

A Catechism of the Jewish Religion by J. Mendes De Solla (1871) Quotes

That the youth of our community is especially in need of religious and moral instruction, seems to me a fact hardly to be disputed or doubted; and it appears equally as evident that in order to impart such instruction methodically and profitably, a manual to be used as a class- book in our religious schools is indispensable. We have no such book, and, as far as I am aware, there is none to be had which will fully answer our purpose. It is true, several catechisms and manuals for the religious instruction of Jewish scholars have from time to time been issued by some of our ministers and teachers, but these are either out of print or unsuitable. I shall not venture to criticise in particular the productions of my predecessors in that field, many of whom surpass me in ability and learning; but it seems that the high attainments of some of these authors rendered them unable to stoop to the level of the comprehension of young students, and the consequence is that the ideas

laid before them are often abstruse; the answers to the questions put to them too lengthy and difficult.¹

Q. What does religion teach us?

A. Religion teaches us first, the existence of a Creator and his attributes; second, our duties toward God and man; and third, what we are to expect from the performance or neglect of such duties.

Q. What is the great object of religion?

A. To make man moral and virtuous, and consequently content and happy in this life and hereafter.²

Q. Could not their false religion produce to them the same happiness, when they did not know any better?

A. No. Experience has shown that idolatry and religion of man's own invention led them to the greatest vices and cruelties. Therefore, God, in mercy to his creatures, revealed to them what is right and good.³

Q. What reason have we to believe in the existence of a Creator?

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A. When we observe the strict order in which the world and all other planets move the regular changes of time and seasons, and the unchangeable laws of nature, we must conclude that some great, intelligent Being has established and still regulates the whole system.

Q. What do we mean by the revelation?

A. That God has made known his will to man by giving to us certain laws and rules for our conduct through life.

Q. What reason have we to believe that God has made known his will by a special revelation?

A. Seeing that God made the world and man, and gave us understanding and a will to act, it is reasonable to believe that he gave us also some rules to guide our conduct.

Q. What is meant by future reward and punishment?

A. That our soul, which is the essence of our being, will enjoy great happiness or suffer much grief after we are dead.

Q. Why do we believe in a future recompense?

A. Because we often see good men suffer great misery in this world, while the wicked enjoy prosperity: we therefore believe that God, who is just, will fully reward every man hereafter.⁴

Q. In what manner should we respect God as a Father?

A. By looking up to him with the highest veneration and love; thanking him for his favors; and by loving and respecting our fellow-creatures as children of the same universal parent.⁵

Q. What reason have we for believing that there can be but One True God?

A. When speaking of God, we think of him as the "FIRST CAUSE" of all that ever existed; and as the first can be but one. we must conclude that there can be but One True God.⁶

Q. What are the principles of the Jewish religion?

A. God's absolute unity; the truth and validity of the Mosaic laws and the prophetic writings; the immortality of the soul; and future reward and punishment.

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Q. What are the chief duties required by our religion?

A. The worship of the true God; the observance of the Sabbath and Holidays; justice and charity towards our fellow-beings; and the promotion of the general welfare of mankind.⁷

Q. What are chiefly the means by which we may promote our perfection and happiness?

A. First of all, to learn and seek the truth, in order to distinguish between right and wrong; and next, to do what is good and abstain from evil.

Q. Why is it that we so often see man do what is wrong and evil, instead of promoting his own good?

A. Partly from ignorance, and partly from man's natural inclination to sin.

Q. Did we not say that man is naturally inclined for religion?

A. Yes, but man, being made of body and soul, is of a twofold nature. His soul, being God-like, is inclined to purely spiritual enjoyments, while his animal nature draws him to sensual pleasures and to sin.

Q. If our bodily nature inclines us to sin, why should we be punished for it?

A. Because God has given us the power of reason to distinguish between right and wrong, and the power to control our inclination to sin. It is, therefore, both our duty and interest to choose the good and avoid the evil.

Q. How can we best control our inclination to sin?

A. By endeavoring and habituating ourselves to do what is good; by frequently attending at the house of God to pray and listen to religious instruction; and by avoiding small transgressions, which are sure to lead to greater ones.

Q. Are we able then to escape entirely the influence of our sinful nature?

A. It is impossible for us entirely to overcome our natural infirmity, for even the best and greatest of men have sometimes sinned but it is our duty to control our passions as much as we can.

Q. But are we not taught in the Scriptures that to obtain pardon, we must offer sacrifices?

A. Sacrifices were instituted only for our forefathers, who were addicted to idolatry, to draw them from their false worship and train them to the service of God; but now our prayers take the place of sacrifices, for God desires only that our mind and heart be directed to him.

"That the children of Israel may bring their sacrifices which they offer in the open field, that they may bring them unto the Lord, to the door of the tabernacle of the congregation... and they shall no more offer their sacrifices to the demons after which they have gone astray." Lev. xvii. 5. See also I Sam. xv. 22, and Isa. i. 10-17.

"Take with you words, and turn to the Lord; say unto him, pardon all iniquity, and receive us graciously; so will we replace the steers by (the prayers of) our lips." Hos. xiv. 3.⁸

Q. Is it necessary that we should always express our prayers in words?

A. No. Since God knows our feelings, we may be engaged in prayer even in silence especially when we join with devotion in the prayers recited for us.

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Q. What ought to be the principal subjects of our regular prayers ?

A. We should pray God to assist us in being good and virtuous, to pardon our sins, and to give us our daily wants; and it is proper also that we should pray for the good of others.

Q. Why should we not despair or lose confidence when we do not see our prayers answered?

A. Because we are often ignorant of what is good for us. If God does not grant what we ask, we should confide in his wisdom and goodness, and trust that he will give us something that is really better for us.⁹

Q. What kinds of food are forbidden?

A. The flesh of certain animals enumerated in the eleventh chapter of Leviticus; blood drawn from the animal; certain parts of the fat of cattle; and the flesh of an animal that died from disease, or was killed by a ferocious beast."

Q. What reason may be given for the prohibition of these things?

A. That they are generally unwholesome, and particularly so in hot climates, such as our forefathers lived in.

Q. What other sanitary laws do we find in the Mosaic code?

A. Regulations for cleanliness of our person, such as frequent washing and bathing, which is especially necessary in hot countries; also preventives against certain diseases which are prevalent in warm climates.

Q. What general principle may we learn from these laws?¹⁰

A. That it is man's duty to preserve and promote his health, so that he may be able to perform his duties towards God, his neighbor, and himself.

Q. How should this principle be particularly applied to our mode of living?

A. That we should moderate the indulgence of our appetites and passions; avoid all excess in eating and drinking, and never gratify our desires to their fullest extent; for the immoderate use of anything that is good brings on satiety and disgust.

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Q. What is meant by moral laws?

A. Such as are intended for the formation of man's character, and such as regard his conduct in relation to others: as the laws of loving God and our neighbor; of honoring our parents and aged persons; of justice and charity, etc.

Q. What two sentences of the Scriptures can you name which comprise all the moral duties we have to perform?

A. One is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might "; and the other, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor like thyself."

Q. How do these short sentences express all our moral obligations?

A. If we truly love God, because we are convinced of his greatness and goodness, we shall certainly obey his will; and if we love our fellow-beings, we cannot injure them, but will surely do all we can to promote their welfare.

Q. What duty is next in importance to that of loving God?

A. The love and respect which we owe our parents. This duty is of such great importance that it has been ranked

among the Ten Commandments, in which only the chief duties of man are prescribed.

Q. Why is the duty of love and respect to parents of such great importance?

A. Because it lays the foundation in forming our character when young. Our parents are our best friends, and being older and wiser than ourselves, they direct us for our best, and if we follow them, we shall certainly do well when grown up.

Q. When the Scripture says, "honor thy father and thy mother," does it mean that we should pay them respect in their presence only?

A. No: it means that we should obey their commands at all times, and act according to their wishes, even if they do not express them, for their wishes are all for our happiness.

Q. What result does experience show us in regard to this duty?

A. It has been generally observed that the best and greatest of men have been obedient and respectful children; while many criminals have confessed that their

disobedience to parents was the source of all their crimes and misfortunes.

Q. Who are next entitled to our respect and obedience?

A. Our teachers, both private and public, and the magistrates of the government under which we live. We owe reverence also to aged persons, and must show respect and politeness towards all men, even to our inferiors.

Q. Name some particular instances where the law commands us to be just.

A. In general it says, "Justice, justice, shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live." (Deut. xvi. 20.) We are forbidden not only to steal, but to commit any kind of fraud in weights, measures or otherwise; to take a bribe or usury; to retain the wages of a hired person over night; to take in pledge any garment or tool which a poor owner may need; we must restore any lost object we find, and many other instances.¹¹

Q. Can we commit any act of injustice where neither money nor property is concerned?

A. We commit great injustice when we injure any person's character; when we invent or circulate false tales to deprive him of his good name.

Q. What special command does the law give on this subject?

A. It says, "Thou shalt not pronounce a false report," (Ex. xxiii. 1) and in another place, "Thou shalt not go about as a tale-bearer among thy people." (Lev. xix. 16.)

Q. When we know in truth anything that is wrong about our neighbor, are we at liberty to expose him?

A. Not unless we have very good reason to do so. We should remember that we are all sinners; we all have our failings, and therefore should be kind and generous in our sentiments, as well as honest in our dealings.

Q. What, then, is the general principle of justice which should guide us in all our acts towards a fellow-being?

A. We should be guided by the great rule of "loving our neighbor like ourselves," that is, treating others as we wish to be treated by them.

Q. What other injury can we do our neighbor besides depriving him of his property or good name?

A. The greatest injury we can do to others is to tempt or induce them to do what is wrong. If we take their property, they may recover it; if we deprive them of their good name, they may regain it; but if we attack their virtue and conscience, we put them in danger of losing forever the best things they have.

Q. What special command does the Mosaic law give on this subject ?

A. It says, "Thou shalt not put a stumbling-block before the blind;" (Lev. xix. 14.) that means, if one does not clearly see what is wrong, he is like blind to it, and if we tempt him we put a stumbling-block before him that he may fall into sin.¹²

Q. What short sentence do we find in the Bible which may serve as a safe guide in all our moral and religious acts?

A. That of the prophet Micah, who says "He has told thee, O man! what is good, and what the Lord required of thee: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God."¹³

¹² 47-54

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