

Jewish Ethics

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

In Biblical and rabbinic sources, Jewish ethics are of paramount importance. According to tradition, God as a moral authority demands ethical living. Thus the Psalms declare: ‘The Lord is righteous; He loves righteous deeds (Ps 11:7). In the Biblical narrative, there are numerous accounts of moral and immoral living, such as the narrative concerning Cain and Abel, the wickedness of the generation of the flood, the prohibition against murder and theft, the condemnation of Joseph’s brothers, Moses’ intercession on behalf of his people. These early stories illustrate God’s concern for righteousness. However, it is pre-eminently in the legal sections of the Torah that moral guidelines are formulated. The Decalogue and the Holiness Code in Leviticus, for example, illustrate the centrality of moral action in the life of the Jew. Such ethical standards form a central dimension of Biblical prophecy. As spokesmen for God, they saw themselves as messengers of the divine word. God, they declared, demands obedience to the moral commandments.

Such an emphasis on human conduct is reiterated in rabbinic sources. Convinced that they were the authentic expositors of Biblical law, the rabbis amplified the precepts found in Scripture. In their expansion of the laws governing human relationships, they stressed the primacy of morality. By choosing the moral life, they declared, Jews are able to complete God’s work of creation. According to rabbinic teaching, the expansion of law in the Torah is part of God’s revelation: both the Written and the Oral Torah contain God’s instructions to his people. Such a conviction implies that the entire corpus of law is binding on all Jews. In all cases, Jewish life is precise and specific, regulating human action in all contexts. Hence, the *Code of Jewish Law* formulated by Joseph Caro in the sixteenth century has served as the framework for

Jewish living until modern times. Considering the development of the moral code within Judaism, you should ask yourself whether the moral injunctions found in Scripture and the rabbinic tradition should be regarded as authoritative for modern Jews. Are such laws universal, or were the moral dictates of the tradition formulated in response to societal conditions? If so, do they need to be modified in modern times?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google.com. Look for websites connected with Jewish ethics, such as www.torah.org/learning/ethics.php3.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with Jewish ethics.
- Imagine that you are a member of a Reform congregation. Write a letter to your rabbi about the relevance of Biblical and rabbinic moral teaching. Use specific examples, and ask whether he thinks such moral teaching is relevant in the modern world.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Invite an Orthodox rabbi to speak to your class about the relevance of Jewish moral teaching today.
- If possible, also ask a Reform rabbi to explain how Reform Judaism has deviated from Orthodox moral teaching.

- Compare and contrast Jewish and Christian moral teaching, comparing the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament. In what ways was Jesus' teaching similar to the views of rabbinic sages? You should be sure to look at Google.com for information about ethics in Judaism and Christianity.