

# PHILALETHES

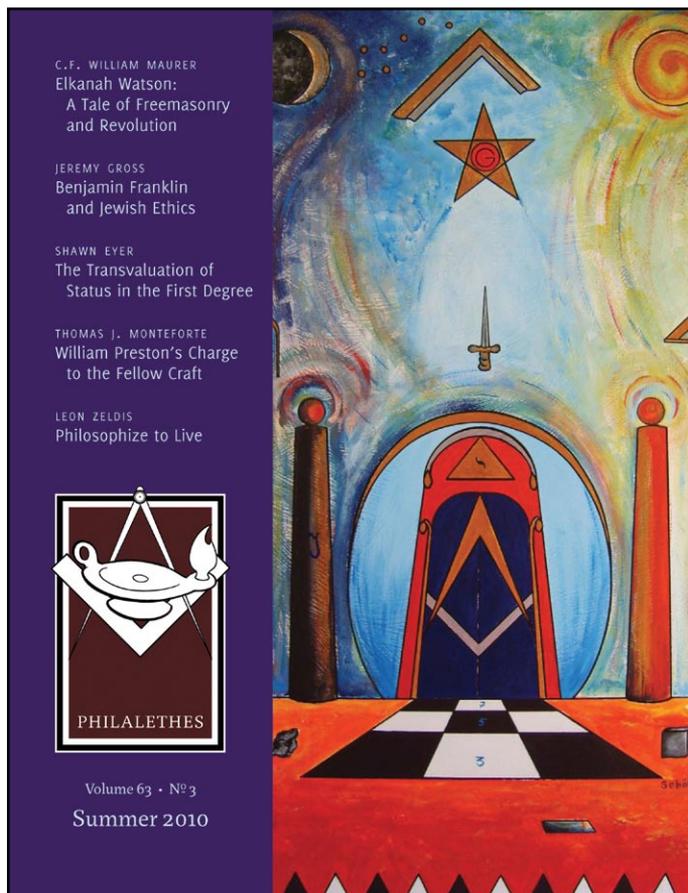
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## JEREMY GROSS Benjamin Franklin and Jewish Ethics

The fascinating story of how, Benjamin Franklin, an instrumental figure in the development of American Freemasonry, developed his “Art of Virtue,” based partly on Pythagorean traditions . . . and how Franklin’s adaptation may have influenced a popular form of Jewish ethical practice known as *Mussar*.



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Could Benjamin Franklin, an instrumental figure in the development of American Freemasonry, have also influenced a popular form of Jewish ethical practice?

# Benjamin Franklin and Jewish Ethics

JEREMY GROSS ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BROTHER FRANKLIN'S  
ART OF VIRTUE AND THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF MUSSAR

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin outlined an ethical practice for self-analysis and contemplation of virtue, especially to acquire and strengthen virtues the practitioner wished to develop. In the Orthodox Jewish community, this method has been adopted, and has taken on an important role in the character development of yeshiva students. More recently, this method has become popular in Jewish circles outside of the Orthodoxy, and organizations have sprung up to use Franklin's method to develop character. Ironically, most of these practitioners have no idea that the method they use comes from Benjamin Franklin, and is not Jewish in origin. This paper will illustrate Franklin's method, show how the Jewish Orthodoxy embraced it, and how it has flourished in a Jewish context, and it will make an appeal to the original universalist intent Franklin had for his method, and encourage Masons to re-embrace part of their heritage, improved through centuries of

practice, to use and spread the method for general use.

While the esoteric Jewish practice of kabbalah has found a contemporary resurgence as of late, most people, even within Judaism, do not know that the practice of kabbalah is often balanced with a less abstract practice, the ethical analysis of Mussar (Ethics). Using Mussar, the practitioner examines his behavior and hopes to influence his future actions for the good, imbuing his actions with virtue, and reflecting upon certain virtues, and their corresponding vices, in light of his own deeds. While there are works of Mussar in the Jewish religious cannon going back all the way to Scripture and the Talmud, the Mussar movement emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a reaction to the cult of personality found in many of the early Hasidic leaders.<sup>1</sup> As early as the time of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, there were opponents of his movement, known as the Mitnagdim (opponents). The Mitnagdim had an early leader in the Vilna Gaon (genius of Vilna).<sup>2</sup>

A generation afterwards, the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment era emerged,<sup>3</sup> and while more secular Jews integrated into their European

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Benjamin Franklin at study, with bust of Isaac Newton, painted in 1767 by David Martin.

and American communities, the more Orthodox found that they too were influenced by new ideas, however much they felt compelled to fold them back into their tradition.

For example, the Mitnagdim listened to the criticisms of orthodoxy leveled against them by the Enlightenment-era detractors, saw some of the abuses committed by the cult of personality within Hasidim, and felt that an ethical revival was necessary to heal and reinvigorate their flavor of Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, a rabbi in what is now Lithuania, began in 1845 to teach ethical meditation in his yeshiva, using the term *Mussar* to cover a range of ethical practices.<sup>4</sup>

### **MUSSAR: A PRACTICE FOR EVERYONE**

While the study of kabbalah was traditionally limited to older married men who had shown outstanding achievement in the study of Torah and Talmud, *Mussar* was for everyone, male and female, young and old, even for some rabbis, for Jew and non-Jew alike.<sup>5</sup> *Mussar* emerged with a sense of urgency in the Litvish (Lithuanian Jewish) community, and Rabbi Yisrael Salanter became a somewhat controversial figure. During a terrible cholera outbreak in Vilna in 1848 that coincided with the High Holy Days, he insisted that his parishioners violate their fast on Yom Kippur to be less susceptible to the disease. He took his yeshiva students out of the Beit

|       | Sun. | M. | T. | W. | Th. | F. | S. |
|-------|------|----|----|----|-----|----|----|
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| Chas. |      |    |    |    |     |    |    |
| Hum.  |      |    |    |    |     |    |    |

Franklin's tool for the promotion of moral growth, created circa 1728, shortly after his founding of the Leather Apron Club, but before his initiation into the Craft.

Midrash (House of Study) and into the hospitals to attend to the sick.<sup>6</sup> His great contribution to Jewish culture was his development of the practices of Mussar into a coherent system.

While some of the practice of Mussar comes from reading selected passages of scripture, as well as great classics of Jewish literature that discuss ethical issues, much of the actual practice is described in a book written in 1812 by Rabbi Mendel of Satanov, called *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* (Accounting of the Soul).<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Mendel describes a system whereby the practitioner chooses a list of thirteen virtues and picks one per week upon which to focus his attention. During the week, he wakes up and meditates upon that virtue, and is especially mindful to exhibit that virtue in his actions, being careful not to commit the sin that is its opposite. Each night, he marks in a notebook his successes

and failures to behave with that virtue, and at the end of the week, he makes an accounting of how well he did in a grid designed for that purpose, and moves on to the next virtue on the list. At the end of thirteen weeks, the practitioner moves back to the first virtue, and after four such cycles, a year has elapsed. The practitioner either keeps his original list of virtues, or chooses new ones, and the cycle begins again.

What is strange about this method is that the Hebrew calendar year does not have 52 weeks. The Russians who ruled Lithuania at the time used the Julian calendar, which did have 52 weeks, but it is unlikely that when Rabbi Mendel published his method, meant for the Orthodox Jewish community, that he would have incorporated the Russian calendar into a method meant for traditional religious Jews. Instead this paper will demonstrate that he got the idea from a Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, from the USA. Rabbi Mendel's method is taken almost entirely from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*.<sup>8</sup> While not explicitly Masonic in its description, every Mason should make himself familiar with Franklin's method, because while Masonry is said to "make good men better," Franklin's method provides a real way to make that happen.

## FRANKLIN'S ART OF VIRTUE

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin writes:

It was about this time [1728] I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task



Franklin would have called the book he intended to write about the method, *The Art of Virtue*,<sup>15</sup> and for the remainder of the essay, the method of Franklin's will be labeled as such. A few years later, Franklin was initiated in St. John's Lodge, in Philadelphia, so this work precedes his Masonic career.<sup>16</sup> And yet, what could be more Masonic than a technique designed to make good men better, regardless of sectarian religion?

The brevity of this paper will not admit a discussion of the secret society Franklin formed, as "a club for Mental improvement," originally called the *Leather Apron Club*, but soon renamed *Junto*.<sup>17</sup> An examination of the nature of the *Junto* will reveal much similarity with Freemasonry,<sup>18</sup> and there is every indication that Franklin continued his exploration of virtue in his long Masonic career.

## THE BIRTH OF MUSSAR

Nearly a century after Franklin devised the *Art of Virtue*, and less than three decades after it first appeared in print, an Orthodox rabbi in Satanov, Russia, published *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*, incorporating the same method. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Levin was a proponent of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, who chose to stay within Jewish Orthodoxy and enact reforms from within. He was an opponent of the Hasidic movement.<sup>19</sup>

It appears that this work became popular only after a reprint with the encouragement of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter in 1845.<sup>20</sup> Salanter is considered to

be the founder of the Mussar movement. He was the first to teach a course of Mussar to his students as a response to the diverse social tensions within the Jewish community at that time, from the Reform movement, inspired by the Haskalah on one side, Zionism, socialism and communism on another side, and Hasidism on yet another.<sup>21</sup>

His method was to use spiritual exercises, meditations, and the study of Jewish classics about ethical issues. The core of his method came from *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*. As these techniques are still used in Litvish (Lithuanian-style) yeshivas today, it is worth exploring how *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh* expounds its technique.

Levin begins by examining the human soul. The animal soul, or *nefesh ha-behamit*, is swayed by the myriad of stimuli around it, and is unable to force its will upon its circumstances. Humans possess an animal soul, just as animals do, but they also possess an intellectual human spirit, or *neshamah ha-enoshit*, and with it the means of taming the animal soul. However, not everyone possesses good taming skills. Some abuse the animal soul, crushing it, while some indulge it until it runs their lives. The animal soul has a tendency to resent poor treatment, and in its resentment it can revolt, and injure the self.

Man is imbued with an evil inclination, or *yetzer ha-ra*, and a good inclination, or *yetzer ha-tov*. The animal soul is powerless to resist the urgings of the evil inclination. The intellectual spirit should

It would be a great service to humanity to reconsider Franklin's *Art of Virtue* in light of what the Mussar tradition has contributed to its use. Perhaps we Freemasons can reclaim the *Art of Virtue*, and share its method with the world.

observe the behavior of the animal soul, especially when it is under the influence of the evil inclination, and learn to gently guide it away from doing evil. By appeal to Deity, the intellectual spirit can learn how to recognize the quiet voice of the good inclination, and follow its lead. Fighting the evil inclination directly can create very rapid improvements, but is emotionally exhausting, whereas gently guiding the animal soul to choose better behaviors is very slow, but less labor-intensive, and has less risk of backlash or relapse.

Levin notes that while all of the great Jewish sages admonish their readers to do good and shun evil, they only address how the intellectual spirit should behave, and give no assistance on how to train the animal soul. To this end, Levin provides a method, extraordinarily similar to Franklin's, for training the animal soul to behave virtuously.

Levin lists thirteen virtues as follows (see the illustration on p. 111):

1. *Menuchat ha-Nefesh*, or Equanimity
2. *Savlanut*, or Patience (Toleration)
3. *Seider*, or Order
4. *Kharitzut*, or Decisiveness
5. *Nekiyut*, or Cleanliness
6. *Anavah*, or Humility
7. *Tzedek*, or Righteousness (Justice)
8. *Kimmutz*, or Frugality
9. *Zerizut*, or Diligence (Zeal or Enthusiasm)
10. *Shetikah*, or Silence
11. *Nikhuta*, or Calmness
12. *Emet*, or Truth
13. *Perishut*, or Separation<sup>22</sup>

Levin devotes a chapter to describing his general method for using the thirteen virtues, and then devotes a chapter to each virtue, along with scriptural passages that extol that particular virtue. It should be noted that, while five of the virtues,

Silence, Order, Frugality, Cleanliness and Humility, exactly match Franklin's virtues, there is a clear correlation between Resolution and Decisiveness, Industry and Zeal, Sincerity and Truth, Justice and Righteousness, Tranquility and Calmness, and Chastity and Separation, especially in Rabbi Mendel's descriptions of those virtues. That only leaves two virtues on each list that do not match the virtues on the other list. In an end-note, Levin offers Temperance as a possible virtue to explore using his technique.<sup>23</sup> When Rabbi Levin prints in his book the accounting grid he uses for his method,<sup>24</sup> he provides a grid almost identical to the one that Franklin provides in the *Autobiography*.<sup>25</sup>

Nowhere in his book does Levin mention that his technique is original with him, nor does he ever mention Benjamin Franklin. It may be speculated that, in the insular world of Orthodox Judaism in Tsarist Russia, ideas from outside were not received with the same acceptance as ideas that were perceived as coming from Jewish tradition. It may also be the case that Tsarist censorship prohibited mention of ideas from the United States of America, especially those considered to have Republican or Democratic partisanship. In none of the Jewish literature consulted for this article is Franklin's name mentioned, even among the contemporary works. There are too many coincidences for Levin to have developed his method independently of Franklin, but no recognition of this apparent fact is available within the Mussar tradition. Indeed, both rabbis I interviewed for this paper suggested the link between Rabbi Levin and Benjamin Franklin, although neither rabbi was able to provide any evidence that Rabbi Levin cited Benjamin Franklin as an influence.

## WISDOM FOR TODAY

Mussar continues to exist within the Jewish

community. An excellent contemporary introduction to the subject is *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis. Morinis is not Orthodox, but he leads Mussar seminars and teaches its method, which he learned from a Litvish Orthodox rabbi in New York City. Something of a Mussar resurgence exists in the Jewish community today, both within and outside the Orthodox community. Along with the method described in *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*, there are a series of visual meditations, and works of Jewish religious ethical literature to study with a partner, called a *chevruta*, in a dialectical format. This is the same partner practice used to study Talmud in the Jewish tradition. One is expected to disagree with his *chevruta*, and the synthesis formed from thesis and antithesis is what builds character in Mussar study.

Unfortunately, these Jewish classics, while fascinating and full of wisdom, do not lend themselves well to use outside of their Jewish context. Most of them assume that the reader has studied Torah and other Biblical works for many years, has completed a study of Talmud, and is familiar with the great Rabbinical commentators, such as Rashi and Maimonides. To a layperson outside of the Jewish tradition, much is lost by casual reading, even with a good translation.

This is a shame, because the method of Mussar is meant for all, men and women, Jews and non-Jews alike. It would provide a great service to humanity to reconsider Franklin's Art of Virtue in light of what the Mussar tradition has contributed to its use. Perhaps we Freemasons can reclaim the Art of Virtue, and share its method with the world, in a manner that pays no regard to partisan politics nor sectarian religion. Indeed, in parallel to the Jewish relationship between kabbalah and Mussar, Freemasons are men of lawful age who practice a ritual initiatory system, but The Art of Virtue is

available to all, regardless of age, gender, or religion. We would do well to supplement what we learn through Masonic ritual by practicing the Art of Virtue ourselves, and providing a great gift to our communities by teaching it to others.

## NOTES

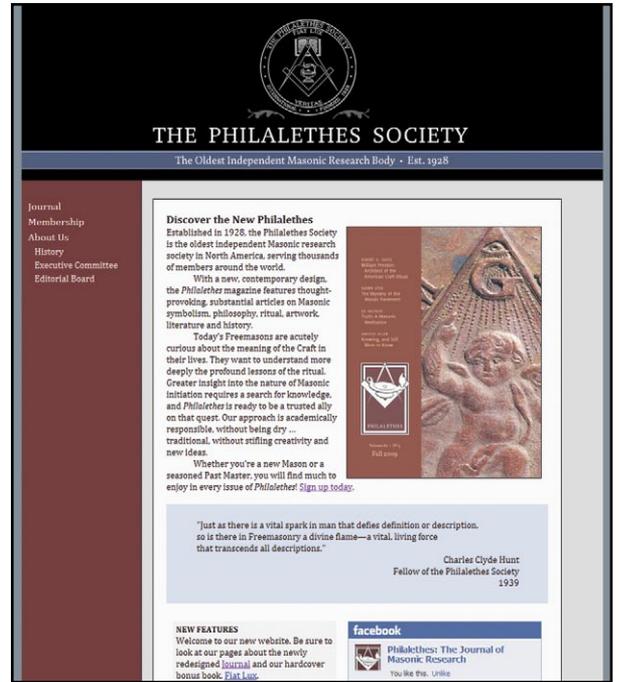
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2. Solomon Schechter & M. Seligson, "Elijah ben Solomon," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901), 133–34.
3. Herman Rosenthal & Peter Wiernik. "Haskalah." *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901), 257.
4. Morinis, 8–9.
5. Morinis, 10.
6. Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 168–70.
7. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Levin, *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1995), vi. Hebrew version first published in 1809.
8. Benjamin Franklin, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin, L.L.D., F.R.S., Written by Himself*. (Philadelphia: William Duane, 1818), 87–101.
9. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 88.
10. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 89.
11. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 91–92.
12. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 90, 92.
13. The Golden Verses of Pythagoras, lines 40–44.
14. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 96.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Julius Friedrich Sachse, *Benjamin Franklin as a Free Mason* (Philadelphia: New Era Printing Company, 1906), 2.
17. Sachse, 15–17.
18. H. T. C. de Lafontaine, "Benjamin Franklin." *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 41 (1928): 4–5.
19. Rosenthal & Wiernik, 257.
20. Levin, vi.
21. Morinis, 8–9.
22. Levin, v, 185. When the translator has translated the word in more than one way, I have noted it.
23. Levin, 183.
24. Levin, 184–5.
25. Franklin, *Memoirs*, 91.

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