

The Ethical Foundations of Judaism

David Bensoussan

President of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue of Montreal

Introduction

On several occasions, the author has been invited to present Judaism in various contexts of dialogue and reflection. The following pages do not claim to offer an exhaustive presentation, but rather to outline a few essential reference points in order to shed light on the ethical foundations of the Jewish worldview.

To understand this vision, one must first grasp how Judaism conceives of human nature: its needs, its aspirations, and its moral responsibility. From this understanding, a millennia-old tradition has developed that accompanies the human being in the search for meaning.

Judaism does not present itself as a fixed ideology, but as a dialogue that spans the centuries: a dialogue between human beings and the world, between human beings and the text, and between human beings and God. At the heart of this tradition lies a fundamental conviction: human existence is never devoid of meaning, and every action can become an act of consciousness.

Every individual has physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs. Spiritual life is not separate from the human condition; it constitutes an intrinsic dimension of it. Faith can channel the good present in each person in order to foster both personal growth and the betterment of the surrounding world.

In Judaism, God is not a theoretical problem to be solved. Even His name is ineffable. He is experienced in daily life. Tradition teaches that “the human soul is a divine spark” (Proverbs 20:27), which places relationships between human beings on the same level of importance as the relationship with God. Respect for human life thus becomes a supreme value: “You shall choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Piety without justice is not sufficient, nor is knowledge without action. Rabbinic tradition reminds us that “it is not study that is essential, but action.” Personal commitment—particularly in moral self-improvement—and social engagement—such as through charity—are fundamental requirements.

Judaism also invites concern for the common good. The prophet Jeremiah expresses this responsibility as follows: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have exiled you and pray to God on its behalf, for in its welfare lies your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

The following themes outline the major features of Jewish ethics and life.

The Narrative of Origins: the Garden of Eden

The story of the Garden of Eden is not merely a founding myth. It lays the groundwork for human freedom and moral responsibility. It describes the moment when humanity truly enters ethical history.

The garden represents a state of original harmony, but also the tension between innocence and responsibility. The forbidden fruit symbolizes the possibility of choice—and therefore the capacity to transgress. The episode of Adam and Eve should not be understood as an irreversible fall, but rather as a maturation: humanity leaves childhood to enter a world where freedom has a cost and where every decision entails responsibility.

This passage also marks the transition from a humanity living by gathering to a humanity called to transform the world through its labor.

Abraham: the Birth of Ethical Monotheism

With Abraham begins a spiritual adventure that profoundly shaped religious history. His journey inaugurates ethical monotheism and breaks with the dominant beliefs of his time.

The covenant established with God is manifested notably through circumcision, performed on the eighth day (Genesis 17:11), as a sign of belonging to this covenant.

But Abraham is not only the founder of a people. He embodies the human being capable of hearing an inner call and responding to it. He even dares to challenge God when justice is at stake, as in the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah. Through his figure emerges a vision of the human being as free, responsible, and bearer of moral demand.

The Exodus: the Pedagogy of Freedom

The Exodus from Egypt occupies a central place in Jewish memory. It reminds us that freedom is never definitively acquired and that it requires vigilance and responsibility.

Egypt represents oppression and the reduction of the human being to mere utility. Leaving it means restoring human dignity. But freedom is not only deliverance; it is also education. The forty years spent in the desert symbolize the learning of a life freed from servitude.

The Exodus thus becomes a universal model: liberation is possible, but it requires constant moral effort.

The Decalogue: Foundation of Biblical Ethics

The Ten Commandments constitute a synthesis of the fundamental principles of moral life. They organize both duties toward God and duties toward others. Together, they form the framework of biblical ethics. The Commandments place human relationships under the aegis of the Creator.

Far from being arbitrary, these commandments aim to preserve human dignity and to structure a society founded on justice, responsibility, and respect for life.

The Hebrew Bible: a Library of Wisdom

The Hebrew Bible forms a vast library composed of narratives, laws, poems, and wisdom texts. It reflects the questions, hopes, and struggles of a people who placed ethics at the center of their vocation.

It recounts lives marked by doubt, joy, revolt, fidelity, and downfall. It never presents life as a straight path. On the contrary, it embraces the complexity of reality and invites the reader to become, in turn, an interpreter of meaning.

It contains divine ordinances and abounds in examples of delicate situations that must be overcome.

The Pentateuch traditionally includes 613 commandments, among which:

- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5)
- “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18)
- “One law shall apply to the citizen and to the stranger” (Numbers 9:14)
- “You shall open your hand to your needy brother” (Deuteronomy 15:8)
- “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20)
- “In justice, you shall favor neither the rich nor the poor” (Leviticus 19:15)

The prophetic books constantly recall the primacy of social justice. They also proclaim a vision of the future marked by universal peace, as expressed by Isaiah (2:4): “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.”

The Writings contain hymns (the Psalms), moral advice (Proverbs), and historical chronicles (Ruth, Esther...). The Book of Psalms channels devotion by expressing, in intense poetry, the impulses of the human soul toward the Creator.

The Talmud: the Conversation of Judaism

The Talmud represents one of the great intellectual works of Jewish tradition. It gathers the debates and reflections of generations of sages.

Rather than a closed system, it constitutes a space of discussion where arguments are examined and confronted. This tradition teaches that truth is often constructed through the plurality of viewpoints.

The Talmud is a code of jurisprudence based on biblical ordinances and paradigms. It constitutes the Oral Law. A multitude of biblical commentaries have been developed over the centuries, including moral principles:

- If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? (Avot 1:14)
- It is not study but action that is essential (Avot 1:17)
- Who is wise? One who learns from every person. Who is strong? One who masters his instincts. Who is honored? One who respects others (Avot 4:1)
- One good deed leads to another; one bad deed leads to another (Avot 4:2)
- Do not rejoice when your enemy falls (Avot 4:24)

Study and Interpretation

In Jewish tradition, the study of sacred texts is never passive. The Scriptures are not a fixed monument but a living space where each generation leaves its mark. They are studied, discussed, and questioned. Truth unfolds through collective inquiry.

A famous Talmudic story recounts that during a debate among sages, one of them invoked a heavenly voice to settle the discussion. Another replied: "The Torah is not in heaven." In other words, interpretation now belongs to human beings.

Discipline and Restraint

Jewish tradition proposes a daily discipline intended to cultivate moral awareness.

Ritual practices – blessings, prayers, dietary laws, or religious symbols – serve as constant reminders of the spiritual dimension of existence. Their aim is less to impose constraints than to transform ordinary gestures into meaningful acts.

The mezuzah affixed to the doorpost recalls the divine presence (Deuteronomy 6:9). In the same spirit, the kippah worn on the head recalls the presence of a higher power; dietary discipline (kashrut) invites restraint regarding certain foods; sexual relations are prohibited during periods of menstruation (Ezekiel 18:6). There is no prohibition on alcohol (Psalms 104:15). In the Bible, the downfall of those who abused alcohol (Noah, Ahasuerus...) encourages moderation.

The Cycle of Life

The major stages of life are marked by rites that inscribe the individual within a collective history.

Circumcision, Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah, marriage, and mourning rites punctuate existence. These ritual moments help accompany life transitions and transmit the fundamental values of the tradition.

- The Bar Mitzvah at age 13 for boys and the Bat Mitzvah at age 12 for girls marks religious maturity. The child is now capable of discerning good from evil, of seeking advice when needed – in short, of becoming responsible for his or her actions.
- Marriage is a desired state: “It is not good for the human being to be alone” (Genesis 2:18).
- Death: Following burial, family and friends visit the mourners for seven days to offer consolation.

- The afterlife: The Hebrew Bible does not directly mention life after death, hell, or paradise. However, the messianic era will be accompanied by the resurrection of the dead (Daniel 12:2).

Diversity of Currents

Over the centuries, several religious sensibilities have developed within Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Traditionalist.

This diversity reflects the adaptability of a tradition that constantly engages with the cultural contexts in which Jewish communities live.

Orthodox Jews advocate observance and rigorous practice of the prescriptions of both the Written and Oral Law. Men officiate (by tradition), and men and women are separated in the synagogue. Hasidim constitute a minority among the Orthodox who adopt distinctive dress.

Conservative Jews advocate observance and rigorous practice of the prescriptions of the Written Law. Men and women participate together in prayer.

Reform Jews relativize the prescriptions of the Written Law in light of their historical context, allowing greater latitude in religious practice.

Traditionalists display a wide range of religious observance; many adhere to certain religious practices.

Over the course of history, two major cultural currents have emerged: Sephardim—Jews who lived primarily under the influence of Spanish Judaism or in Muslim lands—and Ashkenazim—Jews who lived primarily in Christian environments and do not include those influenced by Spanish Judaism.

The Calendar of Festivals

Jewish festivals structure the year by combining historical memory and spiritual experience.

- The Sabbath (Shabbat) is devoted to family life, rest, and ideally spiritual elevation (such as the study of Scriptures).
- Passover (Pesach), at the beginning of spring, celebrates the Exodus from Egypt.
- Pentecost (Shavuot) commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.
- Purim celebrates the prevention of a massacre of the Jews nearly 2,500 years ago in Persia. It is a joyful festival marked by costumes.
- Rosh Hashanah is the New Year. It ushers in ten days of reflection and moral accounting culminating in the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).
- Tisha B'Av is a solemn fast commemorating the destruction of the Temple of Solomon.
- The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), in early autumn, recalls the wandering of the Hebrews in the desert and their encampments in booths.
- Hanukkah commemorates the restoration of religious freedom during the Greek occupation of Judea about 2,250 years ago.

A Millennia-Long History

The history of the Jewish people spans several millennia and traverses numerous civilizations. It is marked by exiles, renewals, and enduring fidelity.

- The Patriarchs settle in Canaan (the Promised Land or Holy Land, called Palestine since the Roman era). Famine drives their descendants to Egypt. The enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt lasts several centuries.
- Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt. The Ten Commandments are promulgated, and the Hebrews reach the Promised Land after forty years of wandering (12th century BCE).

- Judges and then Kings lead the people of Israel.
- After the death of King Solomon (10th century BCE), the kingdom is divided into two: the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel.
- The ten tribes of the Kingdom of Israel are exiled by the Assyrians (8th century BCE).
- Judea is occupied by the Babylonians, who exile the Judeans (6th century BCE).
- The return to Zion takes place under the Persians. Greek (3rd century BCE) and then Roman (1st century BCE) occupations follow. The Romans exile the Jews from Judea by the end of the 1st century.
- The Promised Land is successively occupied by Byzantines (4th century and mid-7th century), Persians (beginning of 6th century), Arabs (7th century), Ottomans (16th century), and then the British (20th century). The Crusaders occupied the Holy Land in the 12th century.
- The second return to Zion and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Despite trials and dispersions, a remarkable continuity has endured: that of a people attached to its texts, its memory, and its moral ideal.

The Jewish Condition

The teaching of contempt for Jews instituted by the Church and the institutionalized humiliation of Jews and Christians (dhimmi status) in Islamic lands led to persecutions and massacres. These attitudes and the preconceived opinions that accompany them have left lasting scars to this day. In 1965, the Vatican's declaration *Nostra Aetate* corrected rites and prejudices concerning Jews.

Conclusion

A tradition relates that one day someone asked the sage Hillel to summarize Judaism while standing on one foot. His words capture the spirit of a tradition that places ethics at the heart of human life:

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
The rest is commentary.
Now go and study.”*

The reflections presented here constitute only an introduction to this worldview, whose richness has continued to inspire moral reflection for millennia.