

## Compassion and Cruelty: The Promise and Limits of the Musar Movement

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- **Musar:** moral discipline, moral instruction, moral correction, the cultivation of virtues/good character traits
- **The Musar Movement:** a 19th and early 20th century Orthodox movement, based in Lithuania, deeply focused on musar
- Two key founders of the Musar movement: Rabbi **Israel Salanter** (1810-1883) and his student Rabbi **Simḥah Zissel Ziv** (1824-1898)

### *Some Musar movement reflections on compassion (love, lovingkindness, “sharing the burden”):*

#### **1. Emulating Moses**

**Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, *Hokhmah u-Musar*, 1:3**

It is only possible to feel another person’s pain, and to share their burden, by utilizing significant mental images, so that with all the pain and suffering and injury which happen to another person, it is as if it happened to oneself....

Moses ‘grew up... and saw [the slaves’] sufferings” (Exodus 2:11). [The biblical commentator] Rashi explains: he “focused his eyes and his heart to suffer on their account.” This means: he habituated himself [to suffering on their account] through a mental image.... He habituated himself to seeing mental images to such an extent that he felt their pain as if he himself was in such pain, and so he came to be sharing their burden... [just as God did]—“with all of their pain, [God] was pained” (Isaiah 63:9).

#### **2. Emulating God**

**Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, *Hokhmah u-Musar*, 1:31-34**

The [fundamental] quality of God is that [God] loves all creatures; were it not so, they could not exist in the world. And we find that loving God’s creatures is closeness to the Blessed One.... Our sages, in their holy way, have taught us: how can a person draw close to the Blessed One? By cleaving to [God’s] attributes (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a). There are none of God’s character traits that are more apparent to us than love of [God’s] creatures.

“You open up your hand and satisfy the desire of all that lives” (Psalms 145:16)—we see that every single creature receives pleasure and satisfaction for its desire, and this is simply God’s love for [God’s] creatures. And consequently we find that the prohibition on causing suffering to animals comes from the Torah (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 32b) and that “the world is built upon lovingkindness” (Psalms 89:3).

### **3. Loving One's Fellow as Oneself**

**Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, *Kitvei Ha-Sabba Mi-Kelm: Elul Ve-Yamim Nora'im*, 147–48**

We are warned to slowly, slowly accustom ourselves to the character trait of generosity to such an extent that we will give charity in the way that one gives to one's children, to whom one does not give because of the commandment of charity but in the way that one puts food in one's own mouth: a person finds joy whenever one is able to please one's family with clothes and food and drink. A person needs to accustom oneself to the character trait of generosity in this way, to such an extent that one finds joy in helping and providing for the poor, as if they are truly part of one's family. . . . And this is as the matter of "loving your fellow as yourself."

One should love one's fellow as one loves oneself, for a person does not love oneself to fulfill the commandment of loving God's creatures, but rather loves oneself naturally. . . . Thus the warning is given to a person that one should accustom oneself to the character trait of loving God's creatures, slowly, slowly, until one naturally loves the other, and naturally rejoices in the good of the other, just as one naturally rejoices in one's own good and the good of one's children, rather than to fulfill a commandment, for then one's love would not be complete. One's love will only be complete if one loves naturally. And this is the goal of the commandment and the desire of the Blessed One in commanding "loving your fellow as yourself"—and in this way one will come to resemble the Blessed One.

### **4. The Fragility of Love**

**Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv, *Hokhmah u-Musar*, 1:91, 2:20**

One who wants to habituate oneself in the character trait of generosity, who engages in charity and acts of lovingkindness, who provides food and drink for the poor, can deeply increase the generosity within one's heart. . . . but nevertheless we know that even the best of them can revert to being reborn with a cruel nature. . . .

When a person focuses upon some matter, one is weakened in another matter. For example, one who immerses oneself very strongly in the [study of] Torah may become weak in the matter of loving and doing good for people. This is because our reason is too powerless to include all of the parts in balance. . . .

### **5. The Empirical Research**

**Prof. Christian Miller (author of *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?*), in *The Journal of Jewish Ethics* 3:1**

At least as far as we know at the current time, the emotion of empathy is necessary for cultivating loving motivation and thereby the virtue of love itself. . . . Here is the remarkable thing—Simḥah Zissel himself proposed that empathy is crucial to developing the virtue of altruistic love. . . . For now, at least, the empirical research has vindicated Simḥah Zissel's approach here. . . . We need to become far more empathetic toward the psychological lives of other people than we tend to be naturally. The path of musar, in this respect at least, becomes a path devoted to discovering and internalizing strategies for increasing our empathetic capacities.