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 **Encyclopedia of Judaism: ETHICS**

Ethics is the science of morality or the systematic study of moral rules and principles. The term "morality" refers to rules which prescribe the way people ought to behave and principles which reflect what is ultimately good or desirable for human beings. In classical Jewish sources there is no term which corresponds to "ethics" or "morality" in this sense. The modern Hebrew word *musar*, which is used today for this purpose, while found in the Bible (Prov. 1:8), means "rebuke" or "chastisement." However, the primary sources of Judaism, the Bible and rabbinic literature, undoubtedly contain an elaborate moral code and the rudiments of an ethical theory.

**Morality in the Bible** The teachings of proper behavior are found in the Bible in different literary forms. The historical narratives of Genesis and Exodus and the books of the early prophets contain an implied approval of particular moral values such as gratitude (Gen. 4:3), hospitality (Gen. 18), righteousness (Gen. 18:19), self-restraint (Gen. 39:12), benevolence (Gen. 24:18-20), humility (Num. 12:3), and intercession on behalf of the exploited (Ex. 2:11-12) as well as disapproval of murder (Gen. 4:11), corruption (Gen. 6:11-12), jealousy (Gen. 37:4ff.), and deception (Gen. 27:5-11). Among the various lists of commandments (Ex. 21; Lev. 19, 25; Deut. 21-25) are moral rules interspersed with ritual and theological statutes which address relations between family members, old and young, employers and employees, rich and poor, men and women, rulers and ruled. There are also imperatives referring to general moral principles such as: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), "Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20), and "You shall do what is right and good ..." (Deut. 6:18).

Of particular importance are the moral attributes used to describe [God](http://www.answers.com/topic/god). The actions of God in [Creation](http://www.answers.com/topic/creation) and in judging the world are seen as good and just. God Himself is held to the principles of justice and righteousness (Gen. 18:25), and in a special revelation He is described as "... merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity ..." (Ex. 34:6). Implicit in the Bible is the concept of *imitatio dei* ([Imitation of God](http://www.answers.com/topic/imitation-of-god)) which was to be fully articulated by the rabbis. For if man is "created in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27), then he is capable of being like God. If the "way of God is justice and righteousness" (Gen. 18:19), then it is proper for man to imitate God: "You shall walk in His ways" (Deut. 11:22).

The Pentateuch comprises the legislative core of Judaism and includes its essential moral teachings. In the books of the later prophets, these moral teachings are applied to the social problems of the time and are delivered in the contemporary context with passion and literary skill. While in the exhortations of Deuteronomy the moral element is absorbed in the overall religious demand, here the moral component is often emphasized as the single consideration upon which the destiny of Israel may depend (Jer. 9:23; Amos 2:6-14, 5:21-24; Mic. 6:7-8). In the Hagiographa portion of the Bible, moral values figure in the narratives of Ruth and Esther and are frequently the Divine attributes praised by the Psalmist (Ps. 11:7, 97:2, 99:4). In the Book of Proverbs, these moral teachings are judged wise and useful by the standards of human experience. Morality is presented here as dispositional character traits associated with particular moral types such as *tsaddik* ("just"), *ḥakham* ("wise"), and *yashar* ("honest"), and such negative types as *rasha* ("evil"), *evil* ("empty-headed"), *kesil* ("foolish"), and *letz* ("scoffer"). While the literary prophets emphasized social morality (see [Social Ethics](http://www.answers.com/topic/social-ethics)), the [Wisdom Literature](http://www.answers.com/topic/wisdom-literature) (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) focused on personal morality, i.e., moral values which are internalized as character traits that become part of the individual's personality.

Already in the Bible the beginning of a reflective approach to morality can be found. The Book of Job deals with the theological problem of theodicy---of the apparently righteous person who is visited with suffering. The Book of Jonah is concerned with wicked people who are apparently permitted to escape punishment. In sections of the Psalms and the Prophets there are attempts to reduce the large number of Divine demands to a few essential moral requirements (Mic. 6:8; Ps. 15:1-2).

At first glance, the Bible seems to be unaware of morality as such, moral rules being presented simply as one of a variety of commandments with no distinction being made on the basis of content. All are equally important and equally obligatory. However, the use of special terms for different types of commandments (with moral rules falling into the category of *mishpatim*), the unusual concentration of moral rules in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-14), and the promise of special rewards for a certain type of commandment which calls for benevolence (Deut. 23:21, 22:7, 24:13, 15:10, 15:18) would seem to indicate that the Bible recognized the special nature of the moral commandments and accorded them special treatment and importance.

This is supported by the close identification of God with moral values. In pre-Sinaitic accounts, God Himself is associated with morality only in terms of His actions; He performs deeds of justice and kindness. However, in the special revelation granted to [Moses](http://www.answers.com/topic/moses) (Ex. 34:6), God is described in terms of dispositional moral attributes ("merciful," "kind"), implying that, in some sense, moral qualities are essential attributes of God and by imitating God in this, man can come into close proximity with Him: "... to love the Lord your God, to walk in all of His ways and to cleave unto Him" (Deut. 11:22).

**Morality in Rabbinic Literature** The moral commandments with behavioral content were expounded by the rabbis using the same exegetical methods they employed in other areas of the [Halakhah](http://www.answers.com/topic/halacha). For example, a commandment such as: "When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you do not bring blood upon your house, if any man fall from it" (Deut. 22:8) was regarded both as a particular law about houses and roofs and as a general principle about moral responsibility in the home for human safety. As the former, the rabbis reasonably limited its application to dwelling places of a certain minimum height (*BK* 51b); as the latter, they broadened it to apply to open cisterns and any other hazard on one's property, and by extension to concern for such things as unsafe drinking water and industrial dangers in places of employment (*Sif*. *ad loc*.; Ket. 41b). (See [Ma'Akeh](http://www.answers.com/topic/ma-akeh).)

In treating the moral content of the biblical narratives, the rabbis employed the methods of *aggadah* and were able to discover many additional moral insights. Thus, from Genesis 18:12, 13 they learned that "one may bend the truth for the sake of domestic peace"; from Genesis 18:1-3 that "being kind to strangers is more important than receiving the Divine Presence," and from Genesis 38:25 that "one should prefer to be burned alive than to embarrass one's fellow man in public." They also explicitly made role models out of such biblical heroes as [Abraham](http://www.answers.com/topic/abraham), Moses, and [Aaron](http://www.answers.com/topic/aaron) (e.g., *Avot* 1:12). In the Mishnah [Avot](http://www.answers.com/topic/avot-1) there is an abundance of moral teachings which emphasize personal character traits in the style of the Book of Proverbs. Taking their lead from the Bible, the rabbis continued the search for the master principle or supreme values of the morality of Judaism (*Avot* 2:1, *Mak*. 23, 24). Thus: "R. Akiva said of the command 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' that it is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai said there is a principle that is even greater: 'This is the book of the generations of Adam ... in the likeness of God made He him'" (Gen. 4:1; *Sif. ad loc*.). In seeking to define the highest reaches of religious experience, the rabbis suggested moral qualities such as *ḥasidut* ("kindliness") and *anavah* ("humility"), while the biblical concept of *kedushah* ("holiness") was seen to have primarily a moral content (*AZ* 20).

The rabbis generally referred to morality by the phrase *bén* *adam le-ḥavero* ("between man and his fellow man"), which was embraced in the term [Derekh Erets](http://www.answers.com/topic/derekh-erets) ("ways of the world" or right conduct). From various expressions by some of the most authoritative rabbis it could be inferred that morality was deemed one of the central components of Judaism: "Simon the Just said, 'The world stands on three things: Torah, *avodah* ("Divine service"), and acts of loving-kindness'" (*Avot* 1:2). Hillel said, "What is hateful to yourself do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study" (*Shab*. 31a).

In terms of the content of the morality of Judaism, the basic meaning of key moral terms such as *mishpat* ("justice"), *tsedakah* ("righteousness"), *ḥesed* ("kindness"), and *raḥamim* ("compassion") is much the same as what is understood by current philosophic analysis. Yet there are special qualities to the morality of Judaism which, in turn, seem to be the result of distinctive approaches.

The involvement of God in the moral struggle imparts a quality of urgency and passion which is unique to Judaism. "For I know their sorrows," says God (Ex. 3:7), and "... it shall come to pass that when he cries out unto Me that I shall hear" (Ex. 22:26). Hence the "hysterical" tone of the prophets. Injustice cannot be tolerated. Cruelty and human suffering shake the foundations of society. Judaism did not introduce new definitions of moral terms but rather revealed the true source of morality: God rather than man, prophecy rather than wisdom. Therefore, man could no longer be complacent about the moral situation. "Righteousness was asleep until it was awakened by Abraham" (*Midrash Tehillim*, Ps. 110).

In Judaism, the realm of morality is not restricted to deed but rather includes man's inner world of consciousness: thoughts, emotions, intentions, attitudes, motives. All are to a degree subject to man's control and qualify for moral judgment. Thus the Bible warns against coveting (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), against hating one's brother (Lev. 19:17), against "hardening one's heart" (Deut. 15:9, 10), while the rabbis inveighed against envy, desire, and anger (*Avot* 2:11) and noted that "thinking about transgression may be worse than transgression itself" (*Yoma* 29a).

Biblical sensitivity to the harm as well as the good that could be done by speech was unprecedented: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). Man must be careful not to lie, curse or slander (Lev. 19:11, 14, 16), nor to receive a false report or speak evil (Ex. 23:1; Deut. 19:16-18). The rabbis also condemned the use of flattery, hypocrisy, and obscene speech and urged the practice of clean, pleasant, and non-abusive language. In terms of the good that could be achieved by speech, the rabbis encouraged proper greetings to all, the need to cheer people with good humor, rebuke properly, and comfort with words in times of bereavement (*BB* 9, *Ta'an* 22a). The *halakhah* endowed the spoken word with legal force and in the area of vows and oaths applied the biblical teaching: "He shall not breach his word, he should do according to all that proceeds from his mouth" (Num. 30:3).

In the ancient world, animals were sometimes venerated as gods or exploited for work or sport with extreme cruelty. The morality of Judaism includes concern for man's relationship to all living creatures. They are seen as junior partners in the building of civilization and therefore entitled to rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-10). Since "the Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Ps. 145:9), man must follow suit: "A righteous man regards the life of his beast" (Prov. 12:10). Man must provide for those animals he has domesticated and must not cause them any unnecessary pain (*BM* 32b). A number of biblical laws seem to aim at preventing "anguish" and "frustration" to animals, particularly in regard to their care for their young (Ex. 23:5; Lev. 22:27, 28; Deut. 22:4, 6, 7, 10, 25:4). The rabbis prohibited causing animals pain for the sake of sport or hunting when not for the sake of food, and permitted experimentation with living creatures only when it seemed likely to lead to practical advances in medical treatment.

Concern for the dignity of man is another distinctive feature of the morality of Judaism, expressing itself primarily as respecting each person's privacy and being careful not to cause anyone shame or embarrassment. The rabbis incorporated into the *halakhah* a special category of "shame" or "indignity" in awarding compensation for damages (*BK* 8:1). In this area, they showed their awareness of the irreducible dignity or worth shared by every human being, as well as their sensitivity to the individual needs of people depending on their self-image and position in life.

**Sources of Moral Knowledge** Even before the Sinaitic revelation, man was considered a moral agent and held responsible for his deeds (Gen. 4:6-7, 9:5-6), as the Bible assumed intuitive moral knowledge on his part. This was developed by the rabbis with their concept of the seven [Noachide Laws](http://www.answers.com/topic/noachide-laws) (*Sanh*. 56 a-b). Evidently these moral intuitions or natural laws were not sufficient for man to know what is right in complex situations of conflicting moral principles or to provide adequate motivation to do what is right. Hence the Torah became necessary first as a national constitution for the newly formed Jewish people, but ultimately as a means of transmitting a more elaborate and serviceable moral code to all men.

While the morality of Judaism is essentially theonomous, grounded in God, it has many features of moral autonomy. Morality is what man must do as man. Man, a creature formed in the likeness of God, is endowed with innate worth and freedom of will. This means that he deserves moral treatment and is capable of treating others morally. God commands man to be moral because He cannot do otherwise. It is in the nature of the good to do good to others. "You shall walk in His ways" (Deut. 28:9) teaches not only what God wants of man but what God Himself is. Once revealed by God, morality is seen to be independent of Him in the sense that God Himself is bound by it. Hence the religious Jew strives to be moral for the love of God, but since God is the absolute good, man may be said to be moral because it is moral.

The morality of Judaism is universal. Its principles of behavior apply to all men and obligate all men. In the Bible all men and women are created in the image of God and have equal opportunity to participate in man's ultimate destiny, be it immortality of the soul on the individual level or the experience of messianic redemption on the historical level. The Jew is called upon to love his fellow Jew as himself (Lev. 19:18), to love the stranger as himself (Lev. 19:33, 34), and indeed to love all of God's creatures (*Avot* 1:12).

The morality of Judaism constitutes a system in the sense that its parts are related to each other by common origin, common purpose, and logical connections. Moral rules can be justified on the grounds that they are deducible from moral principles. Thus all deeds of loving-kindness, such as visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, dowering the bride, are implied in the precept: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." No moral code can possibly anticipate the ever-changing human condition by providing in advance particular rules to cover all possible situations. Man was therefore given moral principles so that the members of each generation could deduce from them rules for themselves. The existence of these principles enables the system to achieve comprehensiveness, which is the ability to provide correct moral decisions for all situations.

Consistency is another feature of a moral system, implying the ability to resolve incipient conflicts between moral principles. The rabbis used their exegetical methods to infer from the Bible a hierarchy of values. Thus, "a positive precept overrides a negative precept" (*Shab*.133a), all negative commandments may be suspended in order to save a human life (Lev. 18:5), love of God stands higher than fear of God (Naḥmanides on Ex. 20:8), and peace is higher than truth (*Sanh*. 10; *BM* 87a). Human life, however, is not the highest value in Judaism, as the Jew must be prepared under certain conditions to sacrifice his life in defense of the Jewish people or in order to avoid desecrating the name of God.

In Judaism, moral norms which are of a behavioral nature are incorporated in the *halakhah*. However, morality and *halakhah* are not identical. There are areas in which the demands of morality may go beyond the requirements of the *halakhah*. These situations are called *li-fenim mi-shurat ha-din* ("beyond the letter of the law") and are deduced from a biblical source (Ex. 18:20; *BK* 99a). Thus, for example, there may be a situation where according to the letter of the law one is not required to return a certain lost object to its owner, yet the finder may be morally obligated to do so (*BM* 24b). Thus, there appears to be in Judaism a class of duties called supererogatory, i.e., actions for which one receives special credit if performed but for which one is not faulted if left undone. (See also [Ethical Literature](http://www.answers.com/topic/ethical-literature)).

Man's Choice In an all-embracing axiological system such as Judaism, moral teachings can be understood fully only in the context of the system's view of man and the universe. Thus, for example, there may be found in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, which narrate the Creation, a particular existential stance in which morality becomes central. When the Bible records the creation of man in the image of God and God's granting him dominion over all the earth, the text hints that although other creatures attain full realization of their potential by merely being, for man this is not the case. It is up to man, by means of his actions, to become like God. The Bible never explains what is meant by the "image of God." However, various commentators have identified it with such characteristically human faculties as language, free will, self-consciousness, reason, moral deliberation, invention, and cultural creativity. Man is called to live and work for God's purposes in this world, and he is thus an ethical being, a creature with moral responsibility capable of "choosing life and the good."

When man chooses "the way of God," that is to say the moral life, he not only actualizes his human potential, he completes the work of creation. Since Judaism holds that man's nature remained essentially unaffected by his so-called Fall, it expects moral development leading to the Divine way of goodness to be initiated by man himself. Man, by fulfillment of God's commandments, is capable, on his own, of fulfilling his God-given potential.

**Later Thinkers** The medieval Jewish thinkers did not give sufficient recognition to the moral aspect of Judaism, more or less glossing over morality as part of the perfection of the soul and the attainment of immortality in the world to come. Thus, for example, [Maimonides](http://www.answers.com/topic/maimonides) felt that immortality of the soul depended chiefly upon intellectual attainments. The knowledge of God necessary for achieving the world to come does, of course, include knowledge of God's moral nature and activity. Nevertheless, moral perfection in Maimonides' system does not really touch man's essence. Most other Jewish. thinkers of the Middle Ages, along with Maimonides, believed that morality was necessary to human perfection, but were aware chiefly of its social utility.

Among the medieval philosophers, [Judah Halevi](http://www.answers.com/topic/judah-halevi-1) and [Crescas](http://www.answers.com/topic/hasdai-crescas), unlike their rationalist predecessors, believed the essence of the God-idea to be goodness rather than thought. Refusing to accept that knowledge was the highest good, they taught that closeness to God and eternal happiness come from love of God and that this is achieved by keeping the commandments.

Only in the 16th century, however, did Judah Löw of Prague make explicit that the religious and spiritual aspects of morality do not stem merely from its being commanded by God. The connection is actually more substantive, since the most that has ever been revealed to man of God is His moral nature. Thus, only by acting morally does man walk in the ways of God and imitate Him, thereby attaining his Divine image. Moral action is the most direct way of cleaving to God and entering into fellowship with Him. Cruelty and injustice distance man from God, while kindness, love, and concern for his fellow man draw man closer. Love and fear of God are themselves based on such moral sentiments as gratitude, justice, and responsibility. Samson Raphael [Hirsch](http://www.answers.com/topic/samson-raphael-hirsch) taught that "justice is the sum total of life and is the sole concept which the Torah seeks to interpret. The Torah teaches us justice towards men, justice towards plants and animals and the earth, justice towards our own body and soul, and justice towards God who created us for love so that we may become a blessing for the world."

Later Jewish thinkers who accorded a central role to morality in their philosophy of Judaism included Samuel David Luzzatto, Hermann [Cohen](http://www.answers.com/topic/hermann-cohen), and Martin [Buber](http://www.answers.com/topic/martin-buber). The latter taught that the love of man is connected to the love of God in yet another sense: "Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou, the primary work addresses the eternal Thou."

According to Judaism, morality is the bridge by which man reaches out to God. Morality is what unites man with his fellow man on the basis of values grounded in the Divine. It is the fabric out of which man weaves for himself an ethical self and society achieves its redemptive goal.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/ethics-legal-term>

**Jewish Ethics Confronts Modernity**

**By** [**Dr. Menachem Kellner**](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/ix_author.php?aid=46656)

*Reprinted with permission of the author from* Contemporary Jewish Ethics*, ed. Menachem Marc Kellner (Sanhedrin Press, 1978). It should be noted that in, examining the formal denominations, Kellner does not include Reconstructionism, which views Judaism at its core as an "evolving religious civilization". Reconstructionist approaches to ethics usually combine an allegiance to traditional ethical thinking with contemporary values. The less formal Jewish Renewal movement is similarly open to contemporary insights in addressing ethical questions, and in bringing the realm of ethics to other realms of Jewish practice (for example, in the development of thinking about "eco-kashrut" which combines a concern for the environment and social issues with traditional rules for what may and may not be eaten).  Also, it should be noted that while historically the Reform movement has emphasized the prophetic tradition as the essence of Judaism, as the author notes, in recent years the movement has seen an increased emphasis on and interest in other aspects of Jewish practice (e.g. observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, Torah study, and the like) in addition to the strictly "ethical."*

Contemporary Judaism is distinguished from medieval Judaism in that it is faced with an entirely new [set of issues] and in that it presents a multiplicity of answers to that complex of problems. With respect to the subject at hand, we may say that contemporary Jewish ethics is distinguished from medieval Jewish ethics[, which was concerned primarily with internal Jewish affairs and guided by traditional assumptions about the authority of the rabbinic tradition,] in that the problems it faces are largely those it shares with the surrounding culture (e.g., the problem of relating morality and religion, and specific questions like political obedience and medical ethics). In short, Jews and Judaism have become part of the modern world and, to a significant degree, the modern world has become a factor which cannot be ignored by both Jews and Judaism.

Contemporary Jewish ethics is further distinguished from its medieval counterpart by the fact that it speaks with a divided voice. One must not ask today, “What is the Jewish position on such and such?” but rather, “What is the Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform interpretation of the Jewish position on such and such?” Although many writers persist in presenting *the* Jewish position on various subjects, it very often ought more correctly to be characterized as *a* Jewish position.

In order to understand fully the differences between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism [and their approaches to contemporary ethics], one ought to examine them in terms of their historical development. For our purposes, however, it should be sufficient to sketch out their basic theological differences. This can be done conveniently by examining their varying conceptions of revelation. Briefly put, Orthodoxy follows the traditional rabbinic claim that the Torah represents the direct, conclusive revelation of God's will. *Halakhah*, which derives directly from that revelation, is the will of God. It is normative for all Jews in all places and at all times. Although Orthodoxy recognizes the fact of halakhic change, it insists that such change has come about and may come about only within the context of well-recognized halakhic mechanisms. The basic Orthodox contention with respect to the *halakhah* is that it is a divine, not a human, system and that as such it is not subject, in essence, to the sort of historical development which is characteristic of human institutions.

Reform Judaism, on the other hand, in both its classic and modern positions, entirely rejects the claim that the *halakhah* represents the revealed will of God. Revelation, it maintains, is progressive, akin to inspiration, and is ultimately concerned with ethics. This emphasis is summed up in the famous motto of early Reform, that Judaism is nothing more than ethical monotheism. While contemporary Reform thinkers have largely given up the classic Reform claim that Judaism took a quantum leap from the time of the Prophets (in whose call for social morality early Reform thinkers saw God’s revelation most clearly embodied) to the nineteenth century and the rise of Reform, it is still the case that Reform Judaism rejects the *halakhah* as a norm and still looks to the prophetic tradition for the “essence” of Judaism.

The Conservative position is roughly midway between that of Orthodoxy and Reform. Conservative Judaism does not view revelation as God “talking” to the Jewish people, as it were, revealing to them exactly what it is he wants them to do. Rather, Conservative Judaism maintains that the Jewish people have had what may be called “revelatory” experiences of God, to which they responded by creating the Torah. *Halakhah*, then, is the way in which Jews have sought to preserve their experiences of God. Although taking its source in the Jews’ experience of God, it is basically a human institution and undergoes change and historical development like all human institutions. It is normative in the conditional sense that one ought to obey the *halakhah* if one wants to preserve the insights and experiences of the Jewish people as a whole and of those Jews in particular who have confronted God directly in their own lives. Conservative Judaism thus sees the *halakhah* as the Jewish vocabulary for approaching God. It does not see the *halakhah* as normative in the absolute sense, however, which would imply that obedience to *halakhah* is explicitly demanded of every Jew by God.

These three different interpretations of revelation and *halakhah* give rise to different emphases within Jewish ethics. Generally speaking, Orthodox thinkers will approach questions of ethics by seeking to determine the teachings of the *halakhah* on the issues at hand. That is not to say that they do not recognize a super-*halakhic* realm of Jewish ethical teaching. Aharon Lichtenstein, for example, has shown the extent to which an Orthodox thinker can recognize such a realm. But no Orthodox thinker will admit the possibility of there being a Jewish ethical teaching which might contradict *halakhah*. That possibility, however, is explicitly stated by at least one important Conservative thinker, Seymour Siegel. “It is my thesis,” he writes, “that according to our interpretation of Judaism, the ethical values of our tradition should have power to judge the particulars of Jewish law. If any law in our tradition does not fulfill our ethical values, then the law should be abolished or revised.” This position would most likely be rejected by Orthodox thinkers on the grounds that it sets human beings up as judges of God’s law.

Generally speaking, at least until the 1970s, the Reform approach to ethics has been to identify Jewish ethics with prophetic teachings which, in turn, were usually interpreted in terms of contemporary liberalism. Of late, however, Reform thinkershave shown new sensitivity to the teachings of the post-biblical Jewish tradition and generally seek to ground their ethical judgments in the Jewish tradition as a whole.

Summing up, we may say that the contemporary Jewish approach to ethical problems is distinguished from the medieval approach in at least two important ways. It is no longer informed by the basic unanimity of spirit which underlay medieval Jewish ethics in all its various styles and forms. Further, and as a result of the Jew’s unprecedented level of integration into the surrounding world, Jewish ethics today faces an entirely new complex of problems. Although there are elements of continuity between medieval and modern Jewish ethics, the discontinuities are more important. This is one of the many ways in which the wrenching changes which accompanied the Jewish entry into the modern world are reflected.

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**Overview: Ethical Behavior**

The Jewish religious and spiritual tradition has been largely concerned with regulating behavior through a wide-ranging legal system.  Nevertheless, it has developed--alongside the literature of *halakhah* (Jewish law) and intertwined with it--a parallel literary tradition concerned with the practice and, to a lesser degree, the theory of ethics.

Both of these traditions begin with assumptions about God’s nature and God’s role in the world. Some of these assumptions are explicit (e.g. that God exists, cares about the world, and makes demands of human beings). Others are implicit in the metaphorical and narrative literature that characterizes classical Jewish thought (e.g. that God visited Abraham when he was recovering from surgery). Ethical thought in Judaism is as tightly bound to theology as it is to law. The involvement of God in moral issues gives Jewish ethical thinking a passion and urgency beyond what is to be found in many other traditions, ancient and modern alike.  This is a God who, in one talmudic tale (Sanhedrin 39b), excoriates His angelic retinue when they rejoice at the drowning of the Israelites’ Egyptian persecutors, asking them “Creatures who are My own handiwork are drowning and you sing songs before Me?!”

The tradition of Jewish ethics relies on biblical precedents. Some moral imperatives such as the repeated admonition in the prophetic books to attend to the needs of society’s weaker classes (resident aliens, orphans, and widows), appear also in the Torah as motive clauses for specific laws: e.g., “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). Others, such as the many conventional adages in biblical wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and parts of other books), appear only outside of the legal context.

Rabbinic Judaism adopted many of its terms for ethical behavior from biblical usage, but re-shaped some and added many others of its own, such as *bein adam la-havero* (the entire realm of interpersonal relations) and *gemilut hasadim* (acts of kindness and caring). The rabbis of classical Judaism and the authors of medieval legal and ethical works displayed particular concern for maintaining respect for human beings—*k’vod ha-b'riot*—and directing human impulses into channels that protect the privacy, dignity, and reputation of every individual.

In the modern era, the social integration of Jews into their host societies and the creation of an autonomous Jewish society in the Land of Israel have emphasized certain practical moral issues, and even raised issues not faced by Jews for centuries. Respective examples include how religiously observant Jews are to relate to their nonobservant fellow Jews, and how a Jewish nation is to conduct warfare and relate to non-Jewish citizens. At the same time, Jewish intellectual life has seen the disappearance even of a unified language of discourse for ethical thinking in a Jewish context.

The fragmentation of approaches, even among religious Jews, has brought a radical discontinuity with the past in the realm of ethical thinking as in every other area of Jewish life. Traditionalists have attempted to apply the methods and categories of *halakhah* [Jewish law] with varying degrees of rigidity and fluidity. Reform Judaism introduced the notion that “prophetic Judaism,” the ethical imperatives of the Torah and especially the biblical prophets, is the “essence” of Judaism. That preference for the ethical imperative still guides much decision-making in the liberal Jewish religious camp.

It is interesting to note that there is no traditional liturgical blessing formula (*b’rakhah*) said on the performance of ethical mitzvot as there are for more ritually oriented practices. Some suggest that this is because when one is about to give to a poor person, visit someone ill, offer comfort to a mourner, or help a bride and groom rejoice--to give but four examples- saying a blessing would destroy the very moment it is supposed to elevate. *B’rakhot* direct our attention to the presence of God at the moment of performing a quotidian act, but to do so in these instances might detract from our openness to the presence of the very person before us. Other suggestions for the absence of such blessings note, for example, the potential awkwardness of thanking God for the opportunity to serve others, given that it is dependent on their being in need.

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ethics/Caring_For_Others/Ethical_Behavior.shtml?PRET>

## Jewish Ethics: Some Basic Concepts and Ideas

### The biblical text and the rabbinic tradition provide the universal search for an ethical life with passion and some unique concepts.

*The rabbis of late antiquity, building upon the Hebrew Bible, shaped the terms and categories of practical ethics that have guided discussions of ethical issues in Jewish life for the past two millennia. This survey of those terms and some of the main areas of concern of Jewish ethics in the formative period of Judaism is reprinted with permission from* [*Encyclopedia of Judaism*](http://www.wiley.com/).

The rabbis generally referred to morality by the phrase *bein adam la-havero* (“norms between man and his fellow-man”), which was included in the term *derekh eretz* (“ways of the world”). From various expressions by some of the most authoritative rabbis, it could be inferred that morality was deemed one of the central components of Judaism: “Simon the Just said, ‘The world stands on three things: Torah, *avodah* (“divine service”), and acts of lovingkindness’” (Avot 1:2). Hillel said, “What is hateful to yourself do not do to your fellow-man. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)*.*

In terms of the content of the morality of Judaism, the basic meaning of key moral terms such as *mishpat* (“justice”), *tzedakah* (“righteousness”), *hesed* (“kindness”), and *rahamim* (“compassion”) is much the same as what is understood by current philosophic analysis. Yet there are special qualities to the morality of Judaism, which, in turn, seem to be the result of distinctive approaches.

The involvement of God in the moral struggle imparts a quality of urgency and passion which is unique to Judaism. “For I know their sorrows,” says God (Exodus 3:7) and “... it shall come to pass that when he cries out unto Me that I shall hear” (Exodus 22:26). Hence the “hysterical” tone of the prophets. Injustice cannot be tolerated. Cruelty and human suffering shake the foundations of society. Judaism did not introduce new definitions of moral terms but rather revealed the true source of morality: God rather than man, prophecy rather than wisdom. Therefore, man could no longer be complacent about the moral situation. “Righteousness was asleep until it was awakened by Abraham” (Midrash Tehillim, Psalms 110).

In Judaism, the realm of morality is not restricted to deed but rather includes man’s inner world of consciousness: thoughts, emotions, intentions, attitudes, motives. All are to a degree subject to man’s control and qualify for moral judgement. Thus the Bible warns against coveting (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18), against hating one’s brother (Leviticus 19:17), against “hardening one’s heart” (Deuteronomy 15:9,10), while the rabbis inveighed against envy, desire, and anger (Mishnah Avot 2:11) and noted that “thinking about transgression may be worse than transgression itself” (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma29a).

Biblical sensitivity to the harm as well as the good that could be done by speech was unprecedented: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:2 1). Man must be careful not to lie, curse or slander (Leviticus 19:11,14,16), nor to receive a false report or speak evil (Exodus 23: 1, Deuteronomy 19:16-18). The rabbis also condemned the use of flattery, hypocrisy, and obscene speech and urged the practice of clean, pleasant, and non-abusive language. In terms of the good that could be achieved by speech, the rabbis encouraged proper greetings to all, the need to cheer people with good humor, rebuke properly, and comfort with words in times of bereavement (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra9, Ta‘anit*.* 22a). The *halakhah* [Jewish law]endowed the spoken word with legal force and in the area of vows and oaths applied the biblical teaching: “He shall not breach his word, he should do according to all that proceeds from his mouth” (Numbers 30:3).

In the ancient world, animals were sometimes venerated as gods or exploited for work or sport with extreme cruelty. The morality of Judaism includes concern for man’s relationship to all living creatures. They are seen as junior partners in the building of civilization and therefore entitled to rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-10). Since “the Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Psalms 145:9), man must follow suit: “A righteous man regards the life of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). Man must provide for those animals he has domesticated and must not cause them any unnecessary pain (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 32b). A number of biblical laws seem to aim at preventing “anguish” and “frustration” to animals, particularly in regard to their care for their young (Exodus 23:5; Leviticus 22:27,28; Deuteronomy 22:4,6,7,10, 25:4). The rabbis prohibited causing animals pain for the sake of sport or hunting when not for the sake of food, and permitted experimentation with living creatures only when it seemed likely to lead to practical advances in medical treatment.

Concern for the dignity of man is another distinctive feature of the morality of Judaism, expressing itself primarily as respecting each person’s privacy and being careful not to cause anyone shame or embarrassment. The rabbis incorporated into the *halakhah* a special category of' “shame” or “indignity” in awarding compensation for damages caused one's fellow (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 8:1)*.* In this area, they showed their awareness of the irreducible dignity or worth shared by every human being, as well as their sensitivity to the individual needs of people depending upon each one’s self-image and standing in life.

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ethics/Caring_For_Others/Ethical_Behavior/Concepts_and_Ideas.shtml?PRET>

## Ethical Monotheism

### By Dennis Prager

Ethical monotheism means two things:

1. There is one God from whom emanates one morality for all humanity.

2. God's primary demand of people is that they act decently toward one another.

If all people subscribed to this simple belief—which does not entail leaving, or joining, any specific religion, or giving up any national identity—the world would experience far less evil.

Let me explain the components of ethical monotheism.

### God

Monotheism means belief in "one God." Before discussing the importance of the "mono," or God's oneness, we need a basic understanding of the nature of God.

The God of ethical monotheism is the God first revealed to the world in the Hebrew Bible. Through it, we can establish God's four primary characteristics:

* 1. God is supranatural.
* 2. God is personal.
* 3. God is good.
* 4. God is holy.

Dropping any one of the first three attributes invalidates ethical monotheism (it is possible, though difficult, to ignore holiness and still lead an ethical life).

God is supranatural, meaning "above nature" (I do not use the more common term "supernatural" because it is less precise and conjures up irrationality). This is why Genesis, the Bible's first book, opens with, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" in a world in which nearly all people worshipped nature, the Bible's intention was to emphasize that nature is utterly subservient to God who made it. Obviously, therefore, God is not a part of nature, and nature is not God.

It is not possible for God to be part of nature for two reasons.

First, nature is finite and God is infinite. If God were within nature, He would be limited, and God, who is not physical, has no limits (I use the pronoun "He"" not because I believe God is a male, but because the neuter pronoun "It" depersonalizes God. You cannot talk to, relate to, love, or obey an "It.").

Second, and more important, nature is amoral. Nature knows nothing of good and evil. In nature there is one rule—survival of the fittest. There is no right, only might. If a creature is weak, kill it. Only human beings could have moral rules such as, "If it is weak, protect it." Only human beings can feel themselves ethically obligated to strangers.

Thus, nature worship is very dangerous. When people idolize nature, they can easily arrive at the ethics of Nazism. It was the law of nature that Adolf Hitler sought to emulate—the strong shall conquer the weak. Nazism and other ideologies that are hostile to ethical monotheism and venerate nature are very tempting. Nature allows you to act naturally, i.e., do only what you want you to do, without moral restraints; God does not. Nature lets you act naturally - and it is as natural to kill, rape, and enslave as it is to love.

In light of all this, it is alarming that many people today virtually venerate nature. It can only have terrible moral ramifications.

One of the vital elements in the ethical monotheist revolution was its repudiation of nature as god. The evolution of civilization and morality have depended in large part on desanctifying nature.

Civilizations that equated gods with nature—a characteristic of all primitive societies—or that worshipped nature did not evolve.

If nature is divine, and has a will of its own the only way for human beings to conquer disease or obtain sustenance is to placate it - through witchcraft, magic, voodoo, and/or human sacrifice.

One of ethical monotheism's greatest battles today is against the increasing deification of nature, movements that are generally led (as were most radical ideologies) by well educated, secularized individuals.

### Personal

The second essential characteristic is that God is personal.

The God of ethical monotheism is not some depersonalized force: God cares about His creations. As University of Chicago historian William A. Irwin wrote in a 1947 essay on ethical monotheism: "The world was to be understood in terms of personality. Its center and essence was not blind force or some sort of cold, inert reality but a personal God." God is not an Unmoved Mover, not a watchmaker who abandoned His watch after making it, as the Enlightenment Deists would have it. God knows each of us. We are, after all, "created in His image." This is not merely wishful thinking why would God create a being capable of knowing Him, yet choose not to know that being?

This does not mean that God necessarily answers prayers or even that God intervenes in all or even any of our lives. It means that He knows us and cares about us. Caring beings are not created by an uncaring being.

The whole point of ethical monotheism is that God's greatest desire is that we act toward one another with justice and mercy. An Unmoved Mover who didn't know His human creatures couldn't care less how they treat one another.

### Goodness

A third characteristic of God is goodness. If God weren't moral, ethical monotheism would be an oxymoron: A God who is not good cannot demand goodness. Unlike all other gods believed in prior to monotheism, the biblical God rules by moral standards. Thus, in the Babylonian version of the flood story, the gods, led by Enlil, sent a flood to destroy mankind, saving only Utnapishtim and his wife - because Enlil personally liked Utnapishtim. It is an act of caprice, not morality. In the biblical story, God also sends a flood, saving only Noah and his wife and family. The stories are almost identical except for one overwhelming difference: The entire Hebrew story is animated by ethical/moral concerns. God brings the flood solely because people treat one another, not God, badly, and God saves Noah solely because he was "the most righteous person in his generation."

Words cannot convey the magnitude of the change wrought by the Hebrew Bible's introduction into the world of a God who rules the universe morally.

One ramification is that despite the victories of evil people and the sufferings of good people, a moral God rules the world, and ultimately the good and the evil will receive their just deserts. I have never understood how a good secular individual can avoid debilitating despair. To care about goodness, yet to witness the unbearable torments of the good and the innocent, and to see many of the evil go unpunished—all the while believing that this life is all there is, that we are alone in a universe that hears no child's cry and sees no person's tears—has to be a recipe for despair. I would be overwhelmed with sadness if I did not believe that there is a good God who somehow—in this life or an afterlife—ensures that justice prevails.

### Holiness

As primary as ethics are, man cannot live by morality alone. We are also instructed to lead holy lives: "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). God is more than the source of morality, He is the source of holiness.

Ethics enables life; holiness ennobles it. Holiness is the elevation of the human being from his animal nature to his being created in the image of God. To cite a simple example, we can eat like an animal—with our fingers, belching, from the floor, while relieving ourselves or elevate ourselves to eat from a table, with utensils and napkins, keeping our digestive sounds quiet. It is, however, very important to note that a person who eats like an animal is doing something unholy, not immoral. The distinction, lost upon many religious people, is an important one.

### One God and One Morality

The oneness of God is an indispensable component of ethical monotheism. Only if there is one God is there one morality. Two or more gods mean two or more divine wills, and therefore two or more moral codes. That is why ethical polytheism is unlikely. Once God told Abraham that human sacrifice is wrong, it was wrong. There was no competing god to teach otherwise.

One morality also means one moral code for all humanity. "Thou shall not murder" means that murder is wrong for everyone, not just for one culture. It means that suttee, the now rare but once widespread Hindu practice of burning widows with their husband's body, is wrong. It means the killing of a daughter or sister who lost her virginity prior to marriage, practiced to this day in parts of the Arab world, is immoral. It means that clitoridectomies, the cutting off of a girl's clitoris (and sometimes more), a ritual practiced on almost one hundred million women living today mostly in Africa, is immoral.

While, in theory, the celebration of multiculturalism is neither offensive nor original, in actuality multiculturalism is yet another attempt to undermine ethical monotheism. Its underlying assumption is that there is no one universal moral code; all cultures are morally equal. As a professor wrote to the New York Times after that newspaper came out against clitoridectomies, who are we in the West to condemn anyone else's cultural practice?

### One Humanity

One God who created human beings of all races means that all of humanity are related. Only if there is one Father are all of us brothers and sisters.

### Human Life is Sacred

Another critical moral ramification of ethical monotheism is the sanctity of human life. Only if there is a God in whose image human beings are created is human life sacred. If human beings do not contain an element of the divine, they are merely intelligent animals.

For many years, I have been warning that a totally secular world view will erode the distinction between humans and animals. The popular contemporary expression "All life is sacred" is an example of what secularism leads to. It means that all life is equally sacred, that people and chickens are equally valuable. That is why the head of a leading animal rights group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), has likened the barbecuing of six billion chickens a year to the slaughter of six million Jews in the Holocaust; and that is how PETA could take out a full page ad in the Des Moines Register equating the slaughter of animals with the murder of people.

Such views don't so much enhance the value of animal life as they reduce the value of human life.

### God's Primary Demand Is Goodness

Of course, the clearest teaching of ethical monotheism is that God demands ethical behavior. As Ernest van den Haag described it: "[The Jews'] invisible God not only insisted on being the only and all powerful God . . . He also developed into a moral God."

But ethical monotheism suggests more than that God demands ethical behavior; it means that Gods primary demand is ethical behavior. It means that God cares about how we treat one another more than He cares about anything else.

Thus, ethical monotheism's message remains as. radical today as when it was first promulgated. The secular world has looked elsewhere for its values, while even many religious Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that Gods primary demand is something other than ethics.

### Jews and Ethical Monotheism

Since Judaism gave the world ethical monotheism, one would expect that Jews would come closest to holding its values. In some important ways, this is true. Jews do hold that God judges everyone, Jew or Gentile, by his or her behavior. This is a major reason that Jews do not proselytize (though it is not an argument against Jews proselytizing; indeed, they ought to): Judaism has never believed that non Jews have to embrace Judaism to attain salvation or any other reward in the afterlife.

But within Jewish religious life, the picture changes. The more observant a Jew is, the more he or she is likely to assume that God considers ritual observances to be at least as important as God's ethical demands.

This erroneous belief is as old as the Jewish people, and one against which the prophets passionately railed: "Do I [God] need your many sacrifices?" cried out Isaiah (Isaiah 1:11). The question is rhetorical. What God does demand is justice and goodness based on faith in God: "Oh, man," taught the prophet Micah, "God has told you what is good and what God requires of you only that you act justly, love goodness and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, emphasis added).

In Judaism, the commandments between human beings and God are extremely significant. But they are not as important as ethical behavior. The prophets, Judaism's most direct messengers of God, affirmed this view repeatedly, and the Talmudic rabbis later echoed it. "Love your neighbor as yourself is the greatest principle in the Torah," said Rabbi Akiva (Palestinian Talmud, Nedarim 9:4).

That is why when the great Rabbi Hillel was asked by a pagan to summarize all of Judaism "while standing on one leg, he was able to do so: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others; the rest is commentary now go and study" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a). Hillel could have said, "Keep the 613 commandments of the Torah; now go and do them," but he didn't. In fact, he went further. After enunciating his ethical principle, he concluded, "The rest is commentary." In other words, the rest of Judaism is essentially a commentary on how to lead an ethical life.

Unfortunately, with no more direct messages from God, and few Hillels, the notion that the laws between man and God and the laws between people are equally important gained ever wider acceptance in religious Jewish life.

Perhaps there are three reasons for this:

1. It is much more difficult to be completely ethical than to completely observe the ritual laws. While one can master the laws between people and God, no one can fully master human decency.

2. While ethical principles are more or less universal, the laws between people and God are uniquely Jewish. Therefore, that which most distinguishes observant Jews from non-observant Jews and from non Jews are Judaism's ritual laws, not its ethical laws. Thus it was easy for a mind set to develop which held that what ever is most distinctively Jewish—i.e., the laws between people and God—is more Jewishly important than whatever is universal.

3. Observance of many laws between people and God is public and obvious. Other Jews can see how you pray, how diligently you learn Talmud and Torah, and if you dress in the modest manner dictated by Jewish law. Few people know how you conduct your business affairs, how you treat your employees, how you talk behind others' backs, or how you treat your spouse. Therefore, the easiest way to demonstrate the depth of your religiosity is through observance of the laws between man and God, especially the ones that are most public.

Yet, while observant Jews may overstress the "monotheism" in "ethical "monotheism," the fact is that they believe the entire doctrine to be true. Secular Jews, on the other hand, believe that ethics can be separated from God and religion. The results have not been positive. The ethical record of Jews and non Jews involved in causes that abandoned ethical monotheism has included involvement in moral relativism, Marxism, and the worship of art, education, law, etc.

The lessons for religious Jews are never to forget the primacy of ethics and not to abandon the ethical monotheist mission of Judaism. The lesson for secular Jews is to realize that ethics cannot long survive the death of monotheism.

### Christians and Ethical Monotheism

While the challenge to making ethics primary in Judaism is largely one of Jews rather than of Judaism, the challenge to Christianity is more rooted in the religion itself. Within Christianity, the doctrine developed that correct faith, not correct works, is God's primary concern.

Paul articulated this view in the New Testament: If good deeds could lead to salvation, he reasoned, "Christ would have died in vain" (Galatians 2:21). For that reason, he continued, "We conclude that a man is put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the law commands" (Romans 3:28).

True, Catholicism holds that faith alone is not sufficient, that some works, too, are necessary for salvation. But between faith in Christ and goodness in behavior, the Church has, until recently, nearly always taught that faith is more important. Thus the Church held for nearly two millennia that even the kindest non Christians were all doomed: "Outside of the Church there is no salvation." In a major move toward ethical monotheism, the twentieth century Catholic Church has reinterpreted this statement, and now teaches that while salvation will come through Jesus, it is not necessary for an individual to assert belief in Jesus by name in order to be saved; only God judges who is saved, and Catholics cannot declare who they are.

Historically, the thrust of Church teachings has not been that cruelty or unethical behavior is the greatest sin. As historian Norman Cohn wrote:

The sins to which the Devil of Christian tradition has tempted human beings are varied indeed: apostasy, idolatry, heresy, fornication, gluttony, vanity, using cosmetics, dressing luxuriously, going to the theater, gambling, avarice, quarreling, spiritual sloth have all, at times, figured in the list.... I have looked in vain for a single instance . . . of the Devil tempting a human being to cruelty.1

Some statements attributed to Jesus can lead a Christian to abandon the fight against evil: "Resist not evil" is the prime example. Others include: "Pray for those who persecute you," "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44), and Jesus' prayer on the cross beseeching God to forgive his murderers. Christians can interpret each of these verses in a way that does not detract from a Christian's duty to fight evil. For example, the verses can be explained as applying only to an individual—i.e., the ideal individual Christian will not resist evil done to him, will love those who hurt her, etc., but this shouldn't be taken to mean that believers won't resist evil done to others. Such interpretations are certainly welcome. But it is difficult to imagine that the ideal Christian will lead a life of nonresistance to evil directed to self, and then strongly resist evil when it is done to others.

These verses of Jesus may explain why as prominent and personally fine a Christian as the Reverend Billy Graham, the most widely listened to Protestant in the world, failed to call evil by its name when he visited the Soviet Union in 1982. Indeed, true to Martin Luther's teachings, Graham called on Soviet Christians to obey the Soviet authorities, and did not publicly side with perse cuted Christians. Rather than refer to the Soviet Union as an enemy of Christianity, the Reverend Graham only referred to "the common enemy" of nuclear war. At the time of the visit, George Will wrote:

Graham's delicacy [about the Soviet Union] is less interesting than his "common enemy" formulation.... His language suggests a moral symmetry between his country and the soviet Union.

The Washington Post reports that when Graham spoke in two churches, both "were heavily guarded, with police sealing off all roads leading to them. Hundreds of KGB security agents . . . were in the congregation." Graham told one congregation that God "gives you the power to be a better worker, a more loyal citizen because in Romans 13 we are told to obey the authorities." How is that for a message from America;

Graham is America's most famous Christian. Solzhenitsyn is Russia's The contrast is instructive.2

Another area of Christian theology that undermines ethical monotheism is the belief that God saves human beings irrespective of how they act toward one another, just as long as they have the right faith. Millions of Protestants hold that believers in Jesus, no matter how many cruel acts they may perform, attain salvation, while nonbelievers in Jesus, no matter how much good they do and how much they may love God, are doomed to eternal damnation.

In spite of these teachings, two points need to be emphasized.

First, it is Christianity, more than any other religion, including Judaism, that has carried the message of the Jewish prophets, the clearest voices of ethical monotheism, to the world.

Second, Christianity, though not theologically pure in its ethical monotheism, can and does lead millions of people to more ethical lives. People do not live by theology alone. Theological teachings aside, the kindness and selflessness often associated with religious Christians and with charitable Christian institutions are rarely paralleled anywhere in the secular world—and infrequently in the religious world, either.

I yearn for the day when Christians will emphasize ethical monotheism as the most important part of their commitment to Christianity. I know from years of work and friendship with Christians of all persuasions that ethical monotheism is a value that many of them can easily and passionately affirm.

### Muslims and Ethical Monotheism

During some of the Western world's darkest periods, Islam was a religious light in the monotheistic world. The seeds of ethical monotheism are deeply rooted in Islam. For whatever reason, however, the soil for their nourishment has, over the last several hundred years, been depleted of necessary nutrients. Islam could be a world force for ethical monotheism, but in its present state, the outlook is problematic.

The Quran has numerous verses that emphasize belief in the one universal God who judges people according to their behavior. Like all religions, however, Islam contains xenophobic elements and doctrines that are incompatible with ethical monotheism. Unlike some other religions today, however, within Islam, xenophobia and hostility to ethical monotheism too often seem to prevail. For example, though the Quran states explicitly that in matters of faith there shall be no coercion, almost everywhere Islam dominates there is considerable religious coercion, whether by the state or by the community.

An example of such state sponsored coercion is Saudi Arabia, where religious police monitor what Muslims drink and reduce women to childlike status by forbidding them, for example, to drive cars. Saudi Arabia also severely restricts the religious freedom of other faiths.

The Sudan, too, is ruled by devout Muslims, and it is one of the most cruel states in the world, especially to its large black non Muslim minority.

Muslims need what most Christians and Jews have experienced - separation of church and state; interaction with other faiths and with modernity; and reform. Islam needs to compete with secularism, not outlaw it, and to allow competing ideologies within Islam. In religion, as in politics, when there is no competition, there is corruption and intolerance.

There are some Muslim voices crying for reform and for ethical monotheism, such as that of Dr. Fathi Osman, the former Princeton historian of Islam and editor of Arabia. When their influence increases, Islam will be a world force for ethical monotheism.

### Conclusion

In his essay "The Hebrews" in the seminal 1947 work The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East, Professor William A. Irwin writes:

Israel's great achievement, so apparent that mention of it is almost trite, was monotheism. It was an achievement that transformed subsequent history.

One may raise the question whether any other single contribution from whatever source since human culture emerged from the stone ages has had the far reaching effect upon history that Israel in this regard has exerted both through the mediums of Christianity and Islam and directly through the world of Jewish thinkers themselves.

The nations are condemned [by the Prophets] for the depravity of their morals. And here is the point: they are so condemned by the God of Israel! It is His righteousness, be it observed, not His might or His glory or any other of the divine qualities prized at the time, which provides the ground of his supremacy. Here we see the meaning of that phrase so commonly employed in the study of Hebrew history: Israel's monotheism was an ethical monotheism.

As the twentieth century ends, most people have still not learned its most obvious lesson—that attempts to change the world that do not place God and goodness at their center will make this world worse. Is it not time to try ethical monotheism?

It is the only truly effective answer to moral relativism, to racism, to nationalism, to worshipping art or law or success. All one needs to do is live by the simple and revolutionary message of Micah, "to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with your God."

### Notes

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/mono.html>

## ETHICAL LITERATURE

**ETHICAL LITERATURE** (Heb. סִפְרוּת הַמּוּסָר, *sifrut ha-musar*). There is no specific ethical literature as such in the biblical and talmudic period insofar as a systematic formulation of Jewish \*ethics is concerned. Even the Wisdom \*literature of the Bible, though entirely ethical in content, does not aim at giving a systematic exposition of this science of morals and human duties, but confines itself to apothegms and unconnected moral sayings. The same is true of the tractate \**Avot*, the only wholly ethical tractate of the Mishnah, which consists largely of the favorite ethical maxims of individual rabbis, and later works, such as \**Derekh Ereẓ* and \**Kallah*. The ethical principles and concepts of Judaism are scattered throughout the vast area of rabbinic literature and it was only in the Middle Ages that this data was used as the basis of ethical works and from this time ethical literature becomes a specific genre of Jewish literature.

The term "ethical literature," applied to a type of Hebrew literature, has two different meanings. Both refer to an important part of Hebrew literature in medieval and early modern times, but while one denotes a literary form which encompasses a group of works closely resembling each other structurally, the other denotes a literary purpose expressed in various literary forms. Traditional authors generally use the term in the first sense, while the latter sense is preferred by modern scholars.

### Literary Form

#### "CLASSICAL" ETHICAL LITERATURE

These writings are in book form and aim at instructing the Jew in religious and moral behavior. Structurally, the books are uniform: each is divided according to the component parts of the ideal righteous way of life; the material is treated methodically – analyzing, explaining, and demonstrating how to achieve each moral virtue (usually treated in a separate chapter or section) in the author's ethical system.

The first major work in "classical" ethical literature, *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, by Baḥya b. Joseph ibn \*Paquda (written in the 11th century), postulates ten religious and moral virtues, each forming the subject of a separate chapter. In *Ma'alot ha-Middot*, Jehiel b. Jekuthiel \*Anav of Rome expounds 24 ethical principles of perfect moral conduct (positive and negative – the latter to be avoided). Bahya b. Asher, one of the most prominent kabbalists in Spain, lists and analyzes the components of moral perfection in alphabetical order in *Kad ha-Kemaḥ*, while Moses Ḥayyim \*Luzzatto's major ethical work *Mesillat Yesharim*, constructed in the tradition of the *baraita* of R. \*Phinehas b. Jair, enumerates the main steps to perfection and holiness. Writings falling into this structural category form the main body of the traditional ethical literature.

#### ETHICAL MONOGRAPHS

Closely following the formalistic pattern of "classical" ethical literature, ethical monographs concentrate on one particular stage in the journey to religious perfection. The first major work of this kind was the *Sha'arei Teshuvah* by \*Jonah b. Abraham Gerondi. In this work the author analyzes every situation and problem that might possibly confront a repentant sinner and advises him how to purge himself completely of the effects of sin. Jonah Gerondi paved the way for what was to become one of the major literary forms in medieval Hebrew literature.

### Literary Purpose

The second meaning of the term ethical literature includes, besides the two categories mentioned (the classical ethical writing and the ethical monograph), nine literary forms, which, though structurally very different, have the same objective – to posit ethical and religious principles. The search for moral and spiritual perfection is the purpose of ethical literature just as practical observance of *mitzvot* is the purpose of halakhic literature.

#### HOMILETIC LITERATURE

Hebrew medieval \*homiletic literature is didactic and, in this sense, does not differ from "classical" ethical writings. The difference between the two is in their methods. Homiletic literature forms the bulk of ethical literature and for centuries influenced Jewish life more than any of the other ethical literary writings. Except for halakhic literature, no other type of Hebrew literature has achieved such a variety in content and form, has inspired authors over such a long period, and has reached such wide audiences.

#### ETHICAL WILLS

Developed in Germany, France, and Spain from the 11th to the 13th centuries, writers have used this literary form until modern times. \*Ethical "wills" usually refer to short, concise works in which the main principles of moral behavior are expounded and which are written in the form of a father's last words to his children. Frequently, the "will" is nothing but a literary cliché, and quite often was applied to short ethical works not really intended as "wills." Many of the works in this category are pseudepigraphic and are later compilations attributed to early scholars.

#### ETHICAL LETTERS

This form includes actual letters in which the writer instructs either his son or another person, who was far away, to live a moral life; and short ethical treatises, called "a letter" ("*iggeret*"), which is also the conventional name applied to any short work. \*Naḥmanides' letters to his sons belong to the first category, whereas the work "*Iggeret ha-Musar*" by R. Shem Tov \*Falaquera is typical of the second.

#### MORALISTIC STORYBOOKS

One of the earliest literary forms used by writers of ethical literature, the first moralistic storybook, \**Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot*, a collection of moralistic tales in the form of exempla and short homilies, was probably written in the geonic period. Structurally, the work is a series of stories which exemplify the way to achieve complete devotion to each one of the Ten Commandments. \*Nissim b. Jacob b. Nissim ibn Shahin's *Sefer ha-Ma'asiyyot* ("Book of Tales"), better known as *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu'ah*, is also an early work (11th century) expressed in this form. Originally written in Arabic, it was translated into Hebrew and as such influenced later Jewish writers. After the 15th century, moralistic-storybook writing became more common in Yiddish literature than in Hebrew.

#### HANHAGOT LITERATURE

Unlike the genres described above, which usually strive to teach the most basic and essential principles of ethical behavior, *hanhagot* literature concentrates on small practical details and not on general spiritual fundaments. The objective – to instruct the individual in the minutest details of daily behavior – makes use both of halakhic laws and of ethical principles. *Hanhagot* literature began to develop in the 13th-century *Sefer ha-Yirah* by R. Jonah Gerondi, and later *Ẓeidah la-Derekh by* \*Menahem b. Aaron ibn Zeraẓ, but it was still popular, mainly in Eastern Europe, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

#### EULOGIES

This type of ethical literature belongs to homiletics because eulogies – written obituaries at least – were considered homilies. Eulogies are usually didactic with the virtues of the mourned dead serving as emulative qualities. Hundreds were printed, either as separate booklets or forming parts of a more general homiletic work.

#### COLLECTIONS OF ETHICAL FABLES AND EPIGRAMS

The first collections were influenced by Arabic works; sometimes these compilations were translations from the Arabic (e.g., *Musrei ha-Pilosofim*, attributed to Isḥaq ibn Hunayn or \**Mivhar ha-Peninim*, attributed to R. Solomon b. Judah ibn \*Gabirol, or \**Kalila and Dimna*).

#### ETHICAL POETRY

Ethical treatises were sometimes written in verse. Structurally, many of them follow biblical examples, especially the Proverbs, and list the commandments in poetical form. One of the earliest works in this literary form, *Shirei Musar Haskel* (1505), was attributed to \*Hai Gaon. Some of the *maqāma* literature should also be included (*Beḥinat Olam* by \*Jedaiah ha-Penini, and *Iggeret ha-Musar* and *Sefer Mevakkesh* by Falaquera).

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND OF THE TRACTATE AVOT

The Book of Proverbs and *Avot*, mainly concerned with ethics, formed the basis of many medieval ethical writings. The interpretation served as a vehicle for the author's own concepts of Jewish ethics. Popular in medieval literature, these commentaries were usually regarded as independent works of ethics, and not part of the literature of exegesis and interpretation.

The objective of all these literary forms is to give workable and practical answers to the moral problems of the times. Their answers however were derived from theological considerations which lie outside the scope of ethical literature. Conceptually, ethical literature is not original in any of the disciplines it draws upon: theology, anthropology, philosophy, or psychology. The new concepts which originated in theological and theosophical literature were adapted to everyday religious life by ethical literature. It expressed them in different literary forms to make them acceptable to the public at large and it is thus, in form rather than in content, that ethical literature was original. Forms of expression usually do not interest theological innovators who mainly address themselves to the intellectual elite of the community, but a writer of an ethical work cannot disregard them. Since his main objective is to influence the life and religious behavior of the community as a whole, the ethical writer cannot afford to address only a segment of the public; consequently structural considerations play an important role.

Two unrelated processes have thus shaped the history of ethical literature: (a) the development of the literary forms as such; (b) the general development of Jewish religious thought on which ethical literature drew for its content and which it popularized. The merger of these two processes is the reason why ethical literature tends to be more conservative, less radical and innovative, than the theological movements in which the concepts it used originated. This phenomenon is apparent at every stage of the history of ethical literature, excluding perhaps the first period in Spain (see below). Ethical literature, in adapting new ideas, couched them in traditional literary genres for which it drew on aggadic lore. All the ethical writers used the aggadic form. The fusion of the old and the new, in form and content, made ethical literature the catalytic agent that preserved the new ideas and introduced them into the bloodstream of Judaism. Ethical literature modified the more radical implications of these concepts, and made them acceptable to the traditional community at large.

Since the ideas that ethical literature propounded originated with the ideological and theological movements in medieval Judaism, its history also reflects the development of these movements. Consequently there are four types of Hebrew medieval ethical literature: philosophical, rabbinic, Ashkenazi-ḥasidic (see \*Hasidei Ashkenaz), and kabbalistic; the last greatly influenced modern ḥasidic ethical literature. These testify to four distinct ideological movements. The development of each of these types will be briefly studied.

### Philosophical-Ethical Literature

The beginnings of Jewish ethical literature in the Middle Ages are rooted in the development of Jewish philosophy of that period. The last chapter of *Emunot ve-De'ot* by Saadiah Gaon (ninth century), which is on human behavior, may be regarded as the first Jewish medieval work in ethics. Distinct from the body of the book, both because of its form and because of its contents, it seems to be a separate work on ethics. The philosophical basis of Saadiah's ethical concepts did not develop out of earlier Jewish thought, and this might be the reason why this part of his work did not have a lasting influence on later Jewish ethical writings. *Tikkun Middot ha-Nefesh* (11th century) by Solomon ibn Gabirol suffered a similar fate, probably because the ethical system developed in the work was also alien to Jewish thought and did not fit into the accepted morals and ethics of the talmudic *aggadah*. Ibn Gabirol tried to show that the fusion of the four essential elements in medieval thought and the five senses formed the bases of all human characteristics.

Both works are written in Arabic, and both were translated (early 12th century) into Hebrew by R. Judah ibn Tibbon. They are an attempt at introducing a "pure ethic" into Jewish philosophy – a direct application of alien philosophical ideas to the field of Jewish ethics, without either blending them with, or using, the wealth of random ethical material already existing in Jewish tradition. In *Sefer ha-Ma'asiyyot*, a book of ethics which appeared at about the same time (11th century), also written in Arabic, but which was early translated into Hebrew, the author, R. Nissim b. Jacob b. Nissim ibn Shahin, used the opposite approach to that of Saadiah Gaon's and Ibn Gabirol's.

He collected ethical stories and sayings from the Talmud to which he added medieval tales and concepts scarcely using philosophical ideas and applying no ethical system. It came to be widely used and accepted in its Hebrew version by all later writers of the ethical tale.

These works were precursory to the body of Jewish philosophical writings and it was *Ḥovot ha-Levavot* of Baḥya ibn Paquda, one of the most penetrating works in medieval literature, which gave impetus to this literature. The first medieval Jewish work to evolve an ethical system rooted in Jewish thought, it tried to come to grips with the fundamental spiritual problems that troubled the medieval Jewish mind. While the influence of contemporary medieval philosophy can easily be detected, especially in the first section which is a philosophical treatise on the unity of God, Baḥya ibn Paquda also culled from such sources as biblical and rabbinic literatures, and Arabic proverbs, tales, and epigrams to create what is primarily an ethical guide. The most influential single Jewish work in ethics in a period of over 600 years, its impact may be partly attributed to the author's profound and fundamental treatment of what was probably the most challenging question to Judaism at the time – the inner quality of religious life.

All major medieval ethical works came to grapple with this basic and crucial problem which essentially grew out of an age that had adopted the Platonic concept of matter and spirit being antagonistic elements and consequently creating a rift within man. The ethical and spiritual teachings in the Talmud had come to be relegated to a secondary position and Judaism thus came to be seen as a materialistic religion, based on practical deeds and actions, and not on spiritual attitudes which, to the medieval scholars, seemed the essence of religious life. Jewish moralists were therefore confronted with the problem of reconciling the contemporary Jewish concept of religious life which was practically orientated and consequently seen as inferior, with the new ideas which saw religion almost exclusively in a spiritual light. While this question was also considered from a purely philosophical point of view, and thus formed the basis of many medieval philosophical writings, it most needed to be answered in the sphere of morals and ethics to which the community at large turned for guidance.

The conflict was resolved in ethical literature through a reinterpretation of the ancient Jewish heritage in which its spiritual values were stressed in the light of the moral and ethical concepts of the age. Nowhere was the problem more sharply and clearly stated than in the introduction to *Ḥovot ha-Levavot.* Baḥya ibn Paquda's ethical system, except for minor changes and variations, was generally accepted by philosophical-ethical literature. He stressed: (a) the idea of *kavvanah* – any ritual act as such does not represent spiritual fulfillment, unless it is performed with the right *kavvanah* (awareness and intention); the deed becomes a means in the fulfillment of a religious duty. Religious value thus also came to be attached to the spiritual attitude of the doer, and not to the deed alone; (b) a whole system of purely spiritual commandments – the *ḥovot ha-levavot*, which gave the title to the work. Spiritual commandments, according to Baḥya ibn Paquda, are those that are completely detached from any physical act, and they, therefore, do not include the traditionally "spiritual" religious acts of prayer and study, because the mouth or the eyes (physical organs) are required in their performance. These commandments he set out as: reaffirmation of God's unity, recognition of His workings in the world, divine worship, trust in God, sincerity of purpose, humanity, repentance, self-examination, asceticism, and the love of God.

With variations in emphasis, this double or triple system of commandments (practical commandments, *kavvanah*, and *Ḥovot ha-levavot*) is found in other philosophical-ethical writings: *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* by \*Abraham b. Ḥiyya ha-Nasi of Barcelona, in which the spiritual meaning of repentance is described; *Yesod Mora* in which Abraham \*Ibn Ezra gave a spiritual foundation to the commandments; and especially in the works of \*Maimonides. The latter, sometimes orientated toward "purely philosophical ethics" as in *Shemonah Perakim*, are also invested with philosophical and spiritual-moral commandments which complement the practical laws, as in *Sefer ha-Madda* of the *Mishneh Torah*. These works ushered in a new period in ethical literature: writings were now in Hebrew and the need to establish a link between the new philosophical-ethical ideas, directed toward the spiritualization and immanence of religious life, and the older more traditional Jewish concepts, became more pronounced. For the Jewish philosophers it had been easier to express "pure philosophy" in Arabic rather than in Hebrew. Henceforth however, even philosophers based their ethical works on biblical passages and talmudic sayings, and thus integrated more closely the ancient Jewish ethical teachings with the new philosophical-ethical ideas.

The relationship between moral perfection and maximum religious fulfillment was one of the main problems that confronted Hebrew philosophers. Maximum fulfillment was usually understood as philosophical contemplation, which had nothing to do with social life and ethical behavior. Was ethics, therefore, to be considered only as a means toward attaining this religious fulfillment, or was ethics an end in itself? Maimonides' writings contain both contradictory concepts; in most places Maimonides subordinates ethics to philosophy but there are places where he sees ethical behavior as the best possible approach to God which man can achieve. Most of the followers of Maimonides tended to see ethics as a means and not as a religious end, e.g., Shem Tov Falaquera's *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*. This approach to ethics possibly contributed to the fact that philosophical-ethical literature after the 13th century ceased to be a vehicle of expression of the ethician.

The search for the inner religious quality of life had found expression in ethical literature before Maimonides, but especially after him philosophers tried to give rational and spiritual reasons for the practical commandments. The commandments were thus considered only seemingly materialistic, and their true essence was seen as spiritual. During the 13th century Jewish thought used allegorization as a means to reveal the hidden spiritual meaning of the commandments and the Torah, thus breaking with the Maimonidean rationale. *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, by Jacob b. Abba Mari b. Samson \*Anatoli, and the polemic and exegetic writings of Zerahiah b. Isaac b. Shealtiel \*Gracian (Ḥen) demonstrate this trend. This development within philosophical-ethical literature was later blamed for the conversion of so many Jews during the Spanish persecutions of the late 14th and the 15th centuries: the contention of these Jews had been that if the true meaning of the commandments was a hidden spiritual one, why sacrifice one's life in order to preserve the outer meaningless, material shell?

### Rabbinic-Ethical Literature

The rise of rabbinic-ethical literature, especially in 13th-century Spain, Provence, and Italy, came as a reaction to such trends and was a revolt against Jewish philosophy influenced by Aristotelian concepts. Rabbinic-ethical literature was receptive to organized ethical thought; its aim, however, was to show that a moral system was already existent in the *aggadah* and in the Talmud. Jonah Gerondi, one of the first Hebrew ethicians, dedicated his major ethical work *Sha'arei Teshuvah* ("The Gates of Repentance") to the problem of repentance, much as Abraham b. Hiyya had done a hundred years earlier. According to him, a systematic arrangement of the old talmudic sayings together with a suitable exegetical commentary would present a complete and satisfactory system. Jonah and the other writers of this literature tried especially to emphasize the spiritual dicta found in older Jewish tradition, thus minimizing and possibly reconciling the antithesis between medieval beliefs and this older tradition.

It is significant that many of the writers of rabbinic-ethical literature were kabbalists, though they did not reveal their mystic ideas in their popular ethical works. Naḥmanides' ethical treatise, *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, discusses the various categories of the just and the wicked and their retribution in the world to come. Baḥya b. Asher wrote a very popular rabbinic-ethical work, *Kad ha-Kemaḥ*, in which, following the rabbinic-spiritualistic method, he enumerates alphabetically and studies different ethical problems. These and other ethicians (some modern scholars even maintain that Jonah Gerondi had been a kabbalist) presented the public with a rabbinic-ethical system, while in their closed mystical circles they resolved the antithesis between the spirituality of religion and the material aspect of the Torah through mystic speculation.

There were, however, some rabbinic-ethical writers who merely tried to compile and systematize the different talmudic-ethical writings. Thus, most of *Ma'alot ha-Middot* by Jehiel b. Jekuthiel Anav is a collection of talmudic and midrashic sayings arranged according to theme and content. The objective of later works, e.g., the two versions of *Menorat ha-Ma'or*, one by Israel \*Al-Nakawa b. Joseph of Toledo, the other by Isaac \*Aboab, was similar. Rabbinic-ethical literature, therefore, did not try to innovate, but to apply traditional Jewish ethics to the medieval world. In the process, it even revived some of the old forms of aggadic literature which came to serve as vehicles of expression.

### Ashkenazi-Ḥasidic Literature

The creative verve of the Hasidei Ashkenaz movement in Germany expressed itself in a body of ethical writings (see *Sefer \*Ḥasidim* (first published 1538, Bologna), \*Judah b. Samuel he-Ḥasid of Regensburg, \*Samuel b. Kalonymus he-Ḥasid of Speyer, and \*Eleazar b. Judah b. Kalonymus of Worms) that deviate in character from the philosophical-ethical literature and rabbinic-ethical literature of the time. (The former, however, had already reached its zenith when Ashkenazi ḥasidic literature started to develop, while the latter began at the same time.) While *Sefer Ḥasidim*, a work of major scope, epitomizes Ashkenazi-ḥasidic literature, writings of lesser range and reputation are equally representative, e.g., the introductory chapters to the halakhic work *Sefer ha-Roke'ah* by \*Eleazar of Worms and the ethical works *Sefer ha-Gan* (1899) by Isaac b. Eliezer and *Sefer Ḥasidim Katan* (1866) by Moses b. Eleazar ha-Kohen (14th and 15th centuries) are almost exclusively based on Ashkenazi-ḥasidic moral teachings. The problems which faced the Ashkenazi ethician, essentially the same as those that confronted the Hebrew thinkers of Spain, Italy, and Provence, were approached differently and were expressed neither in the variety of forms nor given the systematic treatment of the philosophical-ethical and rabbinic-ethical literatures of the south. The teachings of Greco-Arabic philosophy had not reached and therefore had not influenced the Jewish communities in Germany and in northern France. Thus while medieval European thinkers were essentially confronted by the same challenge, their response grew out of their immediate cultural environment.

Ashkenazi-ḥasidic literature is basically less abstract (less consideration is given to principles and fundamentals and more attention is paid to actual situations and concrete problems) than the literatures of the south. Structurally, the two types of literary writings also differ widely. *Sefer Ḥasidim* is not patterned on the methodical division of *Ḥovot ha-Levavot.* It is comprised of 2,000 short random passages in which every situation and every phase of moral and religious life is discussed. Thus Ashkenazi-ethical thinking was much more concerned with the specific problems to which local historical conditions gave rise than were their southern counterparts.

The approach of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz to the concept of the spiritual essence of religious and moral behavior and their interpretation of the practical commandments of the old teachings became the classical solution to all such questions in rabbinic literature. They contended that all commandments and ethical demands made upon man by God are a test in order to examine man's devotion to his creator. The religious value of certain deeds therefore does not lie in the actual performance but in the spiritual and religious effort that constitutes the action, e.g., a rich man who paid the ransom for a captured Jew and released him does not attain the spiritual height of the poor man who, with much effort, collected the ransom from many people, but upon paying the money found that the Jew had already been released. It is not the deed alone that counts, but the effort and devotion which God expects of man in following His will. Thus the reasons for (and even the meaning of) the commandments become negligible and even irrelevant: God in His infinite wisdom chose certain deeds by which to try man; they could be any deeds. What is important is that God's will was revealed through certain commandments and through certain ethical standards; it is not for man to ask why.

Ashkenazi Ḥasidim thus arrived at a certain scale of religious and ethical values and of commandments which ranged from the most difficult and trying precepts to acts which everybody could easily perform; the latter were therefore considered secondary. The religious value in the study of the talmudic tractate *Mo'ed Katan*, which deals with death and mourning, is higher than that of the study of other tractates. The more a commandment contradicts average human desires and instincts, the more religious value is attached to it. Thus, the greatest sacrifice that man can possibly make – to die for \**kiddush ha-Shem* (be martyred in the sanctification of God's name) – is man's supreme religious fulfillment. This view, prevalent during the times of the \*Crusades, was able to take root in an age when thousands of Jews in Germany and northern France died for *kiddush ha-Shem*.

The Ashkenazi-ḥasidic movement thus gave new relevance and new spiritual meaning even to the simplest and most practical of the religious and moral commandments. A more radical principle which also directly affected a whole pattern of behavior was the distinction made between *din Torah* (the "earthly law") and *din shamayim* (the "heavenly law"). Strict observance of the Torah precepts does not necessarily lead to the highest religious fulfillment; for this a higher moral law – *din shamayim*, the law of conscience – is necessary. According to the Torah, a thief is a thief; but according to *din shamayim* a clear distinction must be made between a man who steals bread out of hunger and a rich man who steals in order to further enrich himself. This does not mean that the laws of the Torah should be abandoned; a pious man however should try to transcend them and follow a higher spiritual and moral law.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, when Ashkenazi-ḥasidic theology and ethics flourished, Jewish life and thought of southern and northern Europe were clearly distinct: they were almost two separate cultures. The 13th century saw the slow bridging of the gulf – Ashkenazi ideas spread to southern Europe where they influenced rabbinic-ethical writers, and after the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Ashkenazi-ḥasidic ethics were a bulwark on which Judaism drew, to reorientate itself ideologically after the great tragedy.

Creativity in philosophical-ethical thought came to an end with the expulsion from Spain, mainly because philosophy was seen as a contributory factor to the conversion of hundreds of thousands of Spanish Jews. Writers like Joseph b. Ḥayyim \*Jabez and Isaac Abrabanel clearly denounced current Jewish philosophical thinking. It was a time when Judaism seemed to have fallen into a theological void – the old beliefs were shattered by the tragedy, and for a time nothing, at least nothing systematic and of embracing scope, seemed to replace philosophical thinking. A new theological outlook, the \*Kabbalah, which came to form the largest body of ethical writings in Jewish literature, finally gave literary expression to Jewish life and its aspirations in the aftermath of the expulsion. Ashkenazi-ḥasidic ethical thought had been only a temporary moral and spiritual support to the Jews of southern Europe and it was integrated into the \*Kabbalah which began to develop during the 16th century.

### Kabbalistic-Ethical Literature

The early European kabbalists usually tended to confine themselves to their closed circles and did not want to turn the Kabbalah into a popular literature. The center of kabbalistic learning established in Safed during the 16th century, however, created a body of moral writings which were directed toward the Jewish community at large and which started the 300-year period of kabbalistic-ethical literature.

This literature drew on earlier kabbalistic works, especially the \*Zohar, as well as on Ashkenazi-ḥasidic ethics and rabbinic-ethical thought. Using the Kabbalah and its mystical system as a basis, kabbalistic-ethical teachings were formulated along the same strong systematic lines. Central to kabbalistic-ethical literature are two closely related concepts: (1) an ethical dogma in which the commandments are conceived symbolically; (2) the idea that the temporal world reflects the eternal world and vice versa and that there is an interdependence between the performance of deeds on this earth and processes in the divine mystical world. The symbolic approach to the commandments demanded of man to adhere to them with all his might because they reflect divine mystical actions. Through the idea of reflective worlds, man's deeds formed part of the divine drama, and enabled man by means of his action to influence the mystical powers. Moses b. Jacob \*Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*, one of the first kabbalistic ethical works of this period, is a detailed guide to moral behavior and how such conduct could and should reflect divine essences and satisfy divine requirements. His pupil and follower, \*Elijah b. Moses de Vidas, the author of *Reshit Ḥokhmah*, developed the idea that man's moral deeds are reflected in the heavenly struggle between good and evil. The \*Kabbalah of Isaac \*Luria, which developed in the last part of the 16th century, strengthened this concept by stressing even more man's responsibility in the war raging in the mystical spheres.

The kabbalistic-ethical literature, which, from the 17th century onward continued to develop in Eastern Europe, was based almost exclusively on Lurianic teachings. It emphasized more strongly the power of Satan and the consequences that sin has in the divine world. Works like Ẓevi Hirsch \*Koidonover's *Kav ha-Yashar*, which was very popular, used kabbalistic-Lurianic teachings to warn the reader against the havoc which sin might wreak on the sinner as such, and on the world as a whole.

Kabbalistic theosophy firmly rooted this literature in systematic mystical reasoning and gave it a theological structure. The actual teachings, the positive and negative precepts, did not, however (with a few exceptions, like the custom of *tikkun*, see \*Kabbalah), originate with the kabbalist but were culled from older ethical literature: rabbinic and Ashkenazi-ḥasidic.

The Shabbatean movement, which deeply influenced all of Judaism in the second half of the 17th century, did not use ethical literature as a vehicle of expression (see \*Shabbetai Zevi). Despite the ethical work *Tikkunei Teshuvah* (published by I. Tishby) by \*Nathan of Gaza, most of the Shabbatean literature was theosophical in nature. Some of the Shabbateans who wrote popular ethical works tended to conceal their theological views and only occasional allusions can be found.

During the 18th century two converging trends in Jewish thought – kabbalism and messianism – gave rise to the kabbalistic-ethical works of Moses Ḥayyim \*Luzzatto: *Mesillat Yesharim, Da'at Tevunot*, and *Derekh ha-Shem*. The controversy that raged around Luzzatto, one of the major ethicians in Jewish literature, forced him to conceal the kabbalistic elements in his works through the use of pseudo-philosophical language and terms. His works, which became popular toward the end of the century, are read to this day.

Ḥasidic literature of the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century is almost exclusively ethical. Most of it is comprised of homilies in which moral behavior is strongly stressed; some of the writings, however, are purely ethical in nature, e.g., *Sefer ha-Middot* by R. \*Naḥman of Bratslav or *Tanya* by R. \*Shneur Zalman of Lyady. The collections of ḥasidic stories and fables are usually didactic and have an ethical theme. The *Mitnaggedim*, opponents of Ḥasidism, also based their teachings on Lurianic ethical literature. From their ranks sprang the \*Musar movement which tried to introduce the study of major ethical works into the yeshivot and for whom moral behavior became the greatest religious fulfillment man could aspire to. Haskalah literature at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries also used the traditions of ethical literature in its didactic endeavors.

Hebrew ethical literature, a diversified corpus of writings, is characterized by an underlying unity which cuts across not only the divergent ideological movements out of which the literature grew and which it represents, but also subsumes the various vehicles of expression used by ethicians. Hebrew ethical writers were primarily concerned with a number of elemental universal problems. The solutions they presented, while reflecting the various ideologies, are basically a response to the most crucial point at hand – man and the human condition, his position in the cosmos, and his attitude to the ways of God. They thus transcended the specific dogma to which they adhered and considered the dilemma of man in its universal aspects. Fundamental to this literature are such questions as: the ill fate suffered by the just and the success enjoyed by the wicked in this life; the ways of divine judgment; God's knowledge and active management of the temporal world; why the wicked were created; freedom of choice in ethical and religious matters and the boundaries of that freedom; the meaning of sin and in what relation does the repentant sinner stand to the just who has never sinned; the relation between fear of God motivated by the thought of retributive justice and fear of God aroused by God's greatness; the relationship between the worship of God through fear and the worship of God through love; the meaning of *devekut* (communion with God) and the ways to achieve it; the essence of *kavvanah* and its place in ethical life; the right attitude to Gentiles; the fate of the just and the wicked after death; the essence of the soul; existence after the resurrection; social behavior in and toward the family; and similar questions which transcend time and space to create one unifying body of literary writings. Some of the answers are dictated by the special character and inclinations of the writer more so than by the movement to which he belonged.

Unlike the philosopher and theologian, the ethician is faced with concrete situations, actual people; his responses are therefore more pragmatic and less dogmatic – he tackles the questions practically and in human terms. Ethical literature thus, through the uniqueness of this aspect of its character – the specific moral confrontation with man's universal dilemma – has carved out for itself an independent place in Hebrew literature and it is not merely another branch of theological literature.

Form as much as content was a unifying factor in the corpus of ethical writings that classified it into a literature. Ethicians were obliged to use different literary means in order that their works might be accepted by a wide and sometimes uneducated public. This unavoidable emphasis on form, and not only on content, placed ethical literature into a separate category and set it apart from the other branches of religious thinking. The constant use of fables, stories, epigrams, jokes, and hagiography as vehicles of expression created a distinct literature which was read not only for didactic purposes but also to be enjoyed. The literary and didactic role played by literature during the Middle Ages is comparable to that of fiction in modern times.

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