Judaism

The starting point of Jewish religious belief and practice is the commanding voice of God. However, Judaism’s tendency is to ground ideas like this in more concrete terms. Thus, it is through the medium of the Torah that God commands the Jewish people. When we speak about Torah, we have in mind both the Written Torah (the Old Testament as a whole, but more particularly its first five books) and the Oral Torah, transmitted through the commentaries and teachings of the rabbis over the course of the centuries. Whereas the Written Torah contains the actual divine commandments (mitzvot) which are often communicated only in very general or obscure terms, these mitzvot are spelt out in detail and applied to daily life through a body of rabbinic law (halacha) and teaching (aggada).

Existence

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ In the Jewish religious tradition, Genesis 1:1 is seen as the starting point of all existence, the Bible describing all matter being created simply by virtue of God’s commanding will. Interestingly, there is a rabbinic commentary (Midrash Genesis Rabba, 1:1,6) which speaks of the Torah pre-existing creation and God creating the world by consulting the Torah. This suggests that God's creation of the universe was not an end in itself. Rather, God fashioned the world based on the values of the Torah, so that there would be somewhere in the universe for these values to be put into practice. So what we have is this very profound idea that existence itself was grounded in the realm of the ethical from the very beginning of the world's creation.

The nature of human existence

The pinnacle of God's creative process described in the first chapter of Genesis is marked by his declaration, 'let us make man(kind) in our image' (1:26), thus signifying the elevated status of man and woman within the created order. Various interpretations identify the ‘image of God’ with certain qualities of human existence which radically distinguish it from all other living creatures; namely, intellect, self-awareness, consciousness of others’ existence, free will, conscience, responsibility and self control.

In the second chapter of Genesis we are presented with a second story of creation. Here God is described as forming Man from ‘the dust of the earth’ but also animating this figure by blowing ‘into his nostrils the breath of life’ (2:7). The combination of both dust and divine breath is seen in Judaism as pointing to the belief that human beings are composed of both body and soul. However, the bodily dimension also points to the essential mortality of human existence. After death, the body returns to the earth, its source. As God announces to Man and Woman when they are expelled from
the paradisiacal world of Eden, ‘for dust you are and to dust you shall return’ (Genesis 3:19). On the other hand, the soul, which is of divine essence, returns to God, its source, and lives on forever.

In the second chapter of Genesis we also read that after his creation, Man was placed by God in the Garden of Eden with the instruction that he could eat the fruit of any tree except for ‘the tree of good and bad’. However, such a prohibition, indeed any prohibition, can only mean something if we infer the existence of a human potential to choose between good and bad, right and wrong. In fact, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, suggests that the ‘doctrine’ of free will is a central pillar of Jewish law, quoting in support the verse from the book of Deuteronomy: ‘see, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil’ (30:15).

The purpose of human existence

The creation of humankind ‘in the image of God’ suggests the uniqueness of human existence, not only because of particular human qualities, but also by virtue of the fact that human beings alone can enter into a relationship with God. The nature of that relationship is that, as creatures bearing the stamp of God’s image, human beings are God’s counterparts on earth in terms of the roles they are expected to fulfill. For example, just as God creates all life, he commands man and woman ‘to be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28) so they too, in their own small way, can be creators of life. Just as God is master of the whole cosmos, he expects man and woman to rule over their immediate world, instructing them to ‘fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion’ (Genesis 1:28). However, created as they are in God’s image, human beings must also rise to the challenge of exercising responsibility in fulfillment of this task, acting as God’s stewards of the earth (Genesis 2:15).

The idea of a human partnership in God’s creation is also reflected in the Jewish observance of the Sabbath. The second chapter of Genesis commences with the observation that having completed all his work of the preceding six days, God rested on the seventh. So, too, Jews are instructed in the Ten Commandments to imitate God’s rest by setting aside the seventh day of the week ‘as a Sabbath of the Lord’ (Exodus 20:10).

Good and evil

Rabbinic tradition tends to view good and evil as two urges which reside within every human being and are locked in an ongoing struggle with each other – the yetzer tov (the good impulse) and the yetzer ra (evil impulse). Thus, in various rabbinic sources the evil impulse is personified as a ‘king’ because of its capacity to dominate a person’s actions and motivations. On the other hand, the good impulse is identified with moral consciousness, its role being to keep in check the human inclination towards evil.

Surprisingly, the evil impulse is not seen as something which is inherently bad. Rather, this impulse – associated with human passion and ambition – is an essential element in the makeup of human nature, and necessary to the perpetuation of the species and the existence of civilisation. Viewed in this way, it is not something to be eradicated or suppressed, but directed and controlled in the service and love of God. Thus, the evil impulse is only evil inasmuch as it is liable to be misused.

The good and evil impulses are also essential components of Judaism’s doctrine of free will, as they make it possible for individuals to exercise their capacity for moral freedom. However, if good and evil are to be real possibilities and if moral freedom is to possess any value, God must respect human choices and ‘hide’ his face; in other words, refrain from intervening in human affairs to prevent evil, even if this results in the suffering of others. Seen in this way, God cannot be held responsible for the presence of such suffering. Rather, it has to be viewed as the price which humanity has to pay for the exercise of human freedom.
The individual and the community

‘If I am not for myself who is for me? And when I am for myself what am I?’ (Mishna Avot 1:14). This well known Jewish aphorism, which is attributed to the great first century sage Hillel, points to a fundamental tension between the individual and the community.

THINKING PROMPT

Imagine that Australia comes under the threat of direct military attack and the government introduces compulsory national conscription. You are against war as matter of personal conviction. Which should come first - your duty to defend your country or your duty to be true to your own conscience?

An example of this tension can be found in the laws that regulate the Jewish ritual of shiva. This is the seven-day period in which the closest relatives of a person who has died observe a period of mourning during which they focus on dealing with the emotions of loss as well as receiving the comfort of the surrounding community. This is an intense time of introspection, self-absorption and healing. However, the focus on the self and one’s very legitimate individual needs is relinquished when the wider community celebrates certain Jewish festivals. The rituals of mourning, such as sitting on low benches, not wearing shoes and staying at home, are set aside. Instead, the mourners are expected to participate in the celebration of the festival, thereby giving full expression to the communal aspect of their identity.

On the other hand, there are Jewish texts in which priority is accorded to individual over the community. For example, the Talmud, which is the foundation book of the Jewish legal system, describes a hypothetical situation in which a group is confronted by bandits who demand, ‘Hand over one of your number to be killed. Otherwise you will all be killed.’ The Talmud’s conclusion is that the individual must not be handed over even if it were to result in the death of the group; the only exception being if the individual is guilty of some capital offence, since that person has effectively condemned himself. Although an extreme case in point, the ruling of the Talmud highlights the extent to which the Jewish tradition can go in promoting the rights of the individual over the community.
Ethical thinking and the place of reason

Do God’s commands define morality, or is there some standard of morality that can be arrived at independently of God’s will? As is the case with many theological and ethical issues, the Jewish religious tradition is divided with regard to this question.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a contemporary Jewish theologian and ethicist, argues – very possibly in the minority – that a close analysis of various Jewish traditional sources supports the idea that moral behaviour is autonomous, and therefore not grounded in God’s revealed will. In support of this claim, Jacobs refers to The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, written by the early medieval Jewish thinker Saadia Gaon. In this work, Saadia classifies a whole range of rituals, such as the dietary laws, as belonging to the category of ‘revealed commandments’, since Jews only come to know of such demands because they are part of God’s revelation. On the other hand, the Torah’s rational commandments, which include the ethical, would be recognised even without God’s revelation since people would, by virtue of their own reason, simply know that it is right and wrong.

If this is the case, why then are the rational commandments part of God’s revelation? Saadia’s basic answer is that revelation is required to guarantee certainty and a shared understanding as to how the rational commandments are to be put into practice.

On the basis of his analysis, Jacobs argues that ethics and religion really are independent of each other. However, he also believes that for people of faith, religion provides life with a whole extra dimension. Thus, religious Jews would see their commitment to an ethical life as merely one part of their total relationship to God.

Critics of Jacobs argue that he presents a highly selective reading of Jewish sources in support of his argument. In fact, it appears that contemporary traditional Jewish thought tends more towards the view that ethics begins not with the human quest, but with divine command and instruction. The Bible is not seen as reasoning about the nature of moral behaviour; rather, God reveals what is good and just, and it a Jew’s task to respond with obedient love without necessarily to understand what is being demanded. The example that is often cited in support of this view is Abraham’s response of unquestioning obedience to God’s seemingly immoral demand that he sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22).

THINKING PROMPT

What should a religious person do, if his/her own reasoning leads to a conclusion that conflicts with the teachings of his/her religion? Think of some examples where this might be the case.

In Genesis 9:6, God commands that a murderer must be put to death. Would you, by virtue of your own reason, arrive at a similar conclusion?
Core values and principles of the Jewish ethical system

The Jewish ethical system encompasses a remarkably wide range of areas. It relates to questions of character development, interpersonal relations, the morality of war, dilemmas posed by modern medical technology, sexual behaviour and so on. However, there are a number of core principles and values which reappear in one way or another in discussion of a whole range of ethical issues and themes.

1. **The god-given mission of the Jewish people is to set a living example of what it means to create a just and righteous society.** This is particularly well illustrated in Genesis 18, where Abraham is described as arguing with God regarding the justice of his intention to destroy the city of Sodom.

2. **The imitation of God (imitatio dei) as the chief motivation and method for moral development.** For example, in a text from the Talmud, the rabbis derive from the Bible a number of actions performed by God which they see a model for human behaviour. Thus, God is described (Talmud Sotah 14a) as clothing Adam and Eve after he expelled them from Eden; visiting an unwell Abraham following his circumcision; comforting Isaac after the death of his father, Abraham; and burying Moses. So, too, should we clothe and provide for those in need, visit the sick, comfort the mourner and bury the dead. Within the Jewish tradition these acts are grouped under the general term of **gemilat chessed** (Deeds of Compassion and Loving-kindness). Indeed, the development of a compassionate and loving character is one of the most highly valued goals of Judaism.

3. **The sanctity of human life.** Judaism’s belief in the inherent sanctity of human life derives from the biblical view that humankind was created in the image of God. Judaism is often portrayed as a life-affirming religion which places the preservation of human life above all else. However, this is not always the case. There are certain situations in which devotion to God and the preservation of his commandments is deemed to take precedence over life itself.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Think of some situations where the belief in the sanctity of life might conflict with other principles.

4. **The permanent tension between self-interest and the duty to care for others.** Jewish ethical teachings acknowledge that it is natural, and in certain cases legitimate, to place one’s own interests ahead of all others. The tension is most clearly highlighted in Hillel’s aphorism quoted earlier: ‘If I am not for myself who is for me? And when I am for myself what am I?’ The Talmud poses the following hypothetical situation, which illustrates very forcefully the problems inherent in trying to balance these two priorities: ‘Two people were travelling (in the desert) and one of them had a flask of water in his hand. If both of them drink, they would die, and if one of them drinks, he would reach settlement’ (Talmud Baba Metzia 62a). The rabbis involved in this discussion debate the relative merits of the person drinking the water himself or sharing it with his fellow. Interestingly, the dominant opinion favours the first option.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Discuss the relative merits in this case of drinking the water yourself, sharing it, or handing it over to your companion.

5. **The morality of the heart and morality of the limbs.** The ethical dimension of religious life tends to be associated with what people do. However, Judaism focuses equally on the inner dimension of morality; the development of individual character or personality. Thus, the Jewish ethical system is just as occupied with what people think and feel (duties of the heart) as with what they do outwardly (duties of the heart).
6. The ethical triangle. Within Judaism it is common to draw a distinction between interpersonal commandments and commandments governing one’s relationship with God, the ethical dimension being associated with the former. However, Jewish ethical thinking insists on a close interconnection of the ‘vertical’ (divine-human) realm and ‘horizontal’ (human-human realm). Thus, it can be said that the Jewish ethical system rests on a triangular relation between I-You-God.

The truth of Judaism with regard to other worldviews
Judaism does not subscribe to the view that the path towards redemption in the Hereafter is the exclusive domain of the Jewish people. For the Jew who faithfully observes the mitzvot – God’s commandments as set out in the Torah – the reward is the blessing of eternal life in the Olam Haba, the ‘World-to-Come’. So what of those who do not enter the Jewish fold? Judaism has embraced the notion that the gates of the Hereafter are also open to the ‘righteous gentiles of the world’; in other words, those who embrace a basic moral code referred to as the seven commandments of the sons of Noah.

However, far more complex is the question of where Judaism stands with regard to the ‘truth’ of its own theological position and the truth claims of other religions – especially those within the monotheistic tradition. It is only in more recent decades, with the growth and consolidation of interfaith dialogue, that a small number of authoritative voices have emerged within the Jewish world calling for a re-assessment of Judaism’s attitude concerning the theological truth claims of the other monotheistic traditions. For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, draws a distinction between absolute and universal truth, thereby enabling himself to create ‘theological space’ for these traditions. The influential American scholar, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, goes far beyond Sacks in his willingness to see Christians and Jews as part of the same story and part of the same overall covenant. However, in view of the long history of distrust and misunderstanding between Judaism and Christianity, and more recently between Judaism and Islam, some time will no doubt pass before other prominent voices in the Jewish religious world move beyond the barriers that have traditionally separated the three monotheistic traditions.

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