

## LIVELY OPINION

## More than self-help: Middot (character) training is personal mastery

By SAM GLASER

Special to the Intermountain Jewish News

When New Year's rolls around, I review the things I promised I would change from the previous year. Sadly, the platitudes of my resolutions could be better described as my "New Year's Delusions."

My grandiose ideas about integrating growth and discipline into my life remain just that: ideas. Judaism gives us incredible tools to get lofty concepts into day-to-day practice.

I discovered these opportunities on a mind-blowing study trip to Israel in my 20s. It was the first yeshiva experience of my life, in the Old City of Jerusalem, where I met a cadre of individuals who were actually growing spiritually and ethically and not just talking about it. This crucial journey toward personal mastery is called *tikkun middot*, the healing of our character traits.

We're lucky that countless sages have given us powerful techniques to set goals and actually reach them. The following is an overview of the Jewish solution for transforming delusion into resolution.

Judaism is the original self-help seminar. We've been offering personal growth secrets long before Dale Carnegie, EST and Tony Robbins.

One of my favorite rabbis from that Israel trip is on the forefront of modern *middot* education. Rabbi David Geffen has developed a UK-based program, Loving Classroom.

He helps public school teachers recognize the importance of refining students' traits as a prerequisite to improving scholastic performance.

By adopting the program, client schools have documented marked results in the reduction of bullying, cliques and vandalism.

### Are we living life or is life living us?

The eight core lessons discuss the basic *middot* of respect, compassion, listening, kindness, gratitude, love, care and friendship. When students endeavor to reach mastery in these areas, the result is a "loving classroom" and as they graduate, a loving world.

*Middot* comes from the word "measure." We are measured by our *middot*. Alternatively, each of our character traits must be "measured" or balanced, within limits. For example, if we are too charitable, we may neglect our own needs. If we are too compassionate in justice, murderers may go free. Parents who are overly strict with children might stifle their natural curiosity. Any given *middah* isn't good or bad until it becomes extreme. When we notice one side getting off kilter, we have to emphasize the other side of the continuum to restore equilibrium. Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883),

the founder of the Musar movement (concerned with enhancing moral and ethical conduct), states that repairing one bad trait is harder than learning the entire Talmud — but that shouldn't stop us from trying! Maimonides maintains that imbalanced character traits create a veil blocking holiness in our lives.

Working on *middot* isn't optional; achieving holiness is our fundamental channel to true joy.

The Talmud states, "*derech erez kadma Torah*" (common decency comes before Torah wisdom). Our brilliant laws are irrelevant if they don't result in creating a just, compassionate society.

Judaism rejects "I am who I am" thinking. All of us are works in progress. We are born narcissistic and egocentric and can acquire altruistic behavior as we age.

Anyone studying Torah sees repeating patterns from one generation to the next. Our sages teach the principle, *Ma'asei avot, siman l'banim*, what happens to the forefathers is a sign to the children. The circumstances challenging our parents are often visited upon their offspring. Do we learn from their experience?

Another way to understand this precept is by perceiving the actions of our Biblical heroes as an indicator of our capabilities. We have inherited the predisposition to accomplish the same remarkable level of excellence, to be a "mensch."

In his 90th birthday speech, my Uncle Herb Glaser mentioned the following qualifications for the "Glaser Mensch-o-meter" test: kindness to all, no bragging, integrity, helping those less fortunate, good citizenship, always learning and the willingness to pass good *middot* down to the next generation.

Analyzing where I stand on the Mensch-o-meter is an ideal way to focus my New Year's resolutions.

Ask any matchmaker to list the three most important characteristics of a potential spouse, and the answer will be *middot, middot, middot* (OK, maybe it's *middot, middot, net worth*).

Ultimate *nachat* (Jewish pride) results from hearing that one's offspring instigated an act of compassion.

Our children's day school curricula promoted proper *middot* not only for interpersonal harmony. G-d operates *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure. In other words, G-d deals with us in the precise manner that we deal with others. When we are compassionate, we are rewarded with compassion. When we are judgmental of others, strict judgment results. So, too, with cruelty, impatience, aggression and bitterness. Our sages urge us to judge to the side of merit. Go easy on friends and family!

This universal law of "what goes around comes around" is popularly known as karma. As Jews, we call it G-d's love.

A *musar vaad* is a group meeting or class systematically analyzing and applying specific character traits. Some spend a few weeks on a given *middah*, some over a year. Many *vaadim* are "locked in,"



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meaning, once the group is established, it cannot be joined by others, thereby allowing the unit to bond without outside distraction.

Text study is selected to reinforce the importance and application of the specific *middah* and the passages are exhaustively reviewed to inculcate the message. The goal is to settle for nothing less than heroic character, to emulate the patriarchs and matriarchs in the quest for ultimate human nobility.

I have watched my friends in *musar vaadim* reach great heights in their personal growth. For those of us who cannot fulfill New Year's Resolutions and are frustrated with the "same old, same old" each Rosh Hashanah, perhaps joining a *musar vaad* is worth investigating.

If one doesn't have time to dedicate to a *vaad*, what's the next best option?

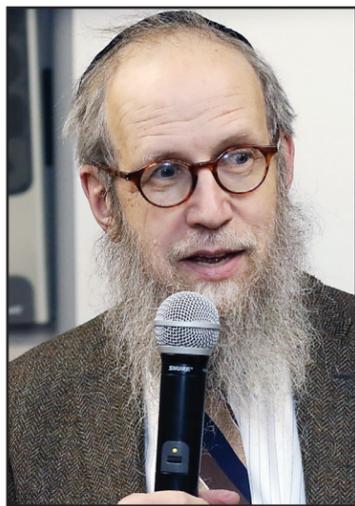
Work independently on one *middah* at a time. The best way to figure out where to start is to contemplate which *middah* is the hardest to keep in balance.

That's your soul *tikkun* (healing).

Once you deduce whether it's impatience, laziness, selfishness, callousness or anger, learn to focus on the appropriate counterpart; for example, patience, industry, generosity.

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The terrible losses and disruptions of 2020 are known to us all. Death, disease, job loss, food insecurity, mental strain, upended schools, polarization. We need not rehearse this. We know it.

Perhaps less evident are the many benefits that this pandemic has catalyzed. How they stack up against the losses, I shall leave to others to evaluate — but we have definitely had a year of benefits and better habits. It is worth enumerating them and giving thanks for them. We should not let the COVID overshadow them.

Life is less hurried. Life is less of a madhouse. There is more time to think. It has become evident in 2020 that contemplation is not a luxury, no longer a forgotten art, but a valuable part of every day.

Life is less reflexive. Less full of obligations that we just have to do because . . . we just have to. No, it

## VIEW FROM DENVER

### 2020: A year of benefits and better habits

has become evident in 2020, not everything that we thought we just have to do, do we have to do.

Life is less material. It became evident in 2020 that all the shopping we could not do enabled us to see that while some shopping was necessary and rightly missed, or switched online, other shopping was not necessary. The time spent, the items to be purchased — not necessary.

Life is less arrogant. It became evident in 2020 that not every social or medical deficiency has a ready

Life has been less self-enclosed. It has become evident in 2020 how others live — from restaurant operators to journalists to healthcare workers. We have learned a lot about the rewards and hazards of professions not our own.

Life has become less obsessed. It has become evident in 2020 that much as we might genuinely miss the likes of a normal season of professional football, hockey, theater and concerts, it is possible to live without it.

Life has become less routine. It

Life has become less sloppy. It has become evident in 2020 that we take our health less for granted; we wash our hands, or do not miss our meds, or focus on exercise (in or out of a gym). In protecting ourselves against COVID-19 we came to protect ourselves against other health harms, too.

Life has become less anonymous. It has become evident in 2020 that in residential American neighborhoods, people actually live in these houses that seemed empty morning, noon and night; people can now be

unnecessary, unhealthy default for others who can be — and in greater numbers now are — cared for at home.

Life has brought less driving. For some, driving is nerve racking and for others it is a delight. Either way, it has become evident in 2020 that its reduction is also a reduction in pollution and, more broadly, a spur to consciousness of pollution and of our individual contributions to it.

Life has become less temporal. It has become evident in 2020, as death has surrounded us all, that there is more to our horizon than our worldly goals. Whether taken as an afterlife or a legacy within this world, our horizon has expanded.

Life has witnessed a certain breakdown in boundaries. At least for those who live in economically privileged spaces, the lives of others have come more clearly into view, as this pandemic is no respecter of these boundaries.

Life has become less certain. We cannot comfortably, assuredly, automatically predict what the next season will bring. Uncertainty compels greater appreciation for what we have now. As Barbara and the late Carl Belz, taking Michael Fried's metaphor from art to life, put it, "presentness is grace."

### For all the losses of the pandemic, it has also reoriented us in positive ways.

answer. It became evident that experts could grope with uncertainty the same as the rest of us. In 2020, room for acknowledgement of a higher power opened up. We have not been in control, accustomed though we became to thinking that humanity can control anything and everything.

Life has been less selfish. Less centered on our needs, our wants. It has become evident in 2020 that humanity can respond to the needs and wants of others, sometimes by direct action, other times simply with empathy.

has become evident in 2020 that relationships are more treasured and more paid attention to, even if only via Zoom or other indirect contact.

Life has become less mindless. It has become evident in 2020 that even as we have all come to be more dependent on electronic media for work and purchasing, we also find ourselves more critical of the mindlessness of endless flashing screen images. Many of us now take more time to read, whether on screen or the old fashioned way, with book or newspaper in hand.

seen walking the streets in much greater numbers than before.

Life has become less detached from nature. It has become evident in 2020 that we need not sit on the beach or climb a mountain to appreciate a blooming tree or a neighbor's garden as we perambulate about our neighborhoods.

Life has brought less "warehousing." It has become evident in 2020 that while nursing homes are an essential godsend for many frail elderly, fear of COVID has also shown that nursing homes are an