

Finding Community in Amsterdam

By Bonnie Leopold



I can go anywhere and feel at home.

The small group of Mussarniks stood in the middle of the Etz Haim library in Amsterdam, facing several archival books open for our display. I was fortunate to be one of those included in this special tour following the Mussar Summer Academy in June. The guide led us to view a handwritten book. We stood in awe at the original Mishna Torah, handwritten by the Rambam in 1282. I dropped my phone and lost my breath!

Amsterdam has been on my bucket list. When I heard that the Mussar Institute Europe was sponsoring a Summer Academy, I knew it was a divine sign. The time had come to visit Amsterdam and continue my Mussar studies in a new community.

My week in Amsterdam began by connecting with our Mussar community of organizers. The discussions were exciting and I felt myself levitating in the spiritual world far away from my home in California. I was the “outsider” for only a brief time. With each gathering I met another dear soul connected to Mussar studies. Language was never an obstacle in sharing. I heard in Dutch and in English, students with interest and desire to keep learning more Mussar.

I was so cared for by the compassion of this Mussar community. Is Bonnie OK? Does she know where she’s going? Does Bonnie need a ride? Does she like the food? Who is picking her up? My host and angel, Mirjam van Blankenstein, was assigned to take care of me. My angel took me sightseeing as we discussed middot. Lots of patience as we waited for the Metro or tram. We discussed compassion in our conversations with those we met along the way. We needed bitachon (trust) as we searched the city.



Academy presenters included Alan Morinis and Avi Fertig discussing the trait of humility and its elements from Mesillat Yesharim – Path of the Just by Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. Our guide presented our group of 60 students with a first edition of Path of the Just, stamped 1740, the date we mention as the first published Mussar teachings. Avi was like a kid in a candy store. He read to us from the text and, with excitement, found a few mistakes in the printing.

Luzzatto writes:

The principle underlying humility is that one not attach importance to oneself for any reason whatsoever ...

For a person must first achieve humility in thought, and then conduct himself in the ways of the humble.

I noticed that I was being humble in this space so far from my home in California. I have been a student of Mussar since 2003. I carried with me memories of attending several TMI Kallot and Practice Retreats in the States along with the Mini-Kallah in Los Angeles. Yet I sat in this historic synagogue, behind a brick wall, as a new student open to possibilities.



In the heat of study (from the temperature in the room), we listened together. This gathering of students from many countries found a common bond. We focused on our similarities of Mussar study and not our differences in how we observe Judaism. I was in a special community to study together, listen to music together, walk together and eat together.

There is a truth in Judaism about feeling home wherever we go. The Shabbat evening prayers at the Liberal (reform) synagogue began, and I knew the melodies. I chanted along in Hebrew and watched during Dutch discussions. I knew the grandfather was proud of his Bar Mitzvah grandson. I could see the Rabbi was very proud of the family and the commitment they had made for this young man's Bar Mitzvah. No words needed. This was my community.