

Encyclopedia Britannica, "Judaism," section on Ethics and Society

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## **Ethics and society**

### **The ethical emphasis of Judaism**

Jewish affirmations about God and humans intersect in the concept of Torah as the ordering of human existence in the direction of the divine. Humans are ethically responsible creatures who are responsive to the presence of God in nature and in history. Although this responsiveness is expressed on many levels, it is most explicitly called for within interpersonal relationships. The pentateuchal legislation sets down, albeit within the limitations of the structures of the ancient Middle East, the basic patterns of these relationships. The prophetic messages maintain that the failure to honour these demands is the source of social and individual disorder. Even the most exalted members of society are not free of ethical obligations, as is seen in the ethical confrontation of David by Nathan ("Thou art the man") for seducing Bathsheba and arranging to have her husband killed (2 Samuel 12).

What is particularly striking about Jewish ethical concerns is the affirmation that God is not only the source of ethical obligation but is himself the paradigm of it. In the so-called Code of Holiness (Leviticus 19), imitation of divine holiness is offered as the basis of human behaviour in both the cultic-ceremonial and ethical spheres. The basic injunction, "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am Holy," underlay the concern for economically vulnerable members of the community; obligations toward neighbours, hired labourers, and the physically handicapped; interfamilial relationships; and attitudes toward strangers (i.e., non-Israelites). Acceptable human behaviour was therefore "walking in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 11:22). The dialectical relation between God and man in the literary prophets also exhibits divine righteousness and divine compassion as patterns to be emulated in the life of the community.

This theme, *imitatio Dei* ("imitation of God"), is expressed succinctly in a commentary on Deuteronomy 11:22 that answers the question of how it is possible to walk "in all His ways": "As He is merciful and gracious, so be you merciful and gracious. As He is righteous so be you righteous. As He is holy, strive to be holy" (*Sifre* Deuteronomy 85a). Even more daringly, God is described as clothing the naked, nursing the sick, comforting the mourners, and burying the dead, so that human beings may recognize their own obligations.

### **Interpenetration of communal and individual ethics**

What stands out in the entire development of Jewish ethical formulations is the constant interpenetration of communal and individual obligations and concerns. A just society requires just people, and a just person functions within a just society. The concrete expression of ethical requirements in legal precepts takes place with both ends in view, so that the process of beginning the holy community and the process of forming the *hasid* ("pious"), the person of

steadfast devotion to God, are concomitant. The relationship between the two is, of course, often mediated by the historical situation, so that in some periods one or the other moves to the centre of practical interest. In particular, the end of the Judaean state (70–135 CE) truncated the communal aspect of ethical obligations, often limiting discussion to apolitical responsibilities rather than to the full range of social involvements. The reestablishment of the State of Israel in the 20th century therefore reopened for discussion areas that for millennia were either ignored or treated as mere abstractions. This implies that the full ethical responsibility of Jews cannot be carried out solely within the realm of individual relationships but must include involvement in the life of a fully articulated community.

This double involvement is most vividly apparent in the biblical period, when both were equally present as divine command and demand. In the rabbinic period, because of the new political context, the communal aspect receded, so that discussion was mainly oriented toward relationships between members of the Jewish community or between individuals as such and away from political responsibilities. Nonetheless, the virtues that were understood to govern these relationships were, in their biblical setting, communal as well. Righteousness and compassion had been obligations of the state, governing the relationship between political units, as the first two chapters of Amos make evident. At the same time, as Micah 6:8 shows, doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God were obligations of the individual as well. Given the situation of the Jewish Diaspora following the revolts against Rome in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, the individual pattern became the primary object of concern. Theoretical ethical systems were not developed until the Middle Ages, but even in the early period it was understood that the dynamic of ethical theory stood behind the practical system of Halakhah, the enumeration of legal precepts. This meant that the law assumed an ethical core that existed prior to revelation and that the laws were just and merciful because God was just and merciful. Thus an attempt was made to reduce the hundreds of precepts to a small number expressing the ethical essence of Torah.

## **The key moral virtues**

In keeping with the rabbinic understanding of Torah, study also was viewed as an ethical virtue. Passages from the Mishna, which are repeated in the traditional prayer book, enumerate a series of virtuous acts—honouring parents, deeds of steadfast love, attendance twice daily at worship, hospitality to wayfarers, visiting the sick, dowering brides, accompanying the dead to the grave, devotion in prayer, peacemaking in the community and in family life—and conclude by declaring that the study of Torah is the premier virtue. The extracts enumerated in the Mishna and the prayer book exhibit the complex variety of ethical behaviour called for within the Jewish tradition. To parental respect and family tranquillity are added the responsibility of parents for children, the duties of husband and wife in the establishment and maintenance of a family, and ethical obligations that extend from the conjugal rights of each to the protection of the wife if the marriage is dissolved. The biblical description of God as upholding the cause of the fatherless and the widow and befriending strangers, providing them with food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:18), remained a factor in the structure of the community. Ethical requirements in economic life are expressed concretely in passages such as Leviticus 19:35–36: “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights,

a just *ephah*, and a just *hin*” (*ephah* and *hin* are units of measure); another example is [Amos](#)’s bitter condemnation of those who “sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6). Such injunctions, together with many other specific precepts and moral requirements, established the basis for a wide-ranging program that sought to govern, both in detail and in general, the economic life of the individual and the community.

Relations within the human sphere are not the only object of ethical concern; nature also is so regarded. The animal world, in the biblical view, requires merciful consideration, so that on the Sabbath not only humans but also their domestic animals are required to rest (Exodus 20:10; 23:12). Mistreatment of beasts of burden is prohibited (Deuteronomy 22:4), and wanton destruction of animal life falls under the ban (Deuteronomy 6–7). In the rabbinic attitude toward creation, all of nature is the object of human solicitude. Thus, the food-yielding trees of a city under siege may not be destroyed, according to Deuteronomic legislation (Deuteronomy 20:14–20). The enlargement of this and other biblical precepts resulted in the generalized rabbinic prohibition, “You shall not destroy,” which governs human use of the environment.

### **The relation to non-Jewish communities and cultures**

Although the end of the Jewish state reduced the scope of ethical judgments in the political sphere, relations between the Jewish community and other polities—particularly the Roman and Christian empires and the Islamic states—provided opportunities for the exploration of the ethical implications of such encounters. Because most of these situations were characterized by gross disparities of power, with the Jews the weaker party, prudential considerations were dominant. Despite this, Jewish authorities sought to bring to bear upon these external arrangements the ethical standards that governed the internal structures.

The problem of the relationship between the Jewish community, in whatever form it has existed, and other social units has been vastly complicated. The relation is ideally that of witness to the divine intent in the world. Practically, it has swung between the extremes of isolation and assimilation, in which the ideal has, on occasion, been lost sight of. Culturally, from its earliest beginnings, the people of Israel have met and engaged the ideas, forms, behaviours, and attitudes of their neighbours constructively. Israel reformulated what it received in terms of its own commitments and affirmations. On more than a few occasions, as in the period of settlement in Canaan, it rejected the religious and cultural ideas and forms of the indigenous population. On other occasions—as in Islamic Spain from the 8th to the 15th century—it actively sought out the ideas and cultural patterns of its neighbours, viewing them from its own perspective and embracing them when they were found to be of value. Indeed, the whole history of Israel’s relationship with the world may be comprehended in the metaphor, used previously, of the heartbeat with its systole and diastole. No period of its existence discloses either total rejection of or object surrender to other cultural and political structures but rather a tension, with the focal point always in motion at varying rates. Judaism’s adjustment to and relation with other social and political units has involved larger aspects of communal and individual life. Whether or not under such circumstances it is helpful to describe Judaism as a civilization, it is important to recognize that, viewed functionally, much more must be included than is usually subsumed under the term *religion* in modern Western societies.

## The formulation of Jewish ethical doctrines

The ethical concerns of Judaism have frequently been expressed in literary works. Not only were rabbinic writings constantly directed toward the establishment of legal patterns that embody such concerns, but in the medieval period the issues were dealt with in treatises on morals; in ethical wills, in which a father instructed his children about their obligations and behaviour; in sermons; and in other forms. In the 19th century the traditionalist Musar (“Moral Instructor”) movement in eastern Europe and the philosophical discussions of the nascent Reform movement in the West focused upon ethics. Indeed, since the political and social emancipation of the Jews, ethical and social rather than theological questions have been given priority. Often the positions espoused have turned out to be “Judaized” versions of ethical theories or political programs. In some instances, as in the case of the distinguished German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), the result has been a compelling restatement of a secular philosophical ethics in Jewish form. In others it has resulted in no more than a pastiche. More crucial, however, is the question of the uniqueness and authority of Jewish ethics. The reestablishment of the Jewish state renewed the possibility that the full range of ethical decisions, communal and individual, may be confronted. In such a situation the ethical task of the people moves out of the realm of speculation to become actual again.