

# Equanimity

## MENUCHAT HA'NEFESH

*Rise above the good and the bad.*

As long as a man's mind is settled, his intellectual spirit quietly stands guard, spreading its light upon his mind as if it were a torch atop the edifice of his body.

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

MY FIRST EXPOSURE to Mussar included a lesson on inner peace unlike any I had ever encountered before. It was words of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter that surprised me so. He said: "As long as one lives a life of calmness and tranquility in the service of God, it is clear that he is remote from true service."<sup>1</sup>

All notions I held about the spiritual life pointed in the opposite direction. Isn't spiritual practice supposed to make us more calm? What's the point of cultivating an inner life if it doesn't result in greater tranquillity? But Rabbi Salanter's meaning is clear. From his perspective, if you have come to a place in your life where all the waters are becalmed and the waves have been stilled, there is a very good chance that you are in a coma, or at least deeply asleep. It is not a good place to be.

Equanimity and tranquillity are attractive in these turbulent and uncertain times. It's so seductive to think of a total escape from the storms and turmoil of life. The place of infinite and permanent calm beckons so invitingly that we can easily overlook the possibility that the serenity we seek would be nothing but a velvet-lined jail cell.

Rabbi Salanter's view cuts right across that grain. Comfort, sweet and soft, invites us to snuggle down and fall asleep, and that can't be our spiritual

goal. Many Jewish teachers liken life to a ladder or a narrow bridge. Would you want to be asleep?

Neither Rabbi Salanter nor any other Mussar teacher has been interested in the soft sell, but rather truth, and especially the truth about our lives. And I confess without reluctance that the truth of my experience is that struggle continues. Despite the years of practice and learning, I continue to be challenged inwardly and to experience daily effort to lift myself up against inner forces that are primed and ready to pull me down, in betrayal of what I hold as my own values, my potential, and the vision of a human being the Torah presents.

What we encounter here is a very Jewish view of life. Your spiritual practice will give you many gifts, but don't expect it to relieve you of your human nature.

### *Human Nature*

There is a story told about Rabbi Elyah Lopian,<sup>2</sup> a great Mussar teacher of the last generation, who had responsibility for the spiritual lives of boys and young men in a yeshiva. One student came to ask permission to go home for the weekend to attend a family celebration. Rabbi Lopian knew that the boy came from a very secular family, and he was concerned about what the boy might be exposed to at home, like immodestly dressed women. "Aren't you concerned about that?" he asked the boy. "Oh no," the boy replied. "I have a plan. I won't look." To which the saintly Rabbi Lopian replied, "I am ninety-two years old and I am blind in one eye and I still look!"

Such is human nature, and Mussar doesn't point us toward a complete transcendence of who we are, as if the goal is to become something other than human, like an angel. Our efforts will be rewarded and we will make progress in our climb toward the light of holiness, but we should know that the effort will be continuous. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes:<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish approach to life considers the man who has stopped going—he who has a feeling of completion, of peace, of a great light from above that has brought him to rest—to be someone who has lost his way. Only he whom the light continues to beckon, for

whom the light is as distant as ever, only he can be considered to have received some sort of response.

Does this mean that the inner trait of equanimity is not only unattainable but maybe even undesirable? That would be an understandable conclusion to draw, but it would be totally incorrect. The Mussar teachers do tell us that equanimity is a very important inner trait to cultivate.

### *Calmness of the Soul*

Jewish sources use several terms to name the soul-trait of undisturbed equanimity, the most descriptive of which is *menuchat ha'nefesh*, calmness of the soul.<sup>4</sup> The Mussar teachers see the importance of a calm soul, but they don't see that inner state as a final station called "Peace and Tranquility" where the journey ends, even as life continues. Instead, they view equanimity as an inner balance that coexists with a world and an experience that accepts turbulence and even turmoil, because that's just the way life is.

In the Jewish view, the goal of spiritual life is not to reach an enlightened state in which all the questions and conundrums of life are unknotted with finality, but rather to become much more skilled at the processes of living. This view applies fully to the soul-trait of equanimity, which does not spell the end of our struggles, but rather is an inner quality we can cultivate to equip ourselves to handle the inevitable ups and downs of life.

The Mussar teachers want us to be a calm soul who is like a surfer who rides the waves on an even inner keel, regardless of what is happening within and around him. Even as the waves are rising and falling, the calm soul rides the crest, staying upright, balanced, and moving in the direction the rider chooses. Equanimity is a quality of being centered in yourself, though at the same time being exquisitely sensitive to the forces that are at work all around, or else you will be vulnerable to being tossed around by the sorts of unexpected waves that crash in on every life.

Equanimity in the Mussar usage does not suggest that feelings are idling in neutral. It isn't a kind of numbness. You still register the ups and downs of the feelings—those are the waves—but you stay awake to the experience from an undisturbed place. When you are submerged in your feelings without at least a flicker of self-awareness, the light of consciousness is extinguished, and the doors to connection and choice are closed. But if

awareness is calmly present, even amid the storms of life, your soul maintains its connection to others and to the divine source and your free will is preserved.

### *Tests*

The situations—large and small—that crop up in everybody's life and disturb our inner peace are not just painful inconveniences, the Mussar masters say, they are tests.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is open to you to pass or fail. Where you get tested is in those specific soul-traits where you yourself are vulnerable. A situation that presses on a well measured and strong trait really is no test at all, and what you will do in response is no stretch. But if you are a person prone to anger and someone steps on your toes (literally or figuratively), or if you are sorely tempted to steal and someone leaves an open purse right under your nose, or if lust gets you every time and the hotel desk clerk is just your type, then here we have a test.

The Alter of Novarodok made preparing for these life-tests a central feature of the Mussar he taught. His view was that we all tend to be very pious and God-fearing, so long as there is nothing particularly difficult challenging our willpower. He warned that when those sorts of troublesome challenges do come our way, as they inevitably will, we are likely to find ourselves unprepared and at risk of crumbling. We're wise to make the commitment to learn and practice at those times when we are not being tested so that we will have resolve and resources at the ready when challenge and trial do come to us, as they will. "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but God tests hearts," the book of Proverbs teaches.<sup>6</sup>

The Alter of Novarodok once asked his students, "Do you know why the Master of the Universe created trains?" And before any of them could give a response, he answered himself, "In order to bring students to the Novarodok Yeshiva!"

A thoughtful student then questioned, "But Rebbe, if so, why does the train run in both directions?"

"That," said the Alter, "is the test."

Understanding and accepting the testing nature of life is essential to the cultivation of equanimity, because it is when you are being tested that you are most likely to be wrested from your inner balance.

The ideal response to a test is to rise to the occasion and to triumph

with flying colors, which would mean stretching into the challenged soul-trait in a way that is both difficult for you to do and also good for the soul. The reality, however, has to be that you could go either way. That's why the test is real. If you pass a test, then that aspect of your inner being gets strengthened and you earn the right to move on—to face yet another set of challenges, as we have learned. Otherwise, you are likely to encounter the same test again at some future point.

I've seen this situation play out most clearly in relationships. Once the honeymoon is over, the relationship can look like nothing but tests. Too often people run from these trials, get divorced, and then proceed to find another relationship—that tests their weak soul-traits in exactly the same way.

Although we may regret it, curse it, and wish it were otherwise, it's inevitable that we keep coming into situations that challenge aspects of our nature where we are ripe to grow. Every life is peppered with these sorts of tests and trials. Why is life set up this way? Certainly not so we will inevitably fail and fall, but rather so we will keep being confronted by opportunities to grow. Life provides the real circumstances in which to mold character and cleanse the soul. From this perspective, our entire life is a curriculum, and as in any course, there are tests along the way. Our challenge is to meet these tests and to use them to purify and rectify and so clear our way to draw closer to each other and to God.

### *Tests Are on the Curriculum*

When you think of the tests you have met and are meeting along your curriculum for growth, you'll likely think of negative challenges—lust, greed, rage, jealousy, arrogance, and the like. These are indeed common tests, but positive experiences can also become tests as we travel along our path. Success, for example, can sometimes be more of a challenge than failure. A run of success can lift a person on waves of elation, spurring a sense of invincibility. Intoxicating arrogance and dangerous greed will feed on success much more effectively than on failure. This is a phenomenon well-known in the business world, where it is a recognized and proven recipe for disaster.

So life keeps delivering tests to your doorstep, whether you happen to be living through dark days or when things are going very well. My observations of my own life as well as those of others convince me that you do yourself a favor by not pushing away from your struggles but instead embracing

them, because they seem to be inevitable, woven right into the very fabric of life. In fact, if you are committed to your own growth, you won't even want your struggles to end because they are the very pathway to growth. The tests are the path. When we consider the ideal inner attitude you can adopt as you contend with your challenges, we are returned to the subject of equanimity.

### *The Independent Soul*

In his chapter on equanimity in his nineteenth-century Mussar book *Cheshbon ha'Nefesh*, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin sums up equanimity in a sentence: "Rise above events that are inconsequential—both good and bad," he writes, "for they are not worth disturbing your calmness of soul." His message is that the good that happens to you is as likely to cloud your settled inner state with mental agitation as is the bad, and in either case, the emotional overload is sure to have a negative impact on your life.

A classic Jewish story<sup>7</sup> attributed to the great kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria sets the standard for equanimity in facing the challenge inherent in both pleasant and nasty situations:

A rabbi once came to one of the contemplative Kabbalists and asked to be accepted as an initiate. The Master said to him, "My son, may God bless you, for your intentions are good. Tell me, though, whether or not you have attained equanimity."

The rabbi said to him, "Master, please explain your words."

The Master replied, "If there were two people, and one of them honored you and the other insulted you, are they equal in your eyes?"

The rabbi answered, "No, my Master. For I feel pleasure and satisfaction from the one who honors me, and pain from the insults of the other. But I do not take revenge or bear a grudge."

The Master blessed the rabbi and sent him away. "Go in peace, my son. When you have attained equanimity, your soul does not feel the honor deriving from one who honors you nor the embarrassment arising from insults. Your consciousness is not yet ready to be attached to the supernal."

We learn something crucial about equanimity here. Calmness of the soul is described as a kind of *independence*. Even though you may be aware



of honor as honor and insult as insult, your emotional state at any moment is not determined by the intentions and actions someone else (or life) sends in your direction. All sorts of feelings will come, as they do in all our lives, but when you are possessed of equanimity, your inner core is not left open to being whipped around by external experiences. You are freer than that.

This seems desirable, especially if we accept that life is bound to keep sending us struggles. We're going to be much better at guiding our way through life's challenges if we are not pulled off center by other peoples' emotions, wishes, and projections.

What makes our challenges so challenging, however, is the fact that they come at us charged with powerful feelings. This is the reality that makes the tests so hard. The bigger the challenge, the more we will experience feelings that will be difficult to sort out or even endure. The more you have mastered inner calmness, however, the better prepared you are to ride the waves of feelings as they arise in you.

Equanimity is the best mind state to be in when meeting a test. Think of being a general on the battlefield—would you want your soldiers to be all inwardly agitated and volatile, or calm, cool, and collected?

Still, we need to recognize that it isn't enough to say "yes to equanimity," as if that's all that's required to strengthen ourselves in that quality. If we really want to bring the balance and poise of a calm soul into the field of action of our lives, we have to take steps that will cause the roots of equanimity to work their way deep into our inner soil.

### *Distance Yourself*

How are we to attain a settled mind that keeps its composure despite the vicissitudes of life? Rabbi Leffin uses the term "rise above" to help us find our inner stance, and this is helpful, though I would like to suggest an alternative that shows up more frequently in the Mussar literature and that I think is more practical: the guidance is to *distance yourself*.

In his famous letter to his son, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman<sup>8</sup> advises: "Distance yourself from anger." And in the *Orchot Chaim* [Ways of Life] of the Rosh, we are advised, "Distance yourself from pride." This phrase, "distance yourself," shows up elsewhere as well.<sup>9</sup>

By "distance yourself" we are surely *not* being told never to be angry, proud, jealous, and the like, because Mussar teachers consistently assert that this would be an unrealistic goal—everyone experiences the full range of inner states, and in and of itself, every inner trait is neither good nor bad. More important is how we respond to what we feel. "Distance yourself," then, can mean only two things. Either we are to stay physically far from people who are angry, proud, and so forth, or we are being directed to develop some kind of *inner* distance from the experience of our own anger, pride, and other incendiary soul-traits.

Although there are definitely times when we ought to stand away from powerful outer forces (including "fools and sinners,"<sup>10</sup> as we are warned), we need to be more concerned with the impulses and reactions that arise in us. We are solely responsible for the powerful inner forces that can lead us astray, and so these are our first priority. The guidance we are being given here is to cultivate an inner attitude that creates some distance between the stimulus that comes at us (whether from within or outside) and our reactions to it. We make this space by cultivating an inner capacity to bear witness.

When you have a strong inner witness, outer influences are seen for what they are. Your soul can clearly perceive "the honor of the one who honors you and the embarrassment of the one who insults you," and that lucid perception will help you keep yourself from being infected by sentiments that swirl around you. That same inner faculty will also keep you from being pushed around by the forces that arise within you—the distanced witness is not (or is at least less) susceptible to the tides of doubt, temptation, and jealousy, that wash through the interior world.

### *Beckoned by the Light*

Do we still face struggles? Yes. Are the struggles real? Yes. Do the consequences matter? Yes. Do we still feel the full range of human emotions and drives? Yes. In other words, every aspect of your current life is real and important. You would be wise to embrace it because it's your soul curriculum. But cultivate the witness who will make you the master of the inner realm and not the victim.

Meditation prepares an inner witness. While sitting still and silent, many inner states will arise, and over time you can get quite good at simply living

in their presence without feeling that you are a slave to any of them, whether repugnant or alluring.

Rabbi Steinsaltz describes the Jewish spiritual experience as a constant beckoning to the light. If we take that word *constant* seriously, then the light we seek must be present at all times and in all situations, no matter how murky or even dark they appear to us. Meditation strengthens the witness so we can remain inwardly aware and attentive to that light in every context in which we find ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

I know this experience personally, and therefore I understand why the metaphor of light is favored, but we are not speaking of real physical light here. There is a way of perceiving that includes a kind of shimmering meta-reality that isn't an aspect of any single thing in sight but encompasses all of it. I can shift into and out of that level of perception. Sometimes I only see the hard-edged stuff in the world. Other times I still see that stuff and also another reality breaching through, an intangible and luminous presence that radiates into all. The shell of materiality is infused with that illumination.

It is the job of the witness to keep an eye out for that light. When you realize that, and assign this task to your inner witness, and strengthen this practice, then over time the witness will make you more aware of the radiance that is a constant in the ever-shifting contexts in which you live.

An inner eye connected to the constant light won't give you a life of fewer challenges and struggles, but it will give you equanimity that will serve you well as you engage with these challenges. It's hard to imagine another inner state that you would want to bring to the trials that come your way, to better help you triumph. Maybe that's why the Alter of Kelm tells us: "A person who has mastered peace of mind has gained everything."

The essence of a person of faith is equanimity.

—Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda,  
*Duties of the Heart*

## 13

# Honor

## KAVOD

*Each and every one, holy soul.*

Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students. All of them died over thirty-two days between Passover and Shavuot because they did not show respect toward each other.

—*Yevamot* 62b

MANY OF US act as if we were born with a clipboard and have been assigned the task of evaluating everyone we meet. I see this tendency in myself, and maybe you can recognize it in yourself as well. You walk into a room and immediately scan the crowd, taking in everyone who is there, and putting them all through an instant evaluation. It can get pretty ugly, and few of us would likely ever verbalize the sorts of things we routinely run through in our minds as we mentally dress down other people.

"She wore that?"

"Just look at that dumb face!"

"Loud!"

"Such a slouch. Stand up straight, why don't you?"

"She smokes?"

I'll stop and let you continue. What sorts of things do you say (only to yourself, of course) when that judgmental frame of mind has a grip on you, and you are moving through life as if someone appointed you to be a judge whose job it is to assess whether or not people measure up?

Let me ask, can you detect even a hint of honor in that attitude? Honor not for what people have done, or how they do it, but in recognition of the