
CORE ETHICAL TEACHINGS OF JUDAISM

Judaism may be described as an "ethical monotheism", a religion based on a concept that there is a single incorporeal God who gives commandments which constitute a moral law for all humanity.

This divine moral law is embodied in the codes set out in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, developed in the later Biblical works, and expanded in a continuing flow of ethical and legal literature, as described in [**The Talmud and Other Literature**](http://www.ijs.org.au/The-Literature-of-Judaism/default.aspx). The Torah is thought to have originated in about 1400 BCE. The codes in the Torah set out 613 commandments, which include those well known as The Ten Commandments.

Included in the moral principles set out in the commandments in the Torah and in the later literature are rules about justice, equality before the law, loving-kindness, social welfare, and the ideals of peace and political freedom. Some examples:

***Leviticus* 19.17**“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

***Psalms* 37:11**“The meek shall inherit the earth and delight in the abundance of peace”.

***Exodus* 23; 4-13**

"Do not join your hand with the wicked to be a malicious witness. Do not follow a crowd to do evil; neither shall you testify in court to side with a multitude to pervert justice; neither shall you favour a poor man in his cause if it is not just.

*And many others, including:*

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again.

If you see the donkey of him who hates you, fallen down under his burden, don't leave him. Help him with it.

Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

Keep far from a false charge, and don't harm the innocent and righteous: for I will not justify the wicked.

Take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials and perverts the words of the righteous.

Do not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, for once you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

For six years you shall sow your land, and shall gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the animal of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard and with your olive grove.

Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and your servant, and the stranger may be refreshed.

Other ethical principles of Judaism include:

**Tzedakah**

This is generally translated as "charity" in English. However in Hebrew the meaning is closer to righteousness and fairness. Indeed, the Hebrew root of the word 'tzedakah' is tzedek, which means 'justice'. In Judaism, giving to those in need is not viewed as a generous, magnanimous act; it is simply an act of justice and the right thing to do. It is the performance of a duty prescribed in the Torah:

***Deuteronomy* 15.11**
“For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.”

Later traditions stipulate that the highest forms of tzedakah are to give so that the recipient does not know the donor, and in such a manner as to assist the recipient to become self-reliant.

The Torah also prescribes various specific duties to the poor, the equivalent of the modern concept of 'social justice'. These include commandments not to harvest the corners of the field, or to pick the last fruit from the tree, so that the poor should have a right to “glean” the remaining produce. (e.g.: *Leviticus* 23;22)

A tithe, a tenth part of the produce, is also to be contributed for the benefit of “the widow and the orphan”.

The spirit of the Biblical rules of the tithe and the gleaning continues in Sydney by giving to a central appeal that is then distributed to the welfare bodies - old age homes, day schools, hospital, the welfare agency, etc. all with volunteer boards of management.

 **Freedom**

The mountain fortess of Masada, where in 73CE over 900 Jews committed suicide to die in freedom rather than submit to slavery and worse under Roman rule

“Once we were slaves in Egypt, now we are free people,” Jews remind themselves three times a day in their prayers and in the prayer before and after the Sabbath meal.

This centrality of freedom in Jewish thought has various implications. In memory of enslavement, there is an emphasis on the rights of the outsider:

***Exodus 23.9***Do not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, for once you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

***Leviticus* 19;33-34**
“And if a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be as one born among you, and you shall love him as thyself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: ‘I am the Lord your God.’ ”

Most importantly there is a distrust of autocratic government and an insistence that rulers must be subject to the law. Deuteronomy 17 prohibits kings from “multiplying” horses, wives, or gold and silver. Verses 18-20 preserve the rule of law which protects the freedom of the subject:

“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law…that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping… these statutes and doing them, so that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren.”

The books of Kings and the Prophets are also full of examples of prophets standing up to kings and reminding them of their duties to God and to the people. See particularly the long passage in 1 Samuel 8-10, where Samuel warns the people of the dangers of an autocratic monarchy.

**Tikkun Olam - Repairing the World**

The concepts of justice, righteousness and freedom come together in the vision of an ideal world articulated by the Prophets. This is expressed in the idea that each of us can make our contribution to making the world a better place. It is often evidenced by a strong Jewish involvement in advancing social justice and in protecting the rights of other minority groups.

***The Book of Proverbs***

This Biblical collection of hundreds of moral sayings is ascribed to King Solomon, with Chapter 25 referring to a copy of Solomon’s proverbs by “the men of Hezekiah king of Judah”, who ruled from 715-687 BCE.

The central theme of the Book is the idea of wisdom and understanding as the highest human values:

Happy is the man who finds wisdom,
and the man who gets understanding,
for the gain from it is better than gain from silver
and its profit better than gold... *(3:13-14)*
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy. *(3:16-18)*

In the hundreds of proverbs there is a multiplicity of themes, and the few extracts here are necessarily inadequate as a summary.

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;
reprove a wise man, and he will love you. *(9.8)*

A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. *(15.1)*

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fatted ox and hatred with it. *(15.17)*

Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall. (*16.18)*

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion. *(18.2)*

Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man,
but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel. *(20.17)*

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold. *(22:1)*

Make no friendship with a man given to anger,
nor go with a wrathful man,
lest you learn his ways
and entangle yourself in a snare. *(22:22-24)*

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,
and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles;

lest the LORD see it, and be displeased. *(24.17)*

A word fitly spokenis like apples of gold in a setting of silver. *(25.11)*

Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens another. *(27.17)*

Much is made of the devastating effects of sexual immorality. Here the Proverbs follow themes which appear throughout the Hebrew Bible, extolling sexual love, while fiercely denouncing promiscuity and adultery. (Compare the Song of Songs and Isaiah 16:3-24):

Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth,
A lovely hind, a graceful doe.
Let her affection fill you at all times with delight,
Be infatuated always with her love.
Why should you be infatuated,
My son, with a loose woman
And embrace the bosom of an adventuress? *(5:18-20)*

The Book of Proverbs ends with a chapter of praise for the virtues of the “good wife”, as translated from the Hebrew “woman of valour”. It is a passage which observant Jewish husbands recite on every Sabbath eve when returning from the Synagogue. The good wife is “like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar”. She actively engages in trade and agriculture, considering and buying a field, and planting a vineyard, while her husband sits at a place of honour at the city gate - and sings her praises.

Thus a book which begins with temptresses luring young men to their doom ends with praise for the “woman of valour” as an active participant in economic life.

**Ethical ideas in the Talmud**

**The golden rule of Judaism**
**Rabbi Hillel the Elder** (c.60 BCE-c.10CE) was once asked by a man, “Teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Rabbi Hillel responded:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.  This is the entire Torah and the rest is commentary. Now go learn.”

(It is interesting to compare this negative formulation with the more onerous “Do unto others…)

The Talmud contains an inexhaustible fund of moral ideas implicit in the great volume of rabbinical discussion which determines the Oral Law. However one section, generally translated as “The Ethics of the Fathers”, is a collection of rabbinical aphorisms – short ethical mottos, some straightforward but others cryptic and requiring thought and interpretation. A short selection:

Rabbi Hillel used to say:

"If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? Yet, if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?”

Rabban Gamaliel the son of Rabbi Judah said:

“Excellent is study of the Torah when combined with a worldly occupation, for toil in them both puts sin out of mind. All study of the Torah which is not supplemented by work must in the last analysis prove futile and may lead to sin.”

Rabbi Hillel said:

“Separate not yourself from the congregation; and trust not in yourself until the day of your death. Judge not your fellow until you are come unto his place. Say not of a thing which cannot be understood that it will be understood in the end. Say not: When I have leisure I will study; perchance you may never have the leisure.”

Samuel the Younger used to quote the saying (Proverbs 24)

“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he  stumbles: lest the Lord see it and be displeased.”

**Judaism and Human Rights**

It is significant that when the United Nations drafted a declaration of human rights they emphasised that it was to be a Universal Declaration.  Human rights were proclaimed to be universally applicable and universally derived.

It follows that no religion or group of religions can claim any exclusive virtue when it comes to human rights. The international code in effect recognises that all religious and cultural groups have a common understanding of those essential rights which they are united in proclaiming. It is an approach which is reflected in the Jewish attitude that no religion has a monopoly of truth, and that each reflects its own culturally appropriate path to an understanding of the Divine, and the relevance of that understanding to human affairs.

**Conclusion**

“God has shown you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah* 6:8)