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MUSAR AND MODERNITY:
THE CASE OF NOVAREDOK

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The pietistic current in Lithuanian Jewry known as the Musar movement has recently begun to attract the serious attention of Jewish historians. The work of Immanuel Etkes on Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founding father of Musarism, and of Shaul Stampfer on the Lithuanian yeshivas of the nineteenth century are two important scholarly contributions which have appeared of late in this area.[1] The revival of scholarly interest in Musarism, after many years of neglect, is richly deserved. Musarism shares with Hasidism the distinction of being an original pietistic movement which was unique to the East European Jewish milieu. Like the latter, it produced in the course of one or two generations an impressive array of original religious personalities, each with his own distinct school of thought. And like Hasidism, Musarism grew and flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; that is, at the very time when secularizing cultural and political movements exerted increasing influence in Jewish society. But whereas modern scholarship has lavished a good deal of attention on Hasidism — its doctrines, history, and confrontations with modernity — the analogous work on Musarism has only just begun.

One focal point of the recent scholarship has been the relationship between Musarism and modernity; specifically, its relationship to the complex of social and cultural changes which overtook European Jewry in the nineteenth century. Etkes has suggested that, to no small extent, Salanter's religious ideology was born out of a sense of crisis and alarm at the decline in religious sensitivity and punctilious halakhic observance among Lithuanian Jews. For Salanter, the growth of Haskalah circles in Vilna and Kovna which he witnessed during the 1840's was an ominous symptom of a greater spiritual crisis facing Jewry. As an antidote to the growing process of spiritual decay he proposed the institutionalized study of *musar* (moralistic) literature; not as an intellectual discipline, but as an emotional experience of spiritual regeneration. The study of *musar* in a dark shadowy room, with a melancholy melody, and passionate repetition of key phrases and verses, would cultivate one's religious self-awareness,

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