

Benjamin Franklin's virtues – and practical Jewish ethics in prison

How Rabbi Eliahu Klein integrated Franklin's autobiography and 'Musal' practice into a California rehabilitation program

By Shai Afsai

PROVIDENCE, RHODE Island is not geographically large, nor does it have a big Jewish population. Its Jewish community and institutions – synagogues, day schools, mikveh, community center, yeshiva, kollel, Holocaust memorial, etc. – are concentrated in one more or less walking-distance part of the city. But, in my experience, it can take years for Jews with shared intellectual interests to discover one another here, even if they are communally engaged. Often, such potentially mutually beneficial meetings never end up occurring. I feel fortunate, therefore, that I not only heard about Rabbi Eliahu Klein and his wife Cynthia Scheinberg's decision to relocate from Berkeley to Providence several weeks ahead of their arrival, but also met them at Shabbat meals very soon after their move.

Klein, a former chaplain, is the author of *Meetings with Remarkable Souls: Legends of the Baal Shem Tov* (1995); *Kabbalah of Creation: Isaac Luria's Earlier Mysticism* (2000), later republished as *Kabbalah of Creation: The Mysticism of Isaac Luria, Founder of Modern Kabbalah* (2005); and *A Mystical Haggadah: Passover Meditations, Teachings, and Tales* (2008). Scheinberg, author of *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (2002), is now Dean of the School of Arts, Humanities and Education at Roger Williams University.

At one of the first Shabbat meals at which we met, I mentioned to Klein that I had applied to the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities for a grant to continue my work on the link between Benjamin Franklin and *Musal* (applied Jewish ethics, or practical Jewish ethical instruction). This is a relatively obscure subject, but to my surprise Klein told me that he was familiar with Franklin's influence on *Musal*, and that as part of his chaplaincy work in California he

had created a program for inmates based on Franklin's virtues and Jewish ethical practice.

When Franklin (1706-1790) composed his now-famous autobiography, he included the description of a self-improvement method that he had devised in his twenties. This method revolved around thirteen behavioral traits (Franklin referred to them as virtues) – temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility – to each of which, in succession, he allotted a week of close attention and reflection. His progress and setbacks in mastering them were tracked daily in a grid chart he designed, which had the seven days of the week running horizontally and the thirteen virtues running vertically. After 13 weeks, Franklin began the cycle again, so that over the course of a year each behavioral trait could be carefully worked on for four weeks.

Franklin had intended to write a book, titled "The ART of Virtue," that would elaborate on this method and form the basis of an international fraternity, a "United Party for Virtue." But his intellectual and organizational energies were directed elsewhere, and in the end Franklin neither wrote the book nor formed this fraternity.

Nearly 20 years after Franklin's death, however, and halfway across the world from Philadelphia, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin of Satanów (1749-1826) completed and published a Hebrew work based on the character improvement technique that Franklin had outlined in his autobiography. Lefin, an early Eastern European maskil (proponent of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment), was deeply interested in *Musal*, which began solidifying as a literary genre in the eleventh century, as well as in bringing beneficial contemporary gentile

knowledge to his fellow Jews.

HIS BOOK, *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh* (Book of Spiritual Accounting, or Book of the Accounting of the Soul), which he published anonymously in 1808, introduced Franklin's list of virtues and character improvement technique to Hebrew readers, though without mentioning Franklin or his autobiography by name. Approved by 12 rabbis in its first edition, Lefin's book – including Franklin's technique – was soon incorporated into the *Musal* tradition, becoming popular among Eastern European yeshiva students.

Cheshbon ha-Nefesh has been republished many times, in many places, but to the best of my knowledge only the 2015 edition put out by Jerusalem's Mossad Harav Kook contains any acknowledgment of Franklin's influence. A reader picking up other available editions needs external information to make the link between Franklin and *Musal*. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, et al.'s *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land – The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook* (2019) contains a lengthy excerpt from Franklin's autobiography relating to his attempts at attaining virtue and to his self-improvement method, thus suggesting that these were principally inspired by Jewish scripture, while at the same time ignoring Franklin's influence on Jewish religious texts.

Born in 1952, Klein grew up in Cleveland, Toronto, Ontario, and Brooklyn, and studied at the Rabbinical College of Telshe and Mesivta of Eastern Parkway Rabbinical Seminary. Since meeting him about a year and half ago, I have had the opportunity to be a guest at his home for a Passover Seder (the only Seder at which I have used a Haggadah authored by my host), to speak together with him at a synagogue in Massachusetts about Franklin and *Musal*, to talk

with him late into the night during Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of the Hasidic luminary's passing in 1810), and to attend the biweekly "Saturday Night Live with Chasidic Masters" gatherings he holds at his home.

Most recently – prior to the COVID-19 outbreak reaching Rhode Island – I sat down for a formal conversation with Klein, transcribed below, about *Musar*, his work as a prison chaplain, and his effort to introduce Franklin's virtues and Lefin's teachings into a California rehabilitation program.

It seems to me that the two spiritual movements in Judaism that most resonate with contemporary Jews are Hasidism [i.e., the Jewish mystical movement that began in the first half of the eighteenth century around the teachings of Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples] — especially Chabad and Breslov Hasidism — and Musar. In Providence alone, I know of four Musar-related courses or study groups that have been taking place at four different locations. How did you come to Musar?

I was raised in a *Musar* family. The origin of my interest in *Musar* is my father. He was a student at the Rabbinical College of Telshe, in Cleveland, Ohio. He practiced *cheshbon ha-nefesh* [i.e., taking stock of one's personality and conduct] using the charts in Lefin's book, and kept a *Musar* diary. My father worked on this for a time and it benefitted him. I was interested in *Musar* to some extent, though not as much as in Hasidism. I didn't think of *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh* again until Feldheim Publishers republished the book [in 1996]. I was drawn to it. It was practical. It seemed like a gentle, good way to develop a radar of your inner soul.

The pairing of Hasidism and Musar is seen in the focus of your religious work, though your published books have so far concentrated on Kabbalah [i.e., the Jewish esoteric tradition] and Hasidism. When did you decide to also make Musar a focus of your teaching?

After 9/11, I had a big change. I'd been studying Kabbalah and Hasidism since the 70s. By the mid-80s, I had a group of students and we studied Lurianic Kabbalah. That group was the basis for my book *Kabbalah of Creation*. After 9/11, I really doubted everything I studied about Kabbalah. I questioned whether these were the appro-

priate teachings for dealing with this horrendous event. I felt at the time there had to be something more substantial people could grasp with their hearts and minds.

I was so stunned and became so numb. Kabbalah was a theoretical, esoteric teaching, sophisticated intellectually – but did it affect my spiritual growth? I wasn't sure. I wondered: how does Kabbalah make a *tikun* [i.e., a repairing of the world]? I felt 9/11 called for a different teaching much closer to people's hearts. I suddenly turned to *Musar*. I felt it was more fundamental in its theories that people could practice daily and see the benefit, change, refinement, and purification of the body, mind, and heart. After 9/11, I started teaching more *Musar*-style texts, and there was an interest.

Even people actively engaged in Musar study may not necessarily know about Franklin's connection to Jewish character improvement. Lefin stated outright that Cheshbon ha-Nefesh's innovative method was not his own discovery, but instead of naming Franklin or citing the autobiography there, he wrote only that "a few years ago a new technique was discovered, and it is a wonderful invention in this task, and it seems this innovation will spread quickly, God willing, as with the invention of the printing press, which brought light to the world." How did you learn about Cheshbon ha-Nefesh's connection with Franklin?

Andy Heinze, who prayed at my synagogue in Berkeley, published a book [*Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century*, 2004] with a chapter on Franklin and *Musar*. I read Nancy Sinkoff's article ["Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of the Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, 1 (2000)]. I was surprised by this connection, but it made sense to me. I remembered my father mentioned, many years ago, some sort of connection between Franklin and *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*. There was some awareness in the yeshiva world that something in the book was from Franklin. The chart and the virtues are Franklin's, but Rabbi Lefin's commentary on each virtue or *midah* is based on the principles of Torah.

Why did you decide to go into prison chaplaincy?

Eventually, in 2005-2006, I pursued hospital chaplaincy training. There I received

a new type of training to help patients and their families in crisis. I had to be with people who were going through major surgeries or dying, and their families, and I had to be the kind of person who could support them. I had been asking Hashem [i.e., God] to guide me to do useful work, and I found it. I helped many people pass on to the next world.

After the conclusion of the training, I chose prison chaplaincy. My prayer was to work with people I could actually transform on some level. I had a problem doing this, though. When I started prison chaplaincy, I had an agenda to get Jewish inmates *sid-durim* [i.e., prayer books] and spread God's light in prison — but then I met lifers who committed horrendous crimes. I had no authority to exclude anyone from Jewish services. For many of these non-Jews, the draw to Judaism was just getting access to kosher food, in which food items are individually packaged and can be bartered or sold. I wondered: what am I doing in the prison? And what I found out is that there were all kinds of people aside from Jews that were doing their versions of *teshuva* [i.e., repentance] that I hadn't thought about.

Was it this realization about non-Jewish inmates being engaged in forms of repentance that gave you the idea of using Benjamin Franklin and Musar in the prison setting?

After the US government federal receivership took over the California prison medical system in 2006, the warden at the Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy, California reached out to chaplains to create rehabilitation programs. One of the chaplains suggested a program focused on imperatives for successful parole, and I came up with the Practicing Ethical Values program, which was turned into a DVD and shown to all incoming inmates. I designed the program, an inmate named Mike D. and I selected the virtues [from Franklin's autobiography and Lefin's *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*], and he constructed the categories [i.e., Being/Personality Traits, Living/Life Skill Traits, and Action/Social Responsibility Traits]. The reason why I wanted to create this program was because I discovered there was no actual program for inmates to literally work on themselves, on the issues that may have brought them there. I didn't see that in the institution. After talking with a lot of inmates, I got the sense that few of



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A portrait of Benjamin Franklin by Joseph Duplessis, 1778

them had societal or familial familiarity with ethical values.

What made you think that Musar could be a good conduit for non-Jews to engage with ethical values?

There are other true paths that can change your perspective of how to be or not be in the world. But I had the goal of teaching a form of Judaism I believed in. Using the charts from Benjamin Franklin and *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*, you develop a heightened awareness that creates change in a natural way, and I thought these inmates could benefit. It's a very easy way to monitor how you react and respond to people and situations. I saw it would be very wise not to have the program come across totally Jewish, but to also focus on Benjamin Franklin. Even Benjamin Franklin worked on himself – and you can too!

How was this Franklin and Musar program received?

The warden went for it and it was very successful while it was going on. The inmates cooperated and shared their struggles and growth. Nine guys went through the whole program. They were lifers or long-term inmates who had a desire to change. In my weekly prison sermons, I always brought up Jewish ethical ideas, and I was already surprised at how appreciative inmates were about these words of hope and second chances. The most poignant comment was, “You know, Rabbi,



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Rabbi Eliahu Klein at his home in Providence, Rhode Island

we never had these kinds of ideas in the culture I grew up in: dealing with anger, vengeance, controlling oneself, having cleanliness of mind in addition to body.” They showed deep appreciation for these teachings. The basic fundamental idea is that while most people grow up with the knowledge of basic ethical teachings, many inmates do not.

When I asked the guys who took the full course what motivated them, most said it was the power of Jesus. I was trying to divorce it from religion, but the reason many of these people are alive is because they made a commitment to deep religious practice. Their new belief systems turned them around. Can you imagine Christians or Muslims taking on a Jewish practice like *Musar*? But it worked. Mike D. saw [the *Musar* program’s] validity even without religion. He was an atheist and anti-religious, but he saw in *Musar* an intellectual way for right living.

The focus of the paradigms program was on new short-term inmates, to give them tools they could use to get out of self-defeating habits. The DVDs were required viewing for all new inmates for a year.

That means hundreds of inmates saw these programs. I even had a fantasy to get the program endorsed by all California state prisons. But it started to take away from my hard work locating Jews, who often hid their identity in prison. Sometimes it would take years to locate them.

Did you gain a new perspective on Musar from working with these men?

In the final analysis, I discovered that the *Musar* Movement [i.e., the movement centered on character refinement and the concentrated study of *Musar* texts, which was begun by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter in Eastern Europe in the 1840s] was truly a universal path that could benefit anyone from any ethnic and religious tradition. *Musar* is the path to study and act on ethical values that will raise the awareness of the practitioner and transform that person from unconscious to conscious, from acting maliciously to acting kindly, from being selfish to being compassionate, from being self-seeking to acting altruistically – and in the end, from living an unfulfilled life to living a life fulfilled and in peace. ■