

A Code Of Jewish Ethics: You Shall Be Holy Vol 1 by Joseph Telushkin Quotes

This book has a simple thesis: God's central demand of human beings is to act ethically... Though this book is, I hope, informative about many Jewish teachings, it would be very disappointing if you were to conclude after reading it, that "no action need be taken."¹

Now go and study. Knowing how to act appropriately is often not a simple matter, and can require a lifetime of study. For example, it is not enough to know that the Bible commands, "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20); we also need to study and deduce in every situation what constitutes acting justly. Having good intentions is not enough. For example, Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most esteemed philosopher of the past three centuries, argued, on moral grounds, that it was forbidden to lie to a murderer who asked where his intended victim had gone... Hillel's principle dictates otherwise. If you would find it unconscionable for someone to answer a murderer truthfully as to your whereabouts, then assume that others (with perhaps the exception of Kant) would agree. Therefore, in such a situation, tell a lie...²

Most parents, including many who regard themselves as committed Jews, take greater pride in their children's intellectual or cultural achievements (and, in the case of girls, in their good looks) than in their kindness. While such parents want their children to be good people, they rarely see becoming ethical as the most important thing that they, and their children, can do. These parents have priorities different from Hillel'.³

In addition, while Genesis 1:26 ordains that human beings should "have dominion over the fish . . . the fowl... and over the cattle," it pointedly "excludes the dominion of men over other men, who are equally endowed with divine qualities. Any act which disregards the rights of other people constitutes an unlawful exercise of dominion" (Abraham Block, A Book of Jewish Ethical Concepts, page 255).⁴

The Torah has a skeptical view of human nature, although it is by no means hopeless about people's capacity to change and improve. In Genesis, God, disappointed by humankind's

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propensity for violence and dishonesty, laments, “The tendency of man’s heart is towards evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). This does not mean that we are born bad or, as certain Christian groups believe, damned (hence the need for baptism), but it also means that we are not born good (and corrupted by society, as Enlightenment thinkers taught). Rather, human beings are born morally neutral, with strong inclinations toward evil. Children, for example, are born self-absorbed, and have to be educated toward sharing, empathy, and generosity.⁵

Judaism regards improving character as the goal of life. As the Midrash teaches, “The Torah’s commandments were not given to mankind for any purpose other than to refine people” (Genesis Rabbah 44:1)... Similarly, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797) taught that “the purpose of life is to strive to break bad habits, and improve oneself. Otherwise, what is life for?” (Even Shleimah 1:2). The Gaon’ statement suggests that such labor is a task that might take decades.⁶

Try to live up to the reputation you aspire to. My grandfather, Rabbi Nissen Telushkin, used to advise people, “Don’t be so concerned with being humble that you try to hide from others all knowledge of the good you do. It is good to be known as being something of a tzaddik. If nothing else, you’ll be afraid to do something bad because you’ll fear that it will become known, and will harm your good name.”⁷

We should not condemn others based on hearsay. In the Bible, God sets an example of how to avoid condemning others without first checking the facts: “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave, I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note.” (Genesis 18:20-21). Since God is all-knowing, the words “I will go down to see” are obviously an anthropomorphism. We must try to make sure that we know the whole story before we assume the worst about another, and certainly before we attack him.⁸

Buy the book: <https://www.amazon.com.au/Code-Jewish-Ethics-Shall-Holy/dp/1400048354>

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