



**Mussar Monthly**  
 by R. Yitzchok Summers

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About a hundred years ago, there was a “popular” Yiddish saying, “shever shu’zein a Yid (it is difficult to be a Jew).” Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l commented that this one phrase greatly damaged people’s attachment to true Torah Judaism.

If one has an attitude, mistaken as it might be, that it is depressing and difficult to be *frum*, then why would one pursue such a lifestyle? We know that the opposite is true. A Torah life is, and should be, inspiring and enjoyable, and a path that one would take because of it’s intrinsic value (even without the great reward which is due to a shomer Torah u’mitzovs).

This same idea applies to *mussar*. The misused phrase, “I am going to give you some mussar!” has done more damage than we can imagine. It immediately conjures up the idea that mussar is painful and something that one should dread. Indeed, the **Torah itself**, gives us the proper definition and perspective of mussar.

Moshe Rabbeinu tells Bnei Yisroel, “V’yedatem ha’yom (you should know today) ki lo es benaychem (for it is not your children) asher lo yado v’asher lo ra’oh (who did not know and who did not see) es *mussar* HaShem.” -Parshas Eikev, perek 11, posuk 2

Many translate the word “mussar” as “chastisement.” However Rav Yechezkel Sarna zt”l (Rosh Yeshiva of Chevron zy”a in Delayos Yechezkel al ha’Torah, page 202) points out that this is incorrect. Rav Sarna brings Onkelous who translates “mussar” as “ol’fana” which means to learn or take instruction. Clearly, the way that the world understands and perceives mussar is totally incorrect. Mussar is intended to be an instructive guide – an uplifting, positive experience as opposed to a destructive dejecting one.

A talmid chochom once told me he figured out why many yeshivos do not study mussar on Shabbos, “It is depressing” he said, and therefore not in the spirit of Shabbos. Those who know the true secret and power of mussar know that just the opposite it true. I reported this encounter to my Rosh Yeshiva, HaGaon HaRav A.H. Leibowitz shlita, (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim). The Rosh Yeshiva said, “[that person] does not know *anything* about mussar.” The proper study of mussar is inspiring and invigorating! The problem is that few know the true *method* needed in order to experience the full effect that mussar has to offer.

## What is Mussar?

Before we go further, we have to answer this critical question: what is mussar? The short answer is that mussar involves the use of Torah as viewed by Chazal (our Sages) to facilitate character growth and development, during a set time each day, with the goal of improving our middos (character traits).

One might then ask, “Who says I am obligated to do this?” There are numerous sources that reinforce a daily discipline to study mussar. To cite just a few:

- Rav Yisroel Salanter zt”l in his letters (Ohr Yisroel, #11) states, “The war against the evil inclination cannot be prosecuted and sustained without *proper* study of mussar.”
- The Vilna Gaon (Maasei Rav, siman 60) states, “One should study mussar texts *several times a day.*”
- The Baal Shem Tov in his tzava (ethical will, page 26) states, “Study mussar each day and cling thereby to good middos.”
- The Chofetz Chaim says in Mishnah Brurah (siman 1, 12), “A person must set aside specific time to study mussar sefarim *each day*...and to study mussar is a greater obligation than the study of Mishnah!”

## The Mussar Method

More specifically the “Mussar Movement,” founded by Rav Yisroel Salanter zt”l, utilizes a special system by which Torah is used to form an “adam ha’shaleim,” a person of perfection in all facets of life. This is why Rav Yisroel in the above citation, makes reference to the “*proper* study of mussar.”

Many have attempted to study mussar yet fail to derive benefit from it. This is because either the study is not consistent (i.e., not daily), or they are not trained in the “Mussar Method,” needed for success.

Based upon Rav Yisroel Salanter zt”l, the “*Mussar Method*” has three components. Each part is an ingredient in the recipe for Torah growth and development:

- 1- Limud HaMussar – the study of mussar
- 2- Chachmas HaMussar – appreciating the depth and wisdom of Chazal
- 3- Chinuch HaMussar – training oneself in the lessons that one has gleaned from the first two parts.

In our next issue we will discuss each of the above steps and begin to unlock the mussar methodology according to our *mesorah* from Rav Yisroel Salanter zy”a and Yeshivas Slabodka.