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## Musar And The Me Generation

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One phenomenon of our time is that many from my generation (in our 20s and 30s), irrespective of the denominations with which we identify, are more religiously observant than our parents.

While many of our parents had a more organic sense of being Jewish, many of us for whom Judaism is a central aspect of our personal identity feel compelled to act upon that identity in ways that are more frequent and sustained than our parents. We often mistakenly articulate this in terms of being "more religious." This is, of course, a misnomer.

While it is true that many of us feel more attracted to Jewish ritual and experience a greater openness to traditional observance, defining what it means to be "religious" is a formidable theological undertaking. It's more than a theoretical discussion, though. Asking that question can lead us to answers that break down dichotomies we have perpetuated and divisions that unnecessarily polarize generations within the Jewish community.

Many from our parents' and grandparents' generation stressed the ethical underpinnings of Judaism. They shaped a Judaism that privileged ethics over ritual, a person's obligation to others over obligations to God. Many from our generation dismiss this as too minimal a way to identify as Jews. We assume their emphasis on ethics was simply a convenient point of meeting between their Jewishness and their desire to be part of mainstream American life. We have always suspected that the emphasis on ethics that defined the Judaism of previous generations of American Jews was, beneath the surface, really a desire to shape a Judaism which was easy, that demanded almost nothing.

Many of our grandparents and parents had boundless faith in the promises of modernity, the opportunities of American life and the price that such opportunities required. But American life has radically changed, and our generation seeks to assert our own Jewish particularism in the context of an America that is increasingly open to such expression. We lack the unbridled enthusiasm for modernity and are more sensitive to the limits of rationality.

While it's easy to critique the past from the vantage point of the present, it would be unwise for our generation to dismiss the previous emphasis on ethics as assimilationist and lazy. There is something in that earlier "classical" interpretation of Judaism that my generation can claim and revive. We may be too tightly wrapped up in our talleisim and tefillin to realize the unique resource with which that earlier thinking provides us. While our parents' and grandparents' emphasis on ethics seemed too easy — a kind of "be a good person" Judaism — perhaps the time has come to bridge such ideas with the discipline and passion of the religious lives we seek to live.

What we need today is no less than a revived and (post-) modern Musar movement. Musar, the 19th century movement of personal piety and ethical behavior, informed the character of many yeshivas throughout Eastern Europe. Championed by Rabbi Israel Salanter, Musar arose as a response to the dichotomy that existed between traditional Jewish learning and personal reverence. Musar was distinguished by its emphasis on moral reflection and self-

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improvement. It was aimed at overcoming materialism and vanity. At its helm were rabbis who were mashgichim, a term usually associated with kashrut supervision but here applied to mean “supervisors of the soul.”

A contemporary revival of Musar would emphasize the primacy of interpersonal ethics in the life of the Jew. It would change the parameters of what it means to be religious. Like so much in post-modernity, it would force us to abandon the very categories and labels with which we are so accustomed to using to explain who we are — terms like “religious” and “secular.” It would take our generations’ emphasis on discipline and comprehensiveness and combine it with the emphasis on ethics of previous generations.

It would be particularly challenging to those non-Orthodox Jews who fail to find meaning in the disciplined observance of daily traditional ritual. It would say, in essence, “You want to stress being a good person, fine. But do so with the rigor, passion and seriousness of Jewish law.” Being a good person, it turns out, isn’t such an easy thing after all. Imagine a non-Orthodox community devoting an entire year to the theme of lashon hara, not speaking about others. Or humility. Or compassion.

Our time is marked by breaking down dichotomies and reconstructing the meaning of terms. A contemporary Musar movement holds the power to unite “religious” and “secular,” the old and the young in an attempt to apply spiritual values to the most mundane aspects of our lives in unprecedented ways.

Reform and Conservative Jews who may feel less comfortable with ritual could now become the Satmars of sensitivity, compassion and insight. n

Rabbi Leon A. Morris is director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanu-El, a new venue for Jewish study open to the community.

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