The Spiritual Practice of Good Actions: Finding Balance Through the Soul Traits of Mussar

Greg Marcus
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At a time in his life when he was being torn apart by conflicting commitments to family, faith, and a workaholic lifestyle, Greg Marcus found a treasure trove of wisdom in his own Jewish tradition. His encounter with Mussar, a thousand-year-old Jewish spiritual growth practice based on mindful living, gave him a way to bring his everyday life into alignment with his highest values and aspirations.

Marcus writes that "there is a solid argument that the Jews invented self-help over one thousand years ago." But Mussar "correction," or "instruction" in Hebrew or "ethics" in modern Hebrew, is a practice that's accessible to everyone. Based on universal principles, using real-world examples, and believing that only actions count, Mussar turns the happenings of everyday life into opportunities for spiritual growth, asking us to admit where we are and take the needed step to be a little better than we were the day before.

Teaching that the goal of our life is not to attain tranquility but to actively and mindfully live our lives doing good things, Mussar works on developing thirteen different "soul traits" by isolating one of them for two weeks, then moving on to the next. Daily practice, alone or in community, has three parts: meditation, mindful action, and journaling, all geared toward helping us to recognize our choice points, get out of our comfort zones, and make the better choice.

KRISTINE MORRIS (Fall 2016)