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The Practice of Musar

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Practice of Musar

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Six years ago, in the pages of this journal, Rabbi Ira Stone proposed that Musar should be “the *aggadah*” of the Conservative movement. An *aggadah*, as he defined it, is the narrative that supports Jewish practice.

The Conservative movement, he wrote, has “a distinctive *halakhah*, that is, a distinctive approach to Jewish law and practice,” but does not have a well-articulated *aggadah*, a story as to why *halakhah* is compelling. We can best find our storyline, according to Stone, in the Musar tradition—the tradition of Jewish reflection on good moral character and how to provide discipline (*musar*) for destructive human impulses—especially as expressed by the nineteenth-century Eastern European Musar movement. The compelling narrative offered by the Musar movement, in Stone’s interpretation, is that human beings are torn between their evil inclinations and their good inclinations, and that Jewish law can help to direct us toward that which is ethically good.¹

The essence of Stone’s proposal is that the Conservative movement should offer narratives that explain the purpose of Torah in forcefully ethical terms. In this sense, his proposal is continuous with the way that rabbinic leaders of the Conservative movement have often spoken. Consider, for instance, Solomon Schechter’s focus on imitating God’s goodness in all walks of life, Mordecai Kaplan’s vision of religion providing “ethical purpose and meaning,” or Louis Finkelstein’s hope for Judaism to serve as a moral beacon for humanity.² Reflecting the modern Jewish insistence that Judaism should be characterized by its drive toward ethical excellence, the Conservative movement has historically encouraged understanding the whole of Jewish practice as filled with ethical meaning, and members of Conservative congregations commonly think of Judaism as primarily directing **[End Page 3]** them to be morally good people.³ Stone continues this admirable trend, though offering his own innovations: he shows the ethical power of traditional aggadic language in his interpretation of terms such as *olam ha-ba* (“the World to Come”), and he urges the Conservative movement to describe its overarching narrative with the word “Musar” and to take up the legacy of the nineteenth-century Musar movement.

Stone is right that the Musar movement can offer us profound narratives (*aggadot*) that depict moral sensitivity as the epitome of service to God. The Musar movement saw itself as recapturing the

ancient and medieval Jewish focus on moral virtue, and it sought to popularize the ethically oriented *aggadot* found in classical rabbinic literature as well as in the later Musar literature authored by diverse rabbis including Bahya ibn Pakuda, Maimonides, Nahmanides, Yonah Gerondi, Asher ben Yehiel, Moshe Cordovero, and Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto. Drawing on these sources, the Musar movement spoke of the wayward human heart and the battle between the evil inclination and good inclination, as Stone notes; it also offered a compelling, teleological vision of how we are called to realize our true purpose by “walking in God’s ways” (i.e., by imitating God’s qualities)—above all, by loving God’s creatures.⁴

Admittedly, however, similar narratives can be found throughout the history of Jewish thought without looking to the Musar movement, and other compelling narratives that support a moral life can be drawn from other Jewish sources. Moreover, some of the particular theological narratives of the Musar movement may be problematic for Conservative Judaism, which cannot rest easily with the Musar movement’s traditionalist understandings of the revelation of Torah or God’s role in human suffering; nor will it easily embrace fanatical tendencies in Musar which, as Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky put it, sometimes depict “every ethical lapse as a fatal stab wound.”⁵ And Stone, my teacher who introduced me to the study of Musar, has himself pointed to the off-putting nature of aspects of Musar theology, and he has sought to ground his vision of Musar in an alternative theological language that draws on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.⁶ If we are seeking *aggadot* that inspire us toward moral excellence, the tradition of Musar and the movement that championed that tradition are important resources, but it is hardly essential that we...

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