

*Teaching Mussar at the FBI**

By: CARY A. FRIEDMAN

I have been training police officers for the past 18 years. At the invitation of a then high-ranking official of the FBI I had become a consultant for their Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) which was exploring the role of spiritual health in the careers of law enforcement officers.

A career in law enforcement is stressful and challenging, both physically and psychologically. Research, observation, and common sense confirm this. According to Hans Selye, a groundbreaking researcher on stress, police work is “the most stressful occupation in America, even surpassing the formidable stresses of air traffic control.” Even with an abundance of psychological practitioners, tools, and interventions, the consistent, persistent heartbreaking statistics of the law enforcement community had led the Special Supervisory Agents (SSAs) of the BSU to believe that the root problem had still not been identified and addressed. The incidence of domestic violence,¹ alcoholism and substance abuse,² divorce,³ gastrointestinal disease,⁴ shortened life-expectancy,⁵ and suicide,⁶ among many other similar statistics, indicated that something else was going on, beyond the

* This article is in response to a request from *Hakirah's* editor to write about my work experience.

¹ Domestic violence is 2–4 times more common among police families than American families in general, according to the National Center for Women and Policing.

² Police officers are twice as likely as the general public to become problem drinkers, according to Terry Constant in “Not So Obvious Police Stress.”

³ The national divorce rate is approximately fifty percent while the divorce rate for police officers is sixty to seventy-five percent, according to Dan Goldfarb in “Police Stress.”

⁴ According to the “Buffalo Cardio-Metabolic Occupational Police Stress (BCOPS)” study.

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physical and the psychological, something that hadn't been identified and addressed.

The BSU hypothesized that a law enforcement career might also be “spiritually” stressful. They chose that term for two reasons: (1) It was vague and broad enough to encompass whatever they might discover within that realm, and (2) they wanted to distinguish it from religion and religiosity. They were careful not to violate the requisite separation of Church and State.

Their goal was straightforward: To identify “tools for intentional spirituality” with which police officers could save themselves from the corrosive effects of a career in law enforcement.

At the time, the aforementioned high-ranking official at the FBI heard me speaking in a public context. My audience was not religious, or even primarily Jewish, so I had crafted my remarks accordingly. I used *divrei Torah* as the foundation of my talk, but expressed those ideas in straightforward English, using universalistic terms. Intrigued, the FBI official initiated a relationship that would span several years and prompt many trips to the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

He described the frustrations officers experience on the job, and the ugliness they face each day, even during mundane and uneventful shifts. He spoke of the profound personality changes they undergo, and the destructive and self-destructive behavior of the officers in their attempt to numb their pain and rage. He also described the BSU's efforts to identify “tools for intentional spirituality” that could be utilized for the benefit of the law enforcement community. In their research, as in everything they do to support the fight against crime, the BSU was concerned not only with FBI agents but also with police officers.

Two statements stood out during the many early conversations we had. The first was a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche: “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.” Law enforcement officers fight monsters, and the process changes them in subtle and profound ways. The second was the official's challenge and invitation to me: “Here, at the FBI's National Academy, we teach *how* to do the job, but we also need to teach *why* to do the job.” With that he

⁵ Police officers are at increased risk for mortality as a result of their occupation. The average age of death for police officers is 66 years of age, according to John M. Violanti in “Dying from the Job: The Mortality Risk for Police Officers.”

⁶ Statistics indicate that somewhere between 2 and 6 times more officers kill themselves each year than are killed by criminals.

invited me to get involved with identifying and designing “tools for intentional spirituality.”

The experience was bewildering. Other than my expertise in the mythology of the Batman,⁷ I was unfamiliar with the world of law enforcement. I did not feel equal to this task and I said so to the Chief of the BSU. Nonetheless, he encouraged me to consider the invitation.

Uncertain, I called my rebbi, described the various exchanges I had and my first trips to Quantico, and asked him what I should do. He replied—firmly and unequivocally—that I should get involved in the work and produce the material they wanted. I expressed my doubts, but he dismissed them and encouraged me to feel confident I would succeed. He shared a number of arguments to explain his position. He mentioned the obligation of *hakkaras batov* we Jews must have for the USA and the law enforcement officers who protect our right to live safely and openly as religious Jews. We live well here; we are given all the rights and freedom we could want. The United States is not like other countries, where, historically, the Jews were subject to a different set of laws, discriminatory laws enforced by their law enforcement officers.

In my community, Jews wearing their *talleisim* walk in the middle of the street on Shabbos, and feel safe and comfortable doing so, because we live in a benevolent country of law and order, a *malchus shel chesed*.⁸ We do not run when we see the police—we welcome their presence. Basic decency, my rebbi informed me, requires me to do everything I can as gratitude to the people who keep us safe. Since I began my work, I have never failed to express—each and every time at the beginning of my presentation—that “I am here as a representative of the Jewish community to say thank you. We can never repay you for what you do for us, but please accept the life-, family-, and career-saving insights I offer as an expression of our gratitude.” I mention that my mother—may she live and be well—is a Holocaust survivor from Vilna who remembers what it was like to live in a country whose police officers enforced a different set of rules for the Jewish people.

In addition, my rebbi pointed out a Tosafos⁹ that discusses our obligation to provide the *umos ha-olam* (non-Jewish nations) with the Torah they need to animate their observance of the *sheva mitzvos Bnei Noach*, the 7 Noachide Commandments. Instructing them in the universal mitzvos is not merely *reshus*, optional, but rather, a *chiyuv*, a requirement. The justice

⁷ I am the author of *Wisdom from the Batcave* (Compass Books, 2006).

⁸ Rav Moshe Feinstein, *Igros Moshe*, *Choshen Mishpat* 2:29, and others

⁹ *Chagigah* (13a) *d.h. Ain mosrin*.

system in our country satisfies the Talmud's criteria for a just and equitable justice system,¹⁰ and hence, my rebbi told me, their work as law enforcement officers is a *keiyum*, a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *dinim*, the Noachide Commandment to set up a just system of law. As such, in fulfillment of Tosafos' explanation, I was obligated to teach the Torah they would need to keep themselves decent and whole, and to preserve the integrity of our justice system and their role within it.

As if that wasn't enough, he talked about the potential for *kiddush HaShem*, if I were to be successful in designing for the law enforcement community powerful and effective "tools for intentional spirituality."

Over the course of two years I kept going back to Quantico, interviewing police officers. They spoke of their successes and failures; their happiness and sadness; their aspirations when they began their career and the disillusionment they now suffer. I followed them through their training, and even participated a bit in their police training courses. I met with young rookies, and seasoned veterans. It was exhilarating and exhausting.

I was surprised to discover the extraordinary idealism and spiritual ambitions that lead many of these young people to enter law enforcement. I was shocked to encounter their raw, inherent greatness of character, the spiritual yearning that lead so many of them to enter the police academy. I was also saddened to see what even a few years on the job did to those once idealistic, spiritual young people. My interactions with them, my time spent shadowing them, had been successful. I was experiencing the secondary trauma, and I could feel their disillusionments, their frustrations, their ever-present rage, and sense of betrayal.

I absorbed their pain and went back home to my life, and to my *sefarim*. I channeled these dark impressions through the prism of Torah literature I knew, to identify a body of Torah insights and instructions that would be relevant and helpful to law enforcement officers. Particularly helpful was the *mussar* literature I have loved since my youth.

Every police officer who has benefited from my books, articles, lectures, videos, or training programs owes a debt of gratitude to Rav Avigdor Miller and Slabodka *mussar*. I borrowed liberally from them and from Chassidic insights—their stirring messages celebrating the everyday toils and greatness of common people. I also scoured the literature of Rav Yisroel Salanter, the Alter of Slabodka, Rav Yitzchok Eizek Sher, Rav Wolbe,

¹⁰ *Even HaEzer* to *Hilchos Nizkei Mammon* 8:5, based upon Rashi's commentary to *Gittin* 9B; *Hilchos Gezeilah v'Aveidah* 5:14, 5:18; *Maggid Mishnah* on *Hilchos Gezeilah v'Aveidah* 5:18.

and Rav Henschel Liebowitz. I “operationalize” their insights to create “tools for intentional spirituality” to help police officers fortify themselves and replenish their reserve of idealism and integrity. It has helped them identify, understand, and control the hidden forces, frustrations and agendas buried deep within their hearts, minds, and souls. It has saved more than a few lives and careers.¹¹

The insights I share are not my own. They are all part of our vast Torah literature. I borrowed them from towering Torah giants. How could the material not be life-saving!

My contribution to the process is this: I am careful to present everything in clear, articulate English sentences. I speak of spirituality, never of religion. The differences are not merely cosmetic, and I am never (knowingly) intellectually dishonest with my audiences. I take Torah ideas and distill them into a form where they are *shaveh l'chol nefesh*, appropriate for all audiences, for law-enforcement officers who are not Jewish and who do not want to be bludgeoned over their heads with my religious beliefs. I respect their sensitivities and sensibilities and I’m careful never to put them into an uncomfortable situation. I generally avoid discussing God although I am allowed to invoke and discuss Him within the parameters laid out by the Civic Religion of the United States.

When I first enter the police training room, I notice their obvious surprise. My yarmulke—which I always wear—can be jarring, or even off-putting to some. But I never share my religious beliefs. “After all,” I ask them, “how many police officers here want to listen to an Orthodox rabbi talk about his strong, clear, well-defined beliefs in God?” I spend the first part of my training programs putting them at ease, convincing them they will learn a lot, and opening them up to my message.

I am mindful of Rambam’s view¹² that it’s not enough for an *eino-Yebudi* to observe the *sheva mitzvos* simply because they make sense; rather, they must observe them because they are mitzvos given by God. I have to maintain my own integrity, of course, but I don’t belabor the point—I wouldn’t want anyone shoving their ideology down my throat. I don’t have to browbeat anyone with my ideology to accomplish the goals my rebbi set for me all those years ago.

¹¹ These courses led me toward writing a book on the “tools for intentional spirituality,” *Spiritual Survival for Law Enforcement*. (Compass Books, 2005)

¹² *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 8:11.

I don't announce to my audiences where my material comes from, but they're not stupid. They get it. I walk in with my yarmulke—I've never taken it off, and I've never been asked to (except by well-intentioned, albeit misguided nonobservant Jews who have tried to advise me how to be "more effective" at getting my message across). They see my kosher food wrapped in aluminum foil, and my constant need to take a break so I can *daven*. Still and all, they welcome—eagerly and gratefully—my teaching.

That brings me to my first main point. We talk a lot about being a "light unto the nations."¹³ Some practitioners / speculators of *ta'amei hamitzvos* tell us that our mitzvos are training to go out, change the world and elevate it.¹⁴

Now, of course, our mitzvah observance would impact the world even if we were on a desert island.¹⁵ Mitzvah observance introduces a flow of *berachab* / spiritual energy from on High down to This World.¹⁶ We don't need an audience for that, and it is indeed a powerful achievement.

But what about that more mundane understanding? The mitzvos prepare us. They elevate our character and equip us for the difficult task of impacting the world through our behavior. Armed with our Torah philosophy and grounded by our mitzvah observance, we are ready and equipped to take on the world and elevate it. Isn't that one of the reasons for the Exile, to be among the nations and engage with them?¹⁷

Often, that engagement has been at arm's length and unpleasant. Jewish history has been marked by eras—long millennia, in fact—during which the nations' brutality left us little choice but to circle the wagons and hunker down, to move our light-giving menorahs from the outside to the inside "and *dayo*."¹⁸ We lit up our lives, families, and communities with the healing, holy light of Torah while the rest of the world chose to wallow in darkness. At those times our greatest ambition and accomplishment—the absolute best way to protect and champion our Torah message intended for all humankind—was to keep that pure light alive, to preserve

¹³ *Yeshaya* 49:6, 42:6, 60:3.

¹⁴ Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim*, ch. 4 *d.h. v'zot baTorah*; *Avodah Zarah* 5b; *Yoma* 39a; Introduction to *Horeb*, The Classification of the Mitzvot; *The Nineteen Letters*: Letters 10, 13, and 14.

¹⁵ *Zohar* 1:35b, 1:82b; *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:6.

¹⁶ *Devarim* 7:12–16, *Teshuvos Rashba* 5:55.

¹⁷ *Pesachim* 87b with *Maharsha d.h. Lo hegleh*. See also *The Nineteen Letters*, with commentary by Rabbi Joseph Elias, *Editor's Notes to Letter Nine*, note #3, p. 135.

¹⁸ See the *bara'isa* on *Shabbos* 21b.

it for a time when the world would be more willing and capable of receiving that Light, instead of recoiling and scampering off into the darkness, or more often than not, trying to kill the bearers of the Light.

But we live in a unique time in history, in a unique country. Not everyone is open to our message, but a surprisingly large group of people are, if we make it clear that we care about their well-being and express our beautiful, holy message in terms they can understand and accept, without watering down the message, G-d forbid, in any way.

There are a few premises, foundational Torah ideas, on which my work is built. The notion of *gadlus ba'adam*¹⁹ is central to everything I do. It is the foundation of everything I teach. So is the belief that our actions matter.²⁰ Another Torah idea: Officers can engage in behaviors that will nourish and nurture their spirits and ethics; they can preside over their own processes of internal fortification. They don't need to receive healing of their spirit as a gift. Our system doesn't believe in intermediaries between us and G-d; everyone has their own direct line to the Creator. These ideas are the foundation on which all my work is built. Their Torah origin is clear and obvious. As it turns out, our beliefs have colored and influenced the American value system, and most Americans subscribe to these notions whether they realize it or not. The Ten Commandments and ideas like the sanctity of human life are obvious examples, but I'm thinking of less obvious, subtler ideas. For example, a colleague, a protestant minister and a professor of protestant theology, shared with me the following observation: Classic Christian theology believes in the doctrine of righteousness through faith—that is, the notion that faith in their deity is enough to be considered righteous and to earn a Christian a place in the next world. In contrast, the Christians note, Judaism, with its system of mitzvah observance, is based on the doctrine of righteousness through acts or law. Faith is not enough. One must also behave properly, and one can and must become a decent person and earn a share in the World to Come through one's righteous behavior. The Jewish notion has prevailed. Most Americans believe in the importance of one's behavior as the determinant of one's standing as a decent person. Christianity has had to scramble to retrofit or incorporate the importance of behavior into its practical theology.

The *Meshech Chachmah* on *Bereshtis* 2:16 points out that a person reaps the Heavenly protection that comes from doing a mitzvah only if he is aware of the significance of what he is doing. I don't exactly inform the police officers that they are being *mekayem* the mitzvah of *dinim*, but I do get them used to thinking about the larger significance of what they are

¹⁹ *Tebillim* 8:6.

²⁰ *Avos* 1:17, 3:15, *Kiddushin* 40b.

doing. This allows them to reap the benefits of a sense of accomplishment and identity that comes from being aware that they are one of the good guys (and, if they choose, the benefit of the aforementioned Heavenly protection as well).

I started with a vision of spiritual health, which I understood to mean robust health in three dimensions: (1) *bein adam l'Makom*, (2) *bein adam l'chaveiro*, and (3) *bein adam l'atzmo*. This inspired the creation of the “3 Accounts of Spirituality” model: (1) Faith in God (or commitment to some higher, absolute Truth, larger than and external to the person), (2) Regard for People, and (3) Confidence in Self. When an officer’s 3 Accounts of Spirituality are full, he or she is in pretty good spiritual shape. The danger exists and trouble begins when the officer depletes those Accounts.

A cadet comes in with three full Accounts. Youth and idealism see to that, and many, perhaps most, officers start out very idealistic. But every shift, even the most mundane, presents big “checks,” depletions or withdrawals against each Account. Every police activity—what they see and what they do—constitutes a withdrawal from one or more of the Accounts of Spirituality. If those Accounts are not replenished, they will soon run dry, at which point the officer will be in spiritual overdraft. In the extreme case of sustained depletion and no replenishment, the officer may reach spiritual bankruptcy. This state is characterized by loss of idealism, cynicism, frustration, rage, existential exhaustion, and a sense of hopelessness. I had often noticed these characteristics in the veteran officers I interviewed.

I identified—through my extensive observations of and interviews with officers—the kinds of experiences and activities that drained them: The death of an innocent child; the vilification of the police by the media; maintaining self-control in encounters with abusive suspects; the depersonalization every officer experiences when he or she puts on a uniform and ceases to be, in the eyes of the people with whom the officer interacts, an individual; confronting raw, cruel, unremorseful human evil; the surrender of personal autonomy to the police administration way up the chain of command. All of these are depletions, and each of these, and hundreds more, drain an officer, albeit in different ways. I worked hard to categorize these “withdrawals” according to which Account they depleted.

Most important of all, I scoured the Torah literature to identify those “tools for intentional spirituality” with which officers could replenish their reserves of spirituality—that is, refill those Accounts. I “operationalized” the *mussar* insights into practical exercises and rituals that officers can use to nurture themselves and refill their Accounts.

It's really remarkable that this search for "tools for intentional spirituality" had never been undertaken before. When we send our police officers out to the street, we expose them to every possible experience and influence that can deplete and exhaust them spiritually. We know with absolute certainty that on the streets they will encounter an unrelenting barrage of experiences and activities that will impair critical thinking, emotional health, perception of reality, idealism, and integrity, and degrade their ability to discern right from wrong. The cumulative effect of a career on the street can make it exceedingly difficult for officers to maintain the clarity of thought, idealism, integrity, and decision-making capabilities with which they started.

Law enforcement executives know the officers are going to encounter these phenomena. That's what it means to be a cop. But within the law enforcement community, it is rare that we find any formal mechanisms to nurture the officers' internal resources that support and nurture spiritual health and well-being. To counterbalance the toxins to which they are exposed on the street, they require a steady diet of influences and infusions that will replenish their idealism and integrity and enhance their capacity and commitment to the noble law enforcement mission.

More often than not, such "support" consists of an annual two-hour in-service class where a lawyer reads aloud from the statutes and regulations governing law enforcement officers' conduct. It is not hard to understand why officers resent such sessions, and they do little to enhance their critical thinking, emotional health and idealism. All too often, the career changes officers into a darker, broken version of themselves, and, historically, the law enforcement community has done almost nothing to address them.

We can't reasonably expect officers to avoid such corrupting experiences. After all, that is what their job is all about: confronting nightmarish events and engaging in soul-numbing experiences. There is no way to sanitize the law enforcement experience.

It's important to recognize that these changes are not a consequence of bad behavior or poor judgment on the officer's part. On the contrary, officers are changed for the *worse* because they do everything *right*. The more they do their jobs well, the more they expose themselves to the very forces that can change and transform them into darker, broken versions of themselves.

The following point is absolutely critical: *Such transformations aren't a punishment for misbehaving. Rather, they are a consequence of throwing oneself wholeheartedly into the career with idealism, commitment and passion.*

Spiritual and ethical health is not a matter of achieving and maintaining a static state of perfect spiritual and ethical clarity. Spiritual and ethical

health is a *dynamic* state of draining and replenishing, corrupting and restoring, clouding and clarifying. The negative phases of these processes are inevitable and unavoidable so long as officers confront facts of life on the street. That is not in our control. What we *can* control is our contribution to the *positive* phases of these processes. *Marshaling and deploying restorative forces is completely up to us.* It doesn't "just happen."

That's where I come in. I encourage officers to detox themselves regularly from the pernicious effects of their career. Even more, I provide them with the tools needed to restore spiritual health and ethical clarity, which is the framework for excellent discretion and ethical performance of law enforcement's mission.

From my familiarity with Torah sources, I identified 17 "Characteristics of Spiritual Health" that my colleagues and I use to assess spiritual health—or, G-d forbid, disease—in officers.

My Torah learning has enabled me to look at mundane situations and grasp the dynamic processes underlying those situations. The ability to identify the abstract lurking beneath the concrete is characteristic of all the *lomdishe* learning we do. Somewhere within every piece of Torah is an insight into the heart, mind, soul of the human being or the point of existence, and these are universally relevant for every human being. My insights come from the low-hanging fruit of Torah learning. I don't do the deep dive into the esoteric realms of Torah. I ride the surface. That's okay. There's still a wealth of life-saving material there.

I've been shocked by the power of Torah to light up the dark places. I'm a believer, and even I had never dreamed how powerful and effective Torah could be in dispelling the Stygian darkness in which these police officers live. I have been shocked by how receptive the police world has been to my teaching.

I'm inspired—and often overwhelmed—when I see what an encounter with Torah can produce. I have an in-box full of e-mails and a desk full of letters from people who have told me that my talks and books have saved them from "eating their gun" (committing suicide). Countless people have asked me for references so they can explore more fully the "Hebraic sources" of my ideas. I spend a good amount of my time dissuading people from converting to Judaism. There are, however, a number of people gobbling up material on Aish.com and Chabad.com. A few have become Bnei Noach. Only in America! G-d bless the USA!

There have been poignant moments along the way. I was invited to give the keynote address to a group of several hundred police chaplains at a conference in Texas. A famous 83-year-old pastor—head of a string of super churches in Texas—was asked to give the opening benediction. The pastor approached the microphone and began to speak. I used the opportunity to review my notes for my speech. Even if I had been listening, I'm not sure I would have understood why, when the minister concluded his prayer, everyone gasped. My host leaned over to me and whispered, "Do you understand what just happened?" I confessed I did not. He explained that the minister had forgone the usual concluding *nusach* of all their Protestant prayers, which end with invoking the name of their Christian deity. Instead, he concluded his prayer with the generic conclusion, something like "we ask that you, God, bless this gathering, and let us say amen." The minister, who was used to preaching to more than 24,000 parishioners every Sunday morning in his main super church, had decided to omit the usual ending of the prayer—an ending he'd been using daily for decades—as a mark of respect for me.

I approached the dais, and waited as the minister walked down. I extended my hand and said, "Craig explained to me the significance of what you did. Thank you for your sensitivity." This rich, powerful, principled, successful man—who could have used the opportunity to trumpet his religious beliefs—replied, "We're so honored to have a Jew come here to address us."

The work has not been without its humorous moments. An evangelical Christian chaplaincy group in a major Midwestern city brought me in to give a day of training to a group of police officers and their families. One of the group's employees—a police chaplain—picked me up at the airport and delivered me to the training academy where the program would be held. At the appointed time, he greeted the officers and their families, made a little pitch about the chaplaincy organization and invited the people in attendance to join the organization and give financial support. He announced some upcoming social events, and proceeded to introduce me: "As you know, the Lion of ... is a Christian fellowship dedicated to supporting our brave Christian brothers and sisters in law enforcement in the ... Metropolitan PD. And in order to give you the absolute best Christian training we can, we are honored to present to you a Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Cary Friedman." It was said without a trace of irony or self-consciousness. I walked up to the podium a little stunned, not sure what to say to that.

It's taken a few of those introductions for me to realize that they sometimes they use the adjective "Christian" to mean "good."

Another lesson: This is not work done lightly. You can never drop your guard. It requires preparation and constant self-doubt and constant vigilance and replenishment of *hashkafic* clarity and integrity. It is nerve-racking work. I have felt more than once that the Gates of *Gebenom* are open at my feet, and that I must tread carefully. I encounter awkward situations all the time. The comfort has been that even the people who put me into awkward situations are (usually, though not always) well-intentioned and just don't know what they're doing. But that doesn't lessen the danger, and I don't mean to minimize the potential for violating *issurei avodah zarah m'd'Oraysa*. But the danger and the need for vigilance doesn't mean we are free to desist from the work.

I don't socialize with law enforcement people in the conventional sense, and that holds me back from breaking into the inner circle. It has hurt me professionally. When they go out at night to socialize, I return to my hotel room and learn Rav Sher's *Leket Sichos Mussar* or Rav Wolbe's *Shiurei Chumash*. It recharges me and prepares me for the next day's challenges.

What I offer doesn't fit easy categorization. Many law enforcement executives see my yarmulke and wonder if my goal is to proselytize. I've appealed to the *frum* community for funding to help bring these resources to police agencies across the country and accelerate the effort to share Torah ideas with the million-plus people involved in law enforcement in the US. But our community believes this is not a Jewish issue. With the tremendous financial needs within our community, this might be true. Nevertheless, imagine the benefit to the Jewish community if a hefty percentage of the law enforcement officers in America could say that they had been given the resources to live healthy lives—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and ethically—because of an infusion of Torah. I can't think of a better investment, or a truer fulfillment of our mission to be a "Light unto the nations." ❧