

The RYS Daily 6/17/07 Mussar Doctrine XV

This approach bears some affinity to a well-known principle enunciated by the French thinker, Emil Coue (1867-1926), who built an entire psychology on repetitive recitation, called "Autosuggestion" in modern terminology. In Coue's opinion, man's powers are influenced by his own, especially unconscious, repetitions, which come to him inadvertently through the impressions received every day from his environment by his eyes and ears. [24] For the most part, man is influenced to his detriment by this repetition which occurs incidentally and unintentionally, and so it causes him to suffer harm. If we want to train ourselves, says Coue, to live our own lives and not have our lives lived for us, we must use conscious and directed autosuggestion, to set for ourselves certain formulas to strengthen our perception and mental discipline, and to repeat these constantly so as to gain self-mastery, remove what is spiritually depressing to us, and to rid ourselves of our moral blemishes. Ernst Halshaar, a well-known research scholar, author of a book on this subject, compares Coue's rule to the Scriptural injunction: "And you shall repeat them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up." [25] He asserts: "Without repetition, there can be no success. Nor does success endure permanently. Everyone repeats, but unconsciously. As for you, remember the rule: Conscious repetition is the guarantee of lasting success." [26]

This rule is identical with R. Israel's Musar principle. Coue stretched his doctrine too far, extending it to many fields, even to physical wellbeing etc., but the basic principle is common to both doctrines. [27]

The same principle is to be found in R. Moses Chaim Luzzato's writings as well. In his introduction to the Path of the Just, he wrote: "The benefit to be obtained from this work is not derived from a single reading... Its benefit is to be derived rather through review and persistent study." R. Israel also found support in the words of the Sages of the Talmud: "When Ray saw a crowd escorting him, he used to say: 'Though his excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds, yet he shall perish for ever like his own dung.' When Mar Zutra the pious was carried shoulder high on the Sabbaths preceding the Pilgrim Festivals, he used to say so: 'For the riches are not for ever, nor does the crown endure to all generations.'" This was the means employed by the Sages. When honor was conferred upon them, they feared lest their minds become distracted. Consequently they would recite over and over again a verse designed to induce the opposite attitude, and so influence themselves." From this rule R. Israel derived his first principle in Musar study.

[24]. The idea that everyone is influenced by whatever he sees and hears has its source in the Torah: "For you know ... how we came through the midst of the nations..., and you have seen their detestable things and their idols..., lest there be among you... whose heart turns away this day... to go serve the gods of those nations" (Deut. Chap. 29); See Rashi, Ramban, ad loc.

[25]. Deut. Chap. 6

[26] Coue's book is available in a Hebrew translation by E. Halshaar. Of. Emile Coue, Self Mastery through Conscious Auto-Suggestion (New York, 1922).

[27] See S. K. Brooks, Autosuggestia, (Hebrew - Tel Aviv ed.), p. 121. The translator, Mr. Feldenkreis ties this approach to the Jewish Musar conception, and adduces support from R. Jonah Gerondi's Yesod Hateshvah and Ramban's letter to his son, both of which deem it mandatory to engage in constant review, morning and evening, in order to mend one's ways and repent.