

Mussar: A Mortal's Path to O'lam Habah

by Scott Crespy

What does a lifelong fascination to super heroes have in common with the modern day practice of Mussar? Each has a step in the world of “what could be,” or in Judaism, the world of O'lam Haba. After seeing *Batman Begins* the other night with one of my children, I wondered what is it that grabs me about super hero movies. Whether the character has ninja training like Batman, or was stung by a radioactive spider like Spiderman, or born on a distant planet like Superman, each has abilities that take him to another level and allows him to have a disproportionate impact on their world. They don't accept the crime, poverty or other malaise of their time; they use their abilities for good.

What does a modern Mussar practice have to do with this? Mussar is an ancient Jewish discipline and approach to life that focuses on developing a person's capacity to care for others. Specifically, Mussar is an approach to ethical development that links Mitzvot, which regulate how we treat others, and Middot, which are ethical/virtuous character traits. As examples, *loshon hara* develops our purity of speech, not lying develops honesty, feeding/clothing the poor, widow and orphan develops generosity and so on. Mussar is an essentially optimistic approach and assumes each person's inherent goodness. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, an important Mussar Rabbi, points out that nothing about what is needed to live an ethical life is new; in *Mesillat Yesharim* he writes that we all know how to do good at an intellectual level. Mussar's methodology and focus on everyday living provide a pathway to take these ideas out of our “heads” and into our hearts .

The practice of Mussar takes me to the edge of what can be. By systematically learning about myself and my triggers, I learn to better control and transform my reactions in everyday life so that I can hopefully approach situations from my better self, with the energy of my yetzer hatov. Like any skill, such as yoga, body building, professional athletics, chess, and public speaking to name a few, Mussar involves practice. The first part of the practice is learning to recognize and control our yetzer hara, the energy we need to take care of our basic needs for food, shelter, and family, all worthy pursuits. Sometimes, that energy can dominate and move us beyond a concern for those basic needs, and we then become selfish and self-absorbed. In the next phase of Mussar practice, the goal is to cultivate our better selves and to free our inner reserves to allow us to see, respond to and be there for those in our family, in our communities and beyond.

While a Mussar practice may not allow us to scale walls, stealthily fight a group of thugs, or fly faster than a speeding bullet, it can allow us to tap into our own hidden reserves so we too can make the world a little better place. According to Rabbi Ira Stone, stepping past our limitations, doing things out of our comfort zone to help others is like taking a step into the world to come, O'lam Haba, or what our world can be.