

Benjamin Franklin's Way to Virtue, the American Enlightenment, and Mussar¹

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“[B]eing fully persuaded of the Utility and Excellency of my Method, and that it might be serviceable to People in all Religions . . . I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice any one of any Sect against it.” —Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*

“[W]here will we take advice for controlling our animal soul, and submitting it to our direction?” —Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin, *The Book of Spiritual Accounting*

When Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) composed his autobiography, he included the description of a self-improvement method he'd devised in his younger years, along with an honest assessment of his varied success in applying it to his conduct. The method centers on thirteen behavioral traits — temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility — each of which, in succession, is allotted a week of close attention and reflection. Progress and setbacks in mastering the traits are tracked daily in a grid chart, which has the seven days of the week running horizontally, and the thirteen traits running vertically. After thirteen weeks, the cycle begins again, so that over the course of a year each behavioral trait has been carefully worked on for four weeks.

The form of Franklin's weekly chart

Temperance.							
<i>Eat not to Dullness.</i>							
<i>Drink not to Elevation.</i>							
	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
T							
S	**	*		*		*	
O	*	*	*		*	*	*
R			*			*	
F		*			*		
I			*				
S							
J							
M							
Cl.							
T							
Ch.							
H							

Franklin devised this self-improvement method when he was still in his twenties, and had originally intended to devote a book to its elaboration. In the *Autobiography*, he laments that due to his many other concerns over the years, he didn't accomplish this task: "I should have called my BOOK the *ART of Virtue* . . . But it so happened that my Intention of writing & publishing this Comment was never fulfilled . . . the necessary close Attention to private Business in the earlier part of Life, and public Business since, have occasioned my postponing it . . . [and] it has hitherto remain'd unfinish'd."²

Producing this book was part of "a *great and extensive Project*" Franklin had envisioned: the formation of an international secret fraternity and mutual-aid society, "the Society of the

Free and Easy.” Its initiates were to profess a belief in a generic religious creed, so that people of all religions would be able to join, and were to follow “the Thirteen Weeks Examination and Practice of the Virtues.” Together, the society’s worldwide members would comprise a “united Party for Virtue”:

My Ideas at that time were, that the Sect should be begun & spread at first among young and single Men only . . . that the existence of such a Society should be kept a Secret till it was to become considerable, to prevent Solicitations for the Admission of improper Persons . . . [t]hat the Members should engage to afford their Advice Assistance and Support to each other in promoting one another’s Interest, Business and Advancement in Life . . .³

As Norman S. Fiering notes in “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” Franklin’s intended organization brings to mind the Masonic fraternity: “One thinks of a quasi-religious society, like the Freemasons, perhaps—of which Franklin was a member—as the basis for this idea.”⁴ In contrast, Franklin biographer Gordon S. Wood suggests that Franklin’s own joining of the Masonic order may actually have been a factor in the Party for Virtue project’s prolonged postponement, as he then felt no pressing need to create a new organization: “Freemasonry more than fulfilled Franklin’s Enlightenment dreams of establishing a party for virtue, and he became an enthusiastic and hard-working member of the fraternity.”⁵

In the *Autobiography*, Franklin reconciles with the fact that he’s no longer able to carry out his ambitious plan at his now more advanced age: “my multifarious Occupations public & private induc’d me to continue postponing, so that it has been omitted till I have no longer Strength or Activity left sufficient for such an Enterprise.”⁶ In the end, he neither wrote his book on virtue, nor formed his party.

However, nearly twenty years after Franklin’s death, and half way across the world from Philadelphia, the early Eastern European *maskil* (Jewish enlightener) Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin of Satanow (1749-1826) succeeded in completing and publishing a Hebrew text based on

Franklin's self-improvement method. Its purpose may have surprised Franklin, for instead of this being a work for the use of the "Virtuous and good Men of all Nations," whom Franklin had envisioned as the members of his party, Lefin's 1808 *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh (The Book of Spiritual Accounting)* was written specifically for the moral and spiritual edification of his fellow Jews.⁷

Nancy Sinkoff observes in "Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of the Enlightenment" that Lefin was drawn to Franklin's method for the very reason that Franklin had originally been compelled to devise it himself. Both the American philosopher and the Eastern European rabbi had "come to the conclusion that a practical program of behavior modification was necessary to effect individual change . . . [and] that self-improvement required a structured plan of behavior modification."⁸

Explaining why he'd thought up his program, Franklin wrote: "I concluded at length, that the mere speculative Conviction that it was in our Interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our Slipping, and that the contrary Habits must be broken and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any Dependence on a steady uniform Rectitude of Conduct."⁹ Finding that no practical method for breaking bad habits and inculcating better ones had been formulated to his satisfaction, Franklin developed his own. Likewise, explaining his decision to embrace Franklin's method, Lefin wrote:

[T]he educational work that we are dealing with here [in *The Book of Spiritual Accounting*] is very valuable, because it is necessary for every person . . . [but] the [rabbinic] sages of the preceding generations bequeathed us exceedingly little concerning it . . .

So too with the wisdom of *mussar* [i.e., Jewish ethics] itself . . . even though [the sages of blessed memory] were themselves tremendously righteous and pious . . . they only addressed the intellectual soul [in their instruction]; but where will we take advice for controlling our animal soul, and submitting it to our direction?¹⁰

Lefin wished that the rabbis of the past had provided more detailed explanations of the practical methods they'd used in refining themselves. Whereas they hadn't done so, Franklin

furnished just such an account in his *Autobiography*, and Lefin believed that his method could benefit all who were interested in self-improvement: “Indeed, several years ago a new technique was discovered, which is a wonderful innovation in this task [of overcoming one’s animal nature], and it seems apparent that its mark will spread as quickly, God willing, as that of the innovation of the printing press, which has brought light to the world.”¹¹

Because Franklin had envisioned his program as universally applicable and as forming the basis of an international fraternity, he needed a set of traits that could be focused on by all prospective members. He compiled his list deliberately, and arranged it cumulatively, so that improved mastery of the first behavioral trait might make it easier to master the second, and so on.¹² Lefin, on the other hand, had no such concerns. Disregarding this aspect of Franklin’s program, he instead urged his readers to select and focus on behavioral traits relevant to their own unique circumstances and personalities, rather than on the specific ones he outlined as examples.¹³

Although Lefin still instructed his readers to select thirteen traits — so that they wouldn’t exhaust themselves by focusing too intently on a smaller number — the order of the traits could be shuffled as needed, and practitioners might dwell on a trait for more than one week of a thirteen-week cycle if they felt it required their special attention. Lefin also expected that as they mastered certain behaviors and became ready for new challenges, practitioners would modify the list of traits they focused on. In general, *Spiritual Accounting* offered a more malleable, individualized method than Franklin had presented in his *Autobiography*. Nonetheless, the behavioral traits outlined for improvement in the *Autobiography* and in *Spiritual Accounting*, though not identical, largely overlap, as does the emphasis on gradually and systematically overcoming undesirable habits and acquiring positive ones.

In *Jews and the American Soul*, Andrew R. Heinze claims that “[a]s Lefin assimilated Franklin, he approached the border of heretical disrespect of the Sages, the chain of rabbinic authority linking the Talmud to the present . . . [when] he noted that the Sages, despite their profundity in many areas, had little to teach about psychological conditioning.”¹⁴ Rabbinic authorities, however, haven’t perceived *Spiritual Accounting* as heretical or disrespectful, and *mussarniks* have been untroubled by Lefin’s assertion of the uniqueness of the work’s method. From Lefin’s day to the present, rabbis and Jewish scholars have regularly noted the connection between Franklin and *Spiritual Accounting*, and have often commented approvingly on its source. Even when Franklin’s name has been absent from discussions of the book, the novelty of *Spiritual Accounting*’s self-improvement system in Jewish practice has been widely acknowledged. An early example of such appreciation is found in a Hebrew letter written by the prominent *maskil* Samuel Jacob Bick in 1815, in which he described *Spiritual Accounting*’s method:

[It is] a wonderful technique invented by the sage Benjamin Franklin from the city of Philadelphia in North America . . . Rabbi Mendel [Lefin] has prepared a delicacy for his nation . . . and taught a simple and clear solution for the broken but still precious soul to speedily return from the bad to the good. In their approbation, the rabbis of the generation said this thing is beneficial and new. And the nation replied in turn: Sanctified! Sanctified!¹⁵

Among the rabbis who admired *Spiritual Accounting* was Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (1810-1883), the promulgator of the Mussar movement, who saw it “as a truly practical book for ethical guidance” and endeavored to have it reprinted.¹⁶ Accordingly, a foreword composed for the book by Rabbi Yitzhok Isaac Sher of Slobodka stressed *Spiritual Accounting*’s singularity and innovativeness: “In this esteemed book, important matters from the wisdom of *mussar*, which we have not found in the other *mussar* books in our possession, are clarified.”¹⁷ Such praise has persisted to the present. More recently, for example, Rabbi Yisroel Miller has suggested that

parents introduce their older children “to the behavior-modification system used by Rav Yisroel Salanter and his disciples, as found in *Sefer Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*,” assuring them that its “program is virtually guaranteed to repay huge dividends.”¹⁸

In “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” Fiering argues that when it comes to his self-improvement method, Franklin shouldn’t be given too much credit for originality, nor should the method be situated too specifically within the context of the American Enlightenment:

Franklin’s method, insofar as it was a system for achieving perfection through reiterated small acts, was part of a general enthusiasm at the time for applying a technique of great antiquity [i.e., the ancient idea of acquiring virtue through habit] that had only recently come into its own. It is tempting to believe that conditions in Franklin’s America were peculiarly conducive to practicality and meliorism, but the trend was much grander than any mere American phenomenon. Franklin’s thinking was simply representative of developments found elsewhere at the same time, particularly among the British associationists.¹⁹

Fiering concedes that Franklin may have been innovative in having his “ethical program . . . break down the virtues into relatively small units of behavior.”²⁰ This aspect of Franklin’s method was certainly significant to Lefin, as it turned the daunting task of self-transformation into a more manageable, step by step process. Perhaps just as important, though, was Franklin’s distinct approach to virtue and religion, which contributed to the ease with which Lefin was able to adapt Franklin’s method and make it a part of accepted Jewish practice. From the outset, Franklin had intended to make his system for self-improvement, as well as the international fraternity whose members would adhere to it, universally accessible. He explained this non-sectarian approach in the *Autobiography*:

It will be remark’d that, tho’ my Scheme was not wholly without Religion there was in it no Mark of any of the distinguishing Tenets of any particular Sect. I had purposely avoided them; for being fully persuaded of the Utility and Excellency of my Method, and that it might be serviceable to People in all Religions, and intending some time or other to publish it, I would not have any thing in it that should prejudice any one of any Sect against it.²¹

Since Franklin took such a non-sectarian approach, there were no philosophical or religious obstacles to prevent the method’s use within a Jewish context. “To this day,” Sinkoff

points out, “Salanter’s reprinting of Lefin’s book has found a home among traditionalist Jewish circles and . . . among popularizing ones.”²² *Spiritual Accounting* received the approbation of prominent rabbis, was embraced by the Mussar movement, and became one of the many Hebrew texts studied in *yeshivot*, furthering Franklin’s initial goal of making his system for self-examination and character improvement “serviceable to People in all Religions.”

Notes

¹ An earlier article of mine on this topic appeared in The Friends of Franklin’s *The Franklin Gazette*. That article addressed how Franklin’s self-improvement method may have reached Rabbi Lefin, as well as why Rabbi Lefin did not mention Franklin or the *Autobiography* by name in *The Book of Spiritual Accounting*. See my “‘Serviceable to People in all Religions’: The Influence of Franklin’s *Autobiography* on Judaism,” *The Franklin Gazette* Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter 2010/2011): 4-5.

² Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (ed. Kenneth Silverman; New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 101-102.

³ Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 105.

⁴ Norman S. Fiering, “Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1978): 223.

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 44.

⁶ Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 105.

⁷ Nancy Sinkoff, “Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe: Cultural Appropriation in the Age of the Enlightenment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2000): 142.

⁸ Sinkoff, “Benjamin Franklin in Jewish Eastern Europe,” 141.

⁹ Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 91.

¹⁰ Rabbi Mendel Lefin, *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh (The Book of Spiritual Accounting)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mirkaz Ha-sefer, 5748), 30-31.

¹¹ Lefin, *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, 31.

¹² Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 91-92.

¹³ Lefin, *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, 36, 88, and 123-124.

¹⁴ Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 45-46.

¹⁵ Samuel Jacob Bick, in *Sefer Kerem Hemed* [Hebrew] (ed. Samuel Judah Leib Goldenberg; Avien: Buchdrucker und Buchhander, 1833), 1:97 (Letter 29).

¹⁶ Menahem Glenn, "Ha-hinuh Ha-mishma'ati Be-shitato Shel R. Yisrael Mi-Salant," in *Sefer Ha-yovel* [Hebrew] (ed. Y.L. Hacoheh Maimon; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5721), 170.

¹⁷ See *Sefer Heshbon Ha-nefesh*, 3 and 5.

¹⁸ Rabbi Yisroel Miller, *In Search of the Jewish Woman* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1984), 102 and 142.

¹⁹ Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue," 213.

²⁰ Fiering, "Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue," 214.

²¹ Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 100.

²² Sinkoff, "Benjamin Franklin and the Virtues of Mussar," The Seforim Blog, March 25, 2008, <<http://seforim.blogspot.com/2008/03/nancy-sinkoff-benjamin-franklin-and.html>>.