



## Mindfulness and Mussar Podcast transcript

### The alacrity of Abraham: An interview with Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner of Temple Beth Tikvah in Roswell, Georgia – Episode #2

November 2022

**Andrew Feldman:** Welcome to the very first episode of the Mindfulness and Musar podcast. I'm Andy Feldman and I'm really glad you're with us. Season One of the podcast will focus on interviews with chapter authors of the book, the *Mussar Torah Commentary: A Spiritual Path to Living, a Meaningful and Ethical Life*, edited by Rabbi Barry Block and published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

The chapter we'll focus on today is called "Anavah – Humility: Shabbat as a Return to Our Authentic Selves." It's written by Rabbi Michelle Pearlman of Beth Chaim Reform Congregation in Malvern, Pennsylvania, and Rabbi Sharon Mars of Temple Israel in Columbus, Ohio. I'm thankful to both of them for their wisdom in this chapter, and I'm glad to have one of those authors with us today, Rabbi Michelle Perlman. Rabbi Perlman, welcome and thanks for being the very first interviewee of this new podcast.

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** Thank you so much. I'm a big podcast fan and this is my first podcast interview, so this is very exciting for me.

**Andrew Feldman:** We are honored to have you with us. Tell us, if you would, what does Judaism say in its various sources about the *middah*—in other words, the soul trait or the virtue – of humility, or in Hebrew, *anavah*.

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** So, *anavah* in my study of Mussar is the *middah* that we start with because *anavah* is a gateway to other *moddot* practices. First, I think we should define *anavah* because it's a little bit hard to define. If we call it humility, which we do call it humility in English, but when we think about humility in English, we often think of like Mother Teresa washing people's feet—that kind of humility. And actually as defined in Mussar—and our teacher, Alan Morinis, has such a great definition—he says, you have to think about *anavah* as taking up no more than my place, but no less than my space.

So if we're working the range of *anavah*, some people are barely kind of showing up, right? They're very shy, they're very introverted, they're very retiring. And on the other end, there's people who just won't stop talking in a room—they just take up so much space. And really *anavah* is asking us to take up no more than our space, no less than our place. So we have to be present, right? We can't be so shy and retiring that we're not even in the conversation. But we can't be so present in the world that we're just taking up all the space. Now, if we're taking up

so much space in the world, then how is there room to do work on other *middot* like *savlanut*, patience, or working out anger, or any of the other *middot*.

If we're just taking up so much space, you can't even really be reflective. If you're just so out there taking up so much space, or if you're not taking any space at all, you know, you don't even really have the self-confidence to do the *Tikkun Middot*. So you have to work on *anavah* first.

**Andrew Feldman:** The chapter that you and Rabbi Mars wrote draws on Parashat B'reishit—[b'reishit meaning] “in the beginning”—and this is the very first section of the Torah. And you draw out examples from well-known figures in that *parashah* that are lacking humility—and not just humility, really, but defined also as hiding from our authentic selves.

An example is Adam and Eve. With Adam hiding in the garden, God looking for him, and God asks, *ayeka*, where are you? And Adam essentially says: I was afraid and hid myself. And as you and Rabbi Mars note, it's an example that *we* can take of hiding our authentic selves from the truth of our lives. Can you say a bit more about the insights of that question: Where are you?

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** Yeah, it's also the invitation to Mussar practice, *ayeka*? Like, what's up with you? And where are you today? Because like in Mussar practice, you're not going to be in the same place every single day and in every single situation, right? Working on *anavah* or any of these character traits, you're always working in reaction to what's going on in your life.

And that question—“*ayeka*?”—is a great question. Where are you today? One day I could be feeling like really great. And then another day something can happen and I'm retreating. And so, *ayeka*, where am I today with my *anavah*? Am I too present? Where am I today? In this relationship or even in this conversation. [I might say to myself], “I feel like I'm talking too much.” Right? And then I've got to go, “Oh, let's pull back.”

**Andrew Feldman:** Having that self-awareness, whether it's in a relationship or a conversation. We'll be back with Rabbi Pearlman after a short break for reflection.

[Music]

**Andrew Feldman:** In terms of advice for cultivating *anavah*, the major practice that you and Rabbi Mars suggest is to find some way to experience Shabbat rest that feels meaningful to you—as the chapter title says, “Shabbat as a Return to our Authentic Selves.” And I really appreciated how you and Rabbi Mars described Shabbat rest not just as relaxing or time away from work, but also connecting with our emotions, which we might not do in our day-to-day pace of life.

Some of the questions that you suggested asking were: How can humility help me understand the place of emotion in my life? Or how much space do I give myself to feel strong emotions? In

other words, finding your authentic self is more than just resting, but also looking inward and being open to that. Is that fair to say?

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** Yeah. That's mindfulness, right? It's being able to feel the emotion and just to feel it and to know, but not to always react. And I think that when Rabbi Mars and I were talking about this, we were reflecting on the fact that we live in such a world where we're just trying to do so many things with our devices. We're on 24/7, we're connected to the 24/7 news cycle that's provoking all kinds of emotion, especially right now. And we're so reactive and we're, if you will, we're in pieces. We're living kind of fragmented lives and the idea of Shabbat brings us back to the sense of *shelemut*—a sense of wholeness.

It gives us an invitation to ask the question that you pointed to earlier: Ayeka, where are you? What's going on with you? And we can, we can take this as an invitation to reclaim our authentic selves—our whole selves. Some of us are very emotional and always reactive. And some of us, we do numbing things and we don't allow ourselves to feel emotion. And so that time, that mindful space that we can get on Shabbat allows us to be more present, more whole, more creative. We're able to listen to one another because we give ourselves that space.

**Andrew Feldman:** That's really well said. I wanted to get your input on one final point. You and Rabbi Mars note something very important, which is that you can experience Shabbat rest in small ways during the week. For example, taking ten minutes at the end of an hour or two of work to meditate or stretch or go for a walk.

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** Yeah, it doesn't have to wait 'till Friday and Saturday. It can be a practice that you hone on Shabbat, but you can take that ability to disconnect—that ability to find mindful moments and apply that at other times. You know, in mindfulness practice we say that meditation is a just a breath away. It's so close to us—it's breathing. And so when we're working and we're feeling frantic and we notice something is off in our bodies, or when we're really reactive and we're like, "We know we shouldn't say what we're going to say, but we can't shut our mouths," we can take a couple of breaths and we can come back to ourselves. And we can check in and we can ask that question, *ayeka*, how ya doing? Where are you? And we can come back to that centered place.

**Andrew Feldman:** Rabbi Michelle Pearlman of Beth Haim Reform Congregation in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Rabbi Pearlman, thank you very much for joining us and for being our very first guest on the podcast.

**Rabbi Michelle Pearlman:** It was wonderful to speak with you, thank you. What a treat.

**Andrew Feldman:** Some information for our listeners. To learn more about the book, *The Musar Torah Commentary*, or to order a copy, please see the publisher's webpage for the book. The web address is [mussar.ccarpress.org](http://mussar.ccarpress.org). The music on our podcast, that great jazz, is by David Chevin and Warren Byrd from their album *Let us Break Bread Together* and used with their permission. And finally, if you want to keep up to date with the podcast, please see our website

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