Climbing Jacob's Ladder:
One Man's Journey to Rediscover a
Jewish Spiritual Tradition

By Alan Morinis

WINTER 5764/2003

JEWISH ACTION

By Alan Morinis

Broadway Books
New York, 2002
225 pages

Reviewed by Hillel Goldberg

Q u estion: Why have all manner of Chassidic courts reestablished themselves after the destruction of the Holocaust while schools of musar have not? Ger, Breis, Amshinov, Vizhnitz, Belz, Satmar and many other Chassidic groups—all of which suffered grievous devastation in World War II—are now flourishing in the United States, Israel and, in many instances, even in Europe. Where is Slabodka, Kelm, Navardok? Clearly, the answer is not in any Nazi predilection for musar adherents; the evil ones killed any Jew they found. While it is true that adherents of a given Chassidic group may have fortuitously survived in relatively large numbers, this cannot explain the contemptuous efflorescence of Chassidism, a handful of whose adherents survived. Nor is the answer to be found in the correct observation that the prewar musar movement numbered far fewer than did the Chassidim, but here, at least, we have a clue.

The Musar Movement was always small. In fact, it is unclear in what sense it was a movement after the initial efforts of its founder, Reb Yaakov Salanter (1808-1883). Reb Yaakov imagined a movement, that is, the improvement of personal character traits by men and women, learned and unlearned alike. He worked hard toward that end in Vilna and Kovno, from 1841 to 1858, and met some success. But then began his long and mostly mysterious sojourn in Western Europe, where he was mostly cut off from his disciples. His students concentrated their efforts within yeshivot; there, Reb Yaakov’s musar program evolved into the yeshiva movement of which Alan Morinis is the foremost exponent. Morinis’ struggle becomes a transparent, enabling others to see that if he can succeed, they can too.

Within Navardok, comes an unexpected book that shows that musar, while hardly rebuilt to prewar proportions, does demonstrate maturity and resonance within a new cultural setting. Reb Yaakov always saw musar as a potential bridge, capable of linking the most devout circles of Jewish piety with the most asceticized societies of the Jewishly ignorant. In part, that is why he devoted the last twenty-five years of his life to teaching adherents and communities in Western Europe, particularly Germany. Musar preaches a matter of intent; as such, it can identify both the spiritual flaws in the most Orthodox and the genuine spiritual strengths in the most unobservant. Musar, under Reb Yaakov’s fine scaled, could turn cabbis in on themselves, searching for defects in their punctilious observance, and could attract the assimilated to the Torah, validating their instinctive elements of ethics or spirituality. To Reb Yaakov, musar was a ladder. Those on the lowest rung could eventually reach the highest, while those on the upper rungs, if not careful, could slip downward. Alan Morinis, in Climbing Jacob’s Ladder, takes the requisite concentration, at least partially assuaged, unobservant mointings, his search begins on the lowest rung—precisely the place that Reb Yaakov and the Alter of Navardok thought that musar could be effective. Morinis seeks to demonstrate that even without a prior grounding in Talmud and other Torah knowledge, one can find God within the quest for honesty and integrity in human relationships— including ones that pertain to oneself. Only a few years ago, Morinis was like one of the Jewishly ignorant students whom Reb Yaakov would have met in nineteenth-century Germany. Morinis’ eloquent and spiritual record of his quest is, perhaps, the ultimate verification of the potential reach of musar beyond the Orthodox Jewish society in which it was born. Morinis, a former Rhodes Scholar with an expertise in Hindu pilgrimage and a former film producer with a personal history of deep inner doubts and financial failure, modestly subtitles his book One Man’s Journey to Rediscover a Jewish Spiritual Tradition. There are, of course, idiosyncratic elements in Morinis’ journey, but he more than opens his soul for us to view. Not that the courage to communicate one’s deepest anxieties and triumphs is a small thing, but Climbing Jacob’s Ladder goes further. Morinis succeeds in making the psychological teachings and exercises of Reb Yaakov alluring. From within the specificity of his own life, Morinis strikes a universal chord. The essence of musar is not the contours of a personal struggle but the idea of struggle. The thoroughness of Morinis’ struggle becomes a transparency, enabling others to see that if he can succeed, they can too.

The effectiveness of the descriptions of the disciplines derives from the sensitive and sympathetic Morinis’ interaction with them and a description of nine musar disciplines.

The effectiveness of the descriptions of the disciplines derives from the sensitive and sympathetic Morinis’ interaction with them and a description of nine musar disciplines.
Morinis’ spiritual forays as much as he delights in their guidance and support. One of Reb Yisrael’s musar disciplines was the musar friendship: the brutally honest yet also supportive relationship between two people, each trying to discover his own unconscious motives, each trying to shape these motives according to the ideals of the Torah, each relying on the other for insight and grounding. This book is an unflinching and loving record of just such a friendship.

What does Morinis take from this friendship? The musar disciplines he describes include meditating to develop a focused mind; using various techniques to read a spiritual text; reciting holy phrases; using mental images; developing self-awareness; contemplating the grandeur of God; employing exercises to improve personal qualities; practicing right speech and removing obstacles that obstruct the flow of love.

Neither Morinis nor the Perrrs devised any of these disciplines; at the very least, in their essentials they are found in the centuries-old musar literature. What gives these disciplines power is not primarily the talented pen of Morinis (though that certainly helps); their real power derives from the fact that their description represents decades of personal work by the Perrrs. Having brought these disciplines to life in their own lives, the Perrrs can convey their inner essence even to a twenty-first-century Jewish searcher with little prior knowledge of the Torah or other Jewish lore. On a larger canvas, the disciplines show that musar indeed survived the Holocaust.

As such, the musar disciplines can reach a broad spectrum of readers. More than any work I know, Morinis’ book makes the musar approach to personal growth and spiritual integrity accessible. Readers who are familiar with musar can benefit too. Perhaps inspired by the musar techniques (too often, in the Orthodox world, they are presented as frozen formulae rather than living realities), Orthodox readers can learn from Morinis’ determination to confront his despair under the dispensation of musar, and from the Perrrs’ persistent and loving exploration of musar in their lives.
Climbing Jacob's Ladder. This song is by Benny Hester and appears on the album United We Stand, Divided We Fall (1990). We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Soldiers of the cross. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Soldiers of the cross. Every round goes higher, higher. Every round goes higher, higher. Soldiers of the cross.