get organized is a lot like telling a fire to cool down. It may be what you want, and it may be what is right, but is it likely to be successful?

Instead of fruitlessly yelling at the fire to cool down (to pursue this metaphor), you need to ask yourself, "What's the 'water' in this case?" In other words, what's the corresponding trait that will, if strengthened, cause the obstacles to orderliness to evaporate as if by themselves?

Let me give a few suggestions, based in Mussar sources. Since disorder leaning into chaos is more common than the problem of obsessive order, I'll focus on disorder, though the same way of analyzing and applying can be useful to one who is rigidly obsessive as well. It's up to you to figure out how to employ the general teaching in your own situation.

It may not be obvious at first why cultivating certain traits serves to counteract issues of order. That's what I will endeavor to explain. Often the connection between traits is subterranean, and so we are fortunate to

have had the Mussar masters who have come before us, excavators that they were.

Undermining Disorder

The first of the countervailing traits I'll suggest is that most central of qualities, humility. Recall the definition of humility we developed in the chapter on that soul-trait: humility means occupying your appropriate space, neither too much nor too little.

The Torah provides a story about order that links clearly to humility. It describes how the people of Israel were told to organize themselves in formation for camping and traveling in the desert: "The Israelites shall camp with each person near the banner, under the flag of their ancestral house. They shall camp at a specified distance around the Tent of Meeting."¹⁸ Each tribe is then positioned in a certain direction with respect to the central tent.

We read in a midrash that when God told Moses that the Jews were to be arranged in this specific formation, Moses complained that if he specified such an organization, there would be protests. "If I tell Yehuda to camp in the east, they will say they want the south, and so it will be with each and every tribe."¹⁹

This story underlines the human tendency to rebel against imposed order. It doesn't matter if the order that is being foisted on us is good, right, useful, or sensible. As long as our "rightful space" is being imposed, we don't want it: "If I tell Yehuda to camp in the east, they will say they want the south." Not that the south is necessarily better than the east or the north, it's just not what you told me to do, and that's the point. Sound familiar?

Disorder is often the child of a rebellious ego that resists humbly occupying a rightful space. All that it whispers in your inner ear can be reduced to "I want" or "I don't want."

I want to have fun, and cleaning up after myself is no fun.

I want to keep accumulating stuff, and organizing it is not something I enjoy.

I want my leisure, and setting things in order is work.

Or . . . I don't want to take responsibility for my stuff. I don't want to do that. I don't have to.

No matter what follows the word "I," there's no mistaking that the subject is "me." Hence the antidote here would be humility. All the methods for cultivating humility that the Mussar masters have formulated over the centuries come into play here.

The subject is large and, I think, the point is made: one approach to undercutting and disarming that inner voice that gives all sorts of reasons and incentives to maintain clutter and chaos is to employ the techniques the Mussar teachers have developed for fostering genuine humility. Order is, after all, a kind of submission of will, and humility fosters submission in place of the ego's self-assertion.

Another soul-trait that bears on order is *kavod*, meaning "honor." The Mussar teachers have had almost as much to say about honor as humility, since the two are actually very closely linked. In this case, what I have in mind is that disorder inevitably involves some sort of dishonor. The only question is, what or who is the target of the dishonor?

When you live with other people and you are content to make a mess in shared spaces, you dishonor the people you live with.

When you are careless and sloppy in your business dealings, you dishonor the people you work with.

When you can't keep anything straight for your customers, clients, or students, you dishonor the people you work for.

And not just people. It's interesting that we use the phrase "unholy mess" to describe a situation that has really been trashed, because to be disorderly also dishonors the inanimate things that are also part of our lives and may also be our responsibility.

The real "unholy mess," of course, is the disorder we bring to divine service, in whatever forms we might serve God, which dishonors HaShem.

Honor is due to all human beings not because of the greatness of their achievements but more simply because they embody an inherently holy soul. When you activate this inner sensibility, you want to keep things in order not just for order's sake, but also for the higher purpose of honoring the people with whom you share relationships. All of us are, after all, made in the divine image, and so when we dishonor people we dishonor God, and when we honor people we honor God.

A story about Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar in the Talmud²⁰ has him riding along on his donkey, feeling proud of his learning, and then meeting an ugly man. The man greeted the rabbi respectfully, saying, "Peace be

with you, Rabbi!” The rabbi did not return the greeting, and, moreover, said: “Simpleton, how ugly are the children of Abraham our father! Are all your townsmen as ugly as you?” To which the man replied: “That I do not know; perhaps you should go to the Creator who formed me and say to Him: ‘How ugly is the creature You have made!’”

Rabbi Shimon recovers, but the story has already delivered its caution not to set ourselves up as judges over others. *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) has Hillel saying, “Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place.” Cultivating an attitude of honoring others helps supplant the tendency to judge people that is so well entrenched in many of us. This is important because, as the famous analogy puts it, when you insult the pot, you insult the potter.

I have worked to foster honor by holding a phrase in mind and then turning my mind to the phrase whenever I encounter someone. I’ve used a phrase I’ve created—“each one a holy soul”—as well as one drawn from Proverbs: “The soul of man is the candle of God.”²¹ Calling a phrase like this to mind is a very effective way to instill a sense of honoring others.

The wisdom of Mussar tells us to be humble and then the resistance to order will evaporate. Honor others and order will come about as a natural consequence. Learning this and putting it into practice is a true gift of Mussar. The inner way to a more productive life will be opened and, much more significantly, the channels to divine service will be cleared. Effort is focused on countervailing soul-traits, and the fruit of the effort is order.²²

The Clasp on the Necklace

Mussar itself also depends on order. Ideally one’s Mussar time should be the same every day—a fixed time that works with your schedule. Set this plan in advance and do your best to keep to it.

One of the core Mussar practices is keeping a daily journal, a practice that I will describe at greater length in chapter 28. The thrust of Mussar journaling is to record your own experiences. As simple as that may sound, many people report difficulty in sustaining the practice. Working with students to solve this problem, I have learned that it is easier to keep the journal if the practice is made to coincide with the preexisting order in your own life. One woman contacted me and told me she had to drop

out of a course I was leading. “Why?” I asked her. “Because I can’t keep the journal in the evening,” she answered. “Have you tried doing it in the morning?” I inquired. “You can do that?” was her answer.

Now I recommend that people place their diaries somewhere along the paths they already walk in their life, where they will see it and encounter it and be reminded to write in it. Beside the coffee pot? Under your toothbrush? On your pillow? The journal practice has great effect if done consistently; order can be put to work to support the practice.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe says in the name of the Alter of Kelm that order can be compared to the clasp on a pearl necklace.²³ The pearls are what make the necklace, and they are definitely more important than the clasp, but without the clasp the pearls will fall off and scatter, and all that will remain of the necklace is the string alone. Similarly, a person contains an abundance of strengths, intellect, character traits, and qualities. But without order, all these virtues will scatter, and he or she will be left with nothing.

Seeing the soul-trait of order as the clasp on a string of pearls provides a useful metaphor for bringing our focus on order to a practical conclusion. When we conceive of order as a midpoint, we are reminded that what ultimately matters in regard to order is to be personally and inwardly “centered.” Order helps create an inner sense that the things that matter have been properly arranged and tended to and, as a result, that the details of life are under control. Calm and unworried, at that point the channels to the divine will are as open and unencumbered as they can get, and the possibility of serving—and happiness—will have become real for you.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be God’s will.

Who orders the stars in their heavenly constellations as
He wills.

—From the Ma’ariv Aravim prayer
recited during the evening service