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The American Jewish Revival of Musar

Geoffrey Claussen

A WOMAN WRITES IN HER JOURNAL EVERY night, focusing on her struggles with anger. Two friends sit down over coffee and discuss their recent efforts to perform at least three acts of generosity every day. A man posts on an online forum about how easily he is distracted by needless concerns but how daily Jewish prayer has helped him to focus his mind. A group studies Jewish teachings on greed, and they commit themselves to taking concrete steps to limit their

consumption. Another group pores over a medieval Hebrew text about pride, and they conclude their weekly study session by chanting some of its words out loud to a haunting Jewish melody.

These American Jews display a good deal of moral seriousness, a tendency towards introspection, and a concern with the virtues to a degree that is somewhat uncommon in mainstream American Jewish culture. In describing their behavior, they might refer to the Jewish tradition

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of “Musar” (“moral discipline”) and explain that they are carrying on the legacy of a nineteenth-century, Lithuania-based movement known as the “Musar movement.” Most American Jews have not heard of the Musar movement, and many, upon learning about it, would write it off as requiring too much self-criticism, too much moralizing, and too much work. And yet interest in Musar has been steadily growing in contemporary America, in part as a counter-cultural phenomenon.

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The nineteenth-century Musar movement was itself a counter-cultural phenomenon, though reacting against a culture of a very different sort. It emerged as a moral revival movement in nineteenth-century Lithuania, which was then characterized by a Jewish intellectual culture like none other in Jewish history. Traditionalist, Lithuanian Jewish rabbis of the era were best known for their truly single-minded focus on the study of Talmud and codes of Jewish law. Scholarship was their highest value; other modes of Jewish piety and practice were highly suspect. Though they accepted all of the commandments required by Jewish law, they made it clear that the ideal form of behavior was the highly intellectual study of traditional rabbinic texts. Such study was seen as sufficient for guaranteeing proper moral character and reverence for God, sometimes because of the supernatural powers ascribed to it, but also because of a conviction that knowledge of moral ideals is the essence of moral education.

From within this culture, in the middle of the nineteenth century, emerged a small group of traditionalist rabbis who challenged it. The

pietistic Musar movement, led by Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–1883), argued that the intellectual study of texts was necessary but insufficient for the development of virtue. He contended that the intellect, with its limited strength, cannot easily uproot the bad moral habits that are planted deeply in human hearts. Salanter and his disciples suggested that character education requires supplementing conventional study with a range of practices that can help a person to identify moral struggles and bring discipline, “musar,” to wayward appetites and emotions. Along with intellectual study, the leaders of the Musar movement advocated introspective meditation and journaling, conversations about one’s moral situation that elicit critical feedback, chanting and visualization exercises that engage the emotions, a deep commitment to the ethical and ritual requirements of Jewish law, and engaging in acts of kindness beyond what the law requires. Moreover, they encouraged individuals to design personalized exercises, tailored to their own natures and targeting their own problematic character traits.

The Musar movement’s leaders sought to focus the Jewish people on the cultivation of virtues—qualities including love, justice, compassion, generosity, reverence, faith, humility, equanimity, and patience—and they argued that such virtues are not easily acquired. They saw moral development as requiring constant labor—ongoing introspection and continual efforts to improve one’s character traits. But, as Salanter observed, all people resist making these sorts of efforts. Businesspeople may devote great energy to selling their products, he noted, and scholars may devote great energy to making sense of scriptural passages, but few people devote much effort to the “work of Musar”—to the work of improving moral character.¹

Indeed, relatively few of Salanter’s contemporaries wanted to make such efforts. Salanter’s attempts to create a mass movement focused on Musar were largely unsuccessful, though the

Musar movement was successful enough to provoke an outspoken opposition. Traditionalists in Lithuania argued in favor of the established, intellectually focused model of moral education, and liberalizing Jews argued in favor of more modern, Western European approaches to education. Traditionalists also opposed the Musar movement's sectarianism and its focus on social criticism, while liberals opposed its theological orthodoxy and its sometimes-fanatical pietism. Over time, the movement made some inroads in traditionalist academies, and it gained a positive reputation among Jews in general, but by and large it remained a sectarian movement within Eastern European Orthodoxy that had little impact on Jewish culture on the whole.

A large percentage of those who were committed to the practice of Musar in the twentieth century were killed in the Holocaust. Some teachers emigrated to the State of Israel or to North America, but the legacy of the Musar movement survived there only in a small number of insular, "ultra-Orthodox" academies. In the U.S., moreover, very few of those teachers emphasized the disciplined practice of Musar in their teaching; one prominent rabbi is said to have concluded that American students could not handle the immense effort that Musar requires.²

It is, then, something of a surprise that the Musar movement has experienced a real revival in America over the past decade. Even more surprisingly, much of that revival has taken place among the non-Orthodox Jews who make up the vast majority of the American Jewish population. Groups dedicated to the work of Musar have sprouted up at a wide range of synagogues, schools, and community centers, as well as online, and Judaism's large liberal religious movements have given serious attention to Musar in recent years. The Conservative movement's scholarly journal, *Conservative Judaism*, centered its Winter/Spring 2006 issue on a proposal by Rabbi Ira Stone that Musar should be at the center of the movement's approach. The Fall 2008 issue of the Reform

movement's magazine, *Reform Judaism*, described the practice of Musar as "an emerging and growing phenomenon" within Reform circles and considered how it might grow further.

Such interest in Musar has been largely inspired by the work of two teachers, Stone and Dr. Alan Morinis. Stone is a congregational rabbi in Philadelphia and the director of Mussar Leadership, a program that guides individuals and groups in the practice of Musar. Stone authored the proposal for Conservative Judaism's adoption of Musar and is the author of *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar*, which develops a non-orthodox theological framework for the practice of Musar, drawing heavily on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Morinis, a former film producer and anthropologist of religion (with scholarly expertise in Hindu pilgrimage), runs the Vancouver-based Mussar Institute, which offers online instruction in Musar and which has helped to coordinate groups of Musar practitioners across North America. Morinis's latest book, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, describes the central virtues of the Jewish tradition and the central practices of Musar, seeking to make disciplines of study, meditation, journaling, visualization, and chanting accessible to a popular audience.

Morinis emphasizes the honesty, humility, patience, and discipline that doing Musar requires. He advises daily practice—focusing one's attention on a given character trait every morning, engaging in self-analysis by writing in one's journal every evening, and dedicating time for study and good deeds on a daily basis. Stone adds to this sort of regimen by emphasizing the moral significance of traditional Jewish observance, involvement with the life of a community, and friendships that offer critical feedback. Following the language of nineteenth-century Musar masters, as well as the language of Levinas, Stone also explains Musar in highly demanding language, focusing on the imperative to "always be wakeful and on guard," and the "infinite responsibility"

to love others and bear their burdens.³ The work of Musar, as Stone depicts it, is endless; one can and should always strive to be more responsive to the needs of others.

The vision of Musar advocated by Morinis and Stone turns away from some tendencies in the nineteenth-century Musar movement. Along with being less theologically orthodox, it offers no fire-and-brimstone preaching, is less ascetic, and is more accepting of self-esteem as a positive virtue.⁴ But with its relentless focus on the effort that it takes to train us to be better people, it captures much of the tenor of its traditionalist predecessors.

This model of spirituality is decidedly counter-cultural. Growing numbers of Americans want religion to help them feel good about themselves, rather than demand self-criticism. We prefer to encourage our innately good instincts, rather than discipline our emotions and desires. We increasingly aspire to do away with guilt and shame, rather than acknowledge a place for such feelings. We like our friends to accept whatever we do, rather than offer reproof. We have created a religious marketplace that offers quick fixes for spiritual problems, and we shy away from requirements of relentless, demanding inner work.⁵ The Jews of nineteenth-century Lithuania were unenthused about the demands of the Musar movement, and certainly the same could be said for the majority of contemporary American Jews. American Jews have, indeed, hardly rushed en masse to embrace the revival of Musar, and even those seeking spiritually or ethically focused forms of religion may prefer more culturally appealing visions of Judaism.

Authors like Morinis and Stone have appealed to Jews seeking greater “spirituality” in their lives, but other spiritual renewal movements have been more successful at appealing to such seekers. It is instructive to compare non-Orthodox attempts to revive the legacy of Hasidism, which, like the Musar movement, was a modern pietistic movement that emerged among traditional

Eastern European Jews. Neo-Hasidism, especially as developed by the contemporary “Jewish Renewal” movement, has commonalities with contemporary Musar—it also teaches meditative and contemplative techniques, seeks to cultivate the inner life, and sees the insufficiency of intellectually focused study. But, drawing on tendencies in traditional Hasidism, it offers a more joyous, optimistic picture of human nature, it promises personal fulfillment through emotional

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expressiveness and mystical experience, and it often encourages the antirationalism found in the Jewish esoteric tradition of Kabbalah. The tendency of the Musar tradition, by contrast, has been to acknowledge the limited strength of reason, but to seek to strengthen it, and, though drawing on some ethically focused Kabbalistic texts, it has tended to avoid antirational, esoteric traditions. While Neo-Hasidism encourages ethical sensitivity and good deeds, moreover, it is not nearly so ethically focused, and it does not join contemporary Musar in emphasizing the slow and careful work required for the development of moral character.⁶ The growing interest in Musar may be, in part, precisely in reaction to the more popular models of spirituality embodied in movements like Neo-Hasidism. For those willing to take up the discipline it demands, Musar offers a more ethically focused and rationally defensible model for encountering God.

Other models of ethically focused Jewish engagement, however, may also have more cultural appeal than Musar. A focus on doing good deeds without the religious “baggage” that the Musar movement brings, and without all the

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Tuned In

For all the talk of “helicopter” parents, one might have thought that children’s media use would be subject to a lot of surveillance. *Generation M²*, the latest report from the Kaiser Family Foundation on recreational media use by young people suggests otherwise. More than 2,000 8- to 18-year-olds were asked if they were subject to any rules about the content or amount of time they spend on television, video games, music, and computers. Only a quarter of the kids reported rules for at least one of these mediums that were enforced most of the time, 39 percent reported some rules that were enforced “some of the time or less,” and 16 percent reported no rules of any kind.

Rules, any rules, have an effect. “When parents set limits,” according to the report, “children spend less time with media”—nearly three hours a day less. The general media environment that parents create in the home also shapes the amount of time kids spend on media. Children in households where the television is on during meal times (64 percent) or on “most of the time” (45 percent) report spending more hours watching than in households where the television is on only when someone is actually watching. Similarly, kids with a television in their bedroom (71 percent) watch it a lot more.

The average daily recreational media use by all kids in the study was over 7.5 hours. Overall, the age group with the highest daily use was 11- to 14-year-olds, at 8 hours and 40 minutes. Hispanic and African American youth had the highest rates, at over 9 hours per day.

These findings are being read as a potential health problem. A pediatrician, echoing the report’s lead author, insisted that we “have to shift from looking at exposure to media as a...values-based issue...to an issue of their physical, mental, and social health.” However, since we don’t know what health problems media exposure actually causes, more research will be needed. So while we keep our values in check, kids will continue to saturate themselves in electronic media.

introspection that it requires, may be a more popular approach. Moreover, large numbers of American Jews continue to express their Jewish ethical commitments through social and political activism, describing themselves as engaged in a quest for *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. Such work may well be encouraged by the practice of Musar, but the Musar movement’s demand for continual, critical introspection is not easily compatible with political activist culture. The Musar movement spoke of *tikkun ha-middot*, the repair of one’s character traits, and of *tikkun ha-nefesh*, the repair of the soul, far more than it spoke of the repair of the world. A well-known Musar story retold by Morinis concerns a rabbi who initially sought to “change the world” but found this impossible; he scaled back his ambitions to change the Jews of his country, but failed; he reduced his focus to his town, and then to his family, but here too he failed. Finally, he focused on changing himself, and it was only by successfully doing this that he was able to change the wider world.⁷ This approach may resonate for some, but it is not the language that American Judaism often emphasizes.

The Musar movement’s requirement of particular virtues is also, of course, in tension with contemporary American notions of personal autonomy. The historic Musar movement taught that there were character traits that must be acquired in order to fulfill the commandment to “walk in God’s ways,” and Stone and Morinis follow its lead. Morinis’s book catalogues a series of virtues that are described in generally traditional Jewish terms and presented as universally binding; while he suggests that each person should select particular virtues to focus on, one should focus on the virtues that one struggles with the most, not, say, the ones that one finds most “personally meaningful.” Stone, focusing on the virtue of responsive, compassionate love, makes it clear that such love has clear moral contours and that it requires a real renunciation of personal pleasure, and he writes consistently of

commandedness, obligation, and requirement. As Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen demonstrate in their study *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, this is precisely the sort of language that makes contemporary American Jews uncomfortable. Though heirs to a tradition that consistently speaks of God's "commandments," as well as the authority of the community, Jews have long since joined other Americans in proclaiming the sovereignty of the individual self. American Jews believe that "Judaism must be strictly nonjudgmental" and that each individual should find meaning in "whatever makes them happy in life."⁸ The Musar movement's rather judgmental talk of moral virtues being strictly binding upon each generation is not easily compatible with American Jews' autonomous quests for personal meaning.

The sorts of attitudes that Eisen and Cohen describe reflect the dominance of what James Hunter, in *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, has called "the psychological strategy" in moral education. As Hunter has shown, American schools increasingly teach moral character using a framework borrowed from the nonjudgmental, inoffensive science of psychology, encouraging the selection of values in accord with one's feelings, and avoiding language that might threaten individual self-esteem or autonomy. There is, in this model, a desire "not to impose external standards," increasing disdain for "propagating some objective moral content," and a sense that "there is nothing to which the self is obligated to submit."⁹

For the many Jews who affirm this model of moral education, the demanding approach of Musar can hardly be attractive. It would seem to be more attractive to those taking what Hunter describes as the "neoclassical" response to the psychological model—a response that seeks to revive the authority of classical virtues, often by resuscitating stories that teach moral values, as done in William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*.

The Jewish equivalent of this sort of response is found in books like *The Jewish Moral Virtues* by Eugene Borowitz and Frances Schwartz, a 1999 compendium of proverbs and stories that are deeply embedded in Jewish tradition. Their efforts would seem to be more successful than Bennett's since, as Hunter suggests, effective moral education generally takes place in particular communities with their own commanding authority. And yet their efforts to encourage interest in the virtues are in a somewhat different key from the more recent efforts of those seeking to revive the legacy of the Musar movement.

The nineteenth-century Musar movement insisted that study by itself is insufficient for properly shaping moral character.

Borowitz and Schwartz describe their book as seeking to revive the legacy of "Musar" by helping Jews to study and appreciate the moral virtues. From the perspective of the Musar movement, however, such efforts to encourage knowledge about the virtues are important but by themselves insufficient. The nineteenth-century Musar movement insisted that study by itself is insufficient for properly shaping moral character. Teachers like Morinis and Stone, in stressing the importance of Musar practice, are also seeking to improve on study-based models of approaching the virtues. Their focus on practice, discipline, and effort, then, run counter not only to the cultural mainstream, but also to many attempts to revive interest in the virtues.

The revival of the Musar movement, then, has many deeply counter-cultural elements—but these are elements that might be appealing to those seeking a renewed vision of Judaism. Its focus on criticism and self-discipline may appeal to those who are reacting against a culture of easy, feel-good fixes. Its ethically focused

model of working on one's inner life may appeal to those who are reacting against more popular models of spirituality. Its emphasis on introspection may appeal to those who are seeking a more self-critical model of political engagement. Its vision of moral requirement may appeal to those who are reacting against the widespread focus on personal autonomy. Its focus on practice may appeal to Jews who are alienated by intellectually focused forms of Judaism and who sense, as the original Musar movement did, that the knowledge of moral ideals is not sufficient for moral education.

On the other hand, not all of the appeal of Musar is counter-cultural. There are ways in which the revival of the Musar movement is encouraged by strong trends in Jewish culture and in the broader American culture. For one thing, as Cohen and Eisen note, high percentages of Jews see morality as the essence of Judaism, and a movement that is deeply committed to ethical renewal is bound to have some popular appeal.¹⁰ The Jewish preference for seeing Judaism in ethical terms is linked with a belief that the tradition should be explainable in universally understandable terms. The contemporary Musar revival builds on this conviction, explaining ways in which Jewish tradition helps Jews to be more ethical human beings—rather than, simply, “better Jews.” Stone, especially, emphasizing traditional Jewish observance, indicates that we should see a wide range of Jewish traditions as part of the practice of Musar; Judaism should help to make Jews more ethically responsible, he suggests, rather than reflecting arbitrary divine dictates or a desire for Jewish solidarity or continuity. As ever fewer Jews are interested in Jewish continuity for its own sake, and ever more Jews want to hear their tradition speak in universal terms, such an ethical vision of Musar is deeply appealing.

The Musar movement also appeals to Americans because of the way it directly addresses individuals as individuals. While on the one

hand Musar is hardly individualist in its focus—it seeks to train individuals to overcome self-centeredness and to be highly responsive to the needs of others—it is very much an individual spiritual discipline. Musar demands that each person focus on one's particular moral situation, work on the particular character traits with which one struggles, and find the particular practices that work for him or her. Morinis emphasizes that “Musar practice is always geared to the

Musar demands that each person focus on one's particular moral situation, work on the particular character traits with which one struggles, and find the particular practices that work for him or her.

uniqueness of the individual,” as each person needs to discover how to most effectively bring about “deep and lasting spiritual change.” We should utilize the Musar practices that proved to be effective in previous generations but, in the final analysis, “different practices will work better for some and not others.”¹¹ Visualizations designed to strengthen patience might be essential for a person who struggles with patience, but not particularly useful for a person who is naturally patient and who has other, more pressing character traits to attend to. Such an emphasis on finding what works is not unique to contemporary Musar teachers; Israel Salanter taught that individuals must find whatever practices can help them to overcome the particular vices with which they struggle. The nineteenth-century Musar movement encouraged each person to find particular “stratagems” that would work for him or her, which would inevitably depend on his or her nature and character.

The practice of Musar must, in part, be tailored to the individual. To be sure, Salanter taught

that such personally tailored practices must be supplementary to aspects of practice required by Jewish law, binding upon all Jews. Stone continues this traditional emphasis in his teaching, but in Morinis's writing, there is much less talk of binding law and more emphasis on finding a personalized approach. This is deeply appealing to contemporary American Jews, who are little interested in submitting to communal norms or commandments but who are deeply interested in selecting religious practices that "work." Many of the particular practices of Musar are appealing in and of themselves—American Jews are attracted to therapeutic exercises that help them to understand themselves better, and they see music, meditation, and conversations with friends as particularly attractive spiritual activities.¹² The Musar movement's encouragement of these sorts of activities, and its pragmatic willingness to adopt whatever activities "work" to make us into better people, make it an attractive model for contemporary Americans, even if they would rather avoid its more demanding aspects.

Musar is also appealing today insofar as it offers a way for Jews to engage with the Jewish tradition outside of conventional communal structures. As Cohen and Eisen show, Jews have limited enthusiasm for communal institutions and certainly for synagogues; even those who do attend synagogue services tend to find more meaningful Jewish experiences in private settings. This follows trends in wider American society; as Wade Clark Roof pointed out in his *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, a preference has emerged among Americans for solitary meditation rather than group worship. This is certainly true for Jews, who are not only alienated from synagogue services but also from traditional Jewish liturgy's imagery and Hebrew language, and who have been among the Americans most receptive to private, meditative techniques imported from Buddhism and other traditions. The solitary meditative practices encouraged by the Musar

movement, including meditation, journaling, and chanting exercises, have a strong attraction for such Jews. Indeed, the sort of daily routine outlined by Morinis, which focuses on private meditation and introspection, offers a more widely attractive model than Stone's demand to also engage with traditional liturgy and community. It is the private dimension of Musar that helps to make it especially attractive to many Jews. While any Musar practice will have a certain communal thrust—the traditional Jewish virtues on which it focuses demand involvement with the life of a community—its private practices appeal to an age characterized by privatized spirituality.

The inner focus of the Musar movement also makes it appealing to many American Jews. As Adam Seligman et al. have argued in *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, liberal modernity has been characterized by a drive for "sincerity"—for the purification of the individual will. America, with its Puritan heritage, has offered an especially favorable climate for religious movements seeking the perfection of the inner life, demanding purity of intention in all actions. Such movements require private soul-searching, and often have disdain for communal rituals that are not obviously connected with the purification of individual hearts. The Musar movement fits this profile to a significant degree—while it strongly approved of traditional communal rituals, it saw all of Jewish life as ideally directed at the healing of individual hearts. Strikingly, it even drew on American models of inner purification: among the Musar practices that Israel Salanter encouraged was the model of diary-keeping found in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, a model which grew out of American Puritan culture.¹³ American culture continues to approve of such "sincere" efforts at inner purification, so it is no surprise that the Musar movement's interest in cultivating inner virtues would find a welcome audience on American soil.

The ethical focus, the individual focus, and the inner focus of Musar may serve to make it

appealing to non-Orthodox Jews who are part of the American cultural mainstream; nonetheless, the revival of the Musar movement very much cuts against the grain of American culture, with its self-critical and demanding model of religious life. Such a counter-cultural model is unlikely to become dominant within large, mainstream movements like Reform or Conservative Judaism. And yet the Musar movement seems to have found a place under the umbrella of such movements, and it may well remain a small but significant trend within contemporary American Jewish life.

Endnotes

- 1 This point is made in the first letter in the classic compilation of Salanter's writings, *Or Yisrael*; the relevant section is translated in Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) 108–9. Etkes's work is the best historical introduction to Salanter and the founding of his movement.
- 2 Such was the conclusion of Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, as conveyed by Rabbi Micha Berger by way of Rabbi Yehoshua Wender. See "What Is Mussar?" *Aspaqlaria: Keeping Values and Meaning in Focus* (31 January 2008): <<http://www.aishdas.org/asp/2008/01/what-is-mussar.shtml>>.
- 3 Ira F. Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (New York: Aviv, 2007) 23.
- 4 In distancing itself from asceticism and attacks on self-esteem, contemporary Musar is particularly distancing itself from the best-known Musar school, Novaredok, a fiercely extremist and antirationalist stream of the Musar movement famously described in Chaim Grade's novel *The Yeshiva* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976); it is much more in keeping with the legacy of the rival Musar movement schools of Slobodka and of Kelm.
- 5 On these trends, see especially Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 6 On these and related efforts, see Dana Evan Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) 258–84; Boaz Huss, "The New Age of Kabbalah," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6.2 (July 2007): 107–25.
- 7 Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boston: Trumpeter 2007) 15–6.
- 8 Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 36.
- 9 James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic, 2000) 180, 182, 191.
- 10 Cohen and Eisen 128–9.
- 11 Morinis 250.
- 12 On the Jewish contribution to and embrace of American therapeutic ideals, see Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). On the spiritual appeal of music, meditation, and conversation, see Steven M. Cohen and Lawrence A. Hoffman, "How Spiritual Are America's Jews?" *S3K Report* No. 4 (March 2009).
- 13 See Etkes 123ff.