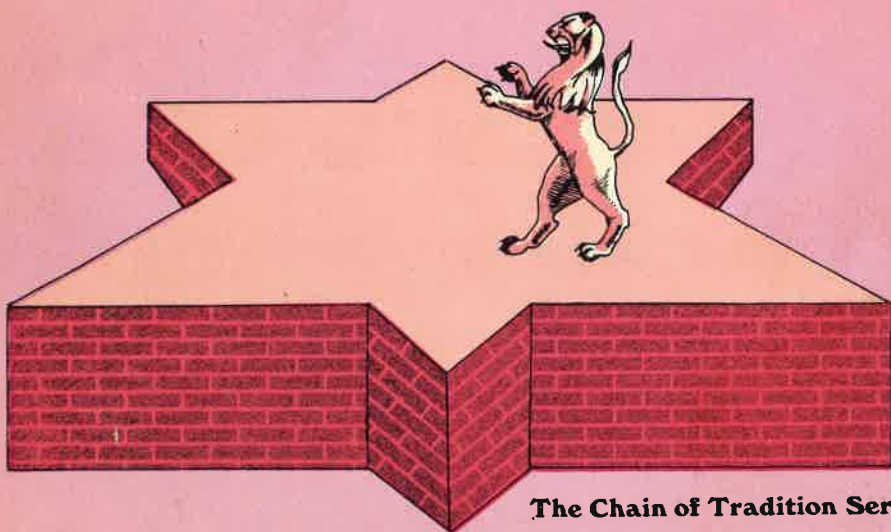


JEWISH ETHICS, PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM

LOUIS JACOBS



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**The Chain of Tradition Series
Volume II**

THE
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**Volume II: Jewish ethics,
philosophy and
mysticism**



*Illustrated by
Irwin Rosenhouse*

THE
CHAIN OF
TRADITION
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Jewish ethics, philosophy and mysticism

BY LOUIS JACOBS

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Introduction

THIS BOOK is divided into three parts: 1) Jewish Ethics, 2) Jewish Philosophy, 3) Jewish Mysticism.

Most of the thinkers represented here belong to the Middle Ages, which in Jewish history must be considered as going to the nineteenth century. Even those who lived at a later period in Jewish history belong in thought to the Middle Ages. The views of modern thinkers are not recorded in these pages, not because they are unimportant but because the book is chiefly concerned with presenting a picture of the older tradition. However, where views are expressed which have parallels in more modern writings the latter are generally referred to in the Comments.

The section on Jewish Ethics, dealing as it does with the patterns of human conduct, is not at all hard to follow. Jewish law sought to create a pattern of living for the Jew. The detailed rules and regulations found in the sources of Jewish law provide a kind of minimum standard for Jewish conduct. But each Jew is expected to rise above the bare minimum and this is where ethics comes in.

The differences between law and ethics in this connection can be briefly stated: 1) Law, as we have just noted, is concerned with minimum standards. Ethics demands something more. For instance, the law forbids the destruction of another's property. Ethics demands that in one's conduct nothing is done which, even indirectly and even in

cases not covered by the law, can cause unhappiness and distress to others; 2) Law provides rules for all Jews. Ethics is more individualistic, encouraging each person to realize the best of which he is capable. For instance, the law demands that every Jew must give charity but leaves the amount given to the individual. Ethics demands that each individual should be as generous as his circumstances allow; 3) In law the emphasis is on action. Certain deeds are good, others bad. Ethics, though also concerned with action, tends to place the emphasis on the formation of character. For instance, the law commands men to be generous to one another and not to steal from one another. Ethics seeks to promote the kind of character which has no desire to steal and which automatically responds to cries of help without being ordered so to do; 4) Jewish law is deeply rooted in Jewish history and experience and is addressed primarily, though not exclusively, to Jews. Ethics is more universal. It speaks to the human being with human needs, hopes and strivings so that its appeal is to all men. For instance, one can find laws which have reference only to *Jewish* life e.g. Sabbath observance (which has little meaning for non-Jews except insofar as it reminds humanity of the need for periodic rest and relaxation). But ethical demands such as that men should love truth and pursue justice, awaken an echo in the soul of every man and are, indeed, for the guidance of all men.

The sections on Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism are more difficult both because of the more abstract nature of the subjects discussed and because of the technical language used. An effort has been made to avoid the use of too many technical terms in the translation and where these were unavoidable they have been explained fully in the comments.

Both Jewish law and ethics require a ground or foundation upon which to build. They need a driving force, to vary the metaphor. In order for law to promote the good deed and ethics the good character they must be inspired by a sound philosophy of life. Show me a man's philosophy, said Chesterton, and I'll show you the man. Hence the significance of Jewish philosophy as providing the inspiration for the good life by considering such ultimate questions as: what is life's purpose? why should man be good? what should be man's relationship to God and to his fellow-men? Jewish mysticism is, from this point of view, a branch of Jewish philosophy but with a greater emphasis on individual experience and a more direct awareness of the divine. The mystic seeks to experience in his personal life those ideas about which the philosopher speaks.

There was bound to be some overlapping since philosophy and mysticism frequently consider the same themes and both are concerned, too, with ethical conduct. The thinkers in each section have, however, been chosen as the most typical representatives of that particular type of literature.

When reading a passage in the section on philosophy it is as well to examine carefully all the arguments for and against. The most interesting feature of this type of literature is not so much in the particular views put forward as in the way these are defended. For all that, many of the questions raised are relevant to us today. By understanding the great Jewish thinkers of the past we become better equipped to engage in our own philosophical quest.

When reading a passage in the section on mysticism it is as well to realize that what is generally being put into words is a kind of experience. Since we are not mystics ourselves we have not had these experiences but many people have had at one time or another something not too different from them so that the writings of the mystics do "ring a bell." It might be mentioned here that nowadays there is a good deal of interest in mysticism in some circles. For example there is the fascination which the "mystic East" exercises over some minds and there are people who take drugs to produce hallucinations which, they claim, are similar to mystical experiences. In this connection it is important to realize that the great Jewish mystics did not go out in search of "kicks." Theirs was a severely intellectual approach in which the main thing was to engage in deep contemplation of God in His relationship to the world. Profound thinking about the divine, they taught, might well result in deep ecstasy but it was the thought which mattered, not the resulting sensation. Indeed, one of the most famous of the Jewish mystics declared that if one engaged in contemplation purely for the sake of the resulting sensation one was not a worshiper of God at all, but a self-worshiper! It should always be remembered that the thinkers who appear in these pages belonged to a world different from our own and we should try to understand what they are saying against the background of their times. Yet the quest they engaged in of stating the relevance of Jewish thought and experience to life is still continued by Jewish teachers and must be furthered if Judaism is to make its impact for the ennoblement of human life.

Each section of this book is prefaced by a short Introductory Note. Before reading any particular passage it is advisable to read the Introductory Note to the section in which it occurs.







Jewish ethics

ETHICS IS the science of conduct, of how men should behave. From the earliest times Judaism has had a good deal to say about this aspect of life. Many of the great ideas in Judaism were expressed in legal form and were considered binding upon all Jews. The Ten Commandments are the best-known example of the legal approach.

But in addition to laws binding upon all men, there are the particular requirements made upon Jews because they are Jews. Each person should try to be as good as he possibly can but since no two human beings are alike, their full responsibilities and the development of their character have to be worked out for themselves. The actual laws of good behavior are a kind of minimum demand. Over and above these there are numerous teachings which can be applied in particular circumstances but which differ in their application according to the characters and temperaments of different human beings.

For instance, the laws against theft and cheating are for all men. But the teachings about how wrong it is to be quick-tempered or greedy or envious of others will naturally differ in their application. A quiet, gentle person will not need so much to be told of these as would a

fiery personality but perhaps the former will benefit more from teachings regarding courage and spiritual ambition. Many ethical and moral teachings of this kind are to be found in the Bible and the Rabbinic literature.

During the Middle Ages and later a whole new type of literature (in Hebrew, the *musar* literature, from a word meaning "instruction" or "reproof"), was developed, based firmly on the classical sources. It is with this type of literature that the following pages are chiefly concerned. This ethical literature examines closely all the ethical teachings of the Bible and the Talmud and presents it in a systematic form so that guidance is readily available on such themes as kindness, generosity and the cultivation of the wholesome character. The literature serves as a spur to future action. But the readers to whom it was addressed were observant Jews so that the ethical life was not divorced from Jewish law and practice and the whole context of Jewish life. The following selections from that literature demonstrate how great Jewish teachers thought Jewish life should be lived.

Among the particularly outstanding teachers in this field are: Bahya ibn Pakuda (eleventh century) and Maimonides (1135-1204). Others are: Nahmanides (1195-1270); Judah the Saint of Regensburg (twelfth-thirteenth centuries), author of the *Sefer Ḥasidim*, "Book of the Saintly"; Jonah ben Abraham of Gerona (Gerondi) (d. 1263), author of *Shaaré Teshuvah*, "Gates of Repentance"; Isaac Aboab (fourteenth century), author of *Menorat Ha-Maor*, "Candelabra of Light" and Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto (1707-1747), author of *Mesillat Yesharim*, "Path of the Upright." In the nineteenth century the Musar movement was founded by Israel Lipkin of Salant (1810-1883). The followers of this movement laid great stress on sound ethical conduct and produced a number of important works on the subject, although many of the ideas were conveyed orally and have not been written down to this day. Simḥah Züssel of Helm was one of the later leaders of this movement.

If you read the complete works of these men you would see that most of the writers had a strong other-worldly approach to life. That is to say, for them this life is a kind of school in which man is trained to behave well by struggling against evil so that he can go to heaven when he dies (and deserve it). Because of this their work is frequently austere and grim in its outlook and, some would say, not quite to our present-day tastes. It is this which, in part, makes them men of

the Middle Ages. From the Renaissance onward men have tried to understand human life much more in terms of this world. But while there is gain in the idea that this life is good in itself, there is still need for the powerful vision of eternal life seen in the Middle Ages. Another feature of life in the Middle Ages was its God-centeredness as opposed to our man-centeredness. The men of the Middle Ages had a strong sense, which we lack, of living to please God. But here, especially, lies the value of these works. They remind modern man in a secular world of how near to God men have been in the past. We are frequently confused in our ethical standards. By reading the work of these men we can learn to see that many of our problems are far from new and that many of the things they said are of value to us today.



On gratitude

How our benefactor's self-interest in doing good should affect our gratitude to him.

It will be good to introduce this section of our work by explaining the different ways in which men do good to one another and their resulting duty to express gratitude for such benefits. From this we can move to our duty of praising and thanking God for all the kindnesses and the great goodness He has shown us.

We begin by noting that everyone agrees that we are duty bound to thank anyone who has been good to us because of his intention to help us. Even if someone is far from being as generous to us as we might have wished, because something prevented him from being as good to us as he intended, we are still obliged to thank him since we are aware of his good intention and know that he wanted to help us. If, however, we derived some benefit from a person who had no intention of helping us, our obligation ceases and we owe him no thanks.

If we analyze the different ways in which people help one another we discover that they are not less than five in number. The first way is like that of a father who is good to his son. The second is like that

of a master who is good to his slave. The third is like that of a rich man who is good to the poor in order to receive reward from Heaven, that is, God. The fourth is like that of men who are good to one another in order to acquire a good name and fame and recompense in this world. The fifth way is like that of the strong man who does good to the weak because he is sorry for him and pained by his condition.

We must now examine the motives of all these types to see whether or not they act for any other reason than to benefit the one who receives the help. Now it is obvious that with regard to the good a father does to his son, the father has his own benefit in mind. For the son is a part of the father and the father's most powerful hopes are centered on his son. You can see that a father feels more for his son than the son himself in providing him with food, drink and clothing and in protecting him from all harm. Since it is natural for parents to be kind to their children and to love them, nothing is too hard for a father to do when the happiness of his child is at stake. Yet despite the fact that he does it as a matter of his nature, both Scripture and common sense make it a duty for the son to serve, honor and respect his parents. As Scripture specifically says: "Ye shall fear every man his father and his mother" (Leviticus 19:3); "Hear, my son, the instruction of thy father and forsake not the teaching of thy mother" (Proverbs 1:8); "A son honoreth his father, and a servant his master" (Malachi 1:6). The son is commanded to give him this respect despite the fact that the father is bound to do whatever he does in this connection by the laws of his nature. His goodness really comes from God and the father is no more than God's instrument.

So, too, with regard to the good a master does to his slave. It is obvious that the master's motive is to protect his investment in the slave since he needs him to work for him. For that he will spend some more of his money in order to protect his money. In spite of this God obligates the slave to work for his master and to be grateful unto him. As it is said: "A son honoreth his father, and a servant his master" (Malachi 1:6).

So, too, with regard to the good a rich man does to the poor in order to receive reward from Heaven. Such a rich man behaves like a smart businessman who gives something small, perishable and unworthy to acquire some great and good benefit which will come to him after a time. His motive is only to adorn his own soul when his life on earth comes to an end. All he has done is to give away something God has deposited with him for the purpose of giving it to whoever deserves it. Yet it is well known that it is right to thank such a man and praise him even though his motive is to adorn his own soul when his life on earth comes to an end. In spite of this he is entitled to praise, as Job said: "The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me" (Job 29:13). And Job said further: "If his loins have not blessed me, when he warmed himself with the fleece of my sheep" (Job 31:20).

So, too, with regard to the good men do to one another in order to acquire a good name and fame and recompense in this world. Such good deeds are like someone giving an object of value to someone else to guard for him, or depositing some money with a friend because he fears that he might need it after a time. Even though, as we have said, his motive in doing good to others is really meant to be for his own benefit, nevertheless he is entitled to receive praise and thanks for having done good. As the wise one has said: "Many court the generous man, and everyone is a friend to him that giveth gifts" (Proverbs 19:6). And he also said: "A man's gift maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men" (Proverbs 18:16).

So, too, with regard to the good a man does to a poor man for whom he feels sorry. His motive is to remove his own pain which comes to him as a result of the anguish and sorrow he feels for the person on whom he has pity. He is like someone who heals a pain he has by giving of that which God has been good enough to give to him. Yet he is not left without praise, as Job said: "Could I see any perish for want of clothing or any poor without covering? Did not his loins bless me, when he warmed himself with the fleece of my sheep?" (Job 31:19-20).

It is obvious from all that we have said that the motive of any man who does good to others is primarily for his own good. He wishes either to acquire for himself an adornment in this world or the next or he desires to remove from himself something painful or he wishes to improve his own property. Despite this we may not withhold praise and thanks, respect, love and gratitude from him for his kindnesses. This is so, despite the fact we have noted that the good such persons give is only loaned to them and they cannot help themselves. Their goodness is not permanent nor is their generosity continuous. Their kindness has in it an element of self-seeking or the desire for self-protection.

How much more, then, is man obliged to serve, praise and thank the Creator of both the goodness itself and the one who bestows it, for His goodness has no limit but is permanent and constant without any self-seeking or self-protecting motives but only an expression of His generosity and lovingkindness toward all mankind!

Baḥya takes the rather cynical view that no human being can do good without at the same time having in his mind the desire to benefit himself. He always "gets something out of it," and self-interest is the basic rule of human nature. For all that, says Baḥya, it is right and proper to thank those from whom we benefit. In that case how much more do we owe thanks to God whose goodness is not for Himself at all but only for us! God can never do good to benefit Himself since God lacks nothing and does not require anything His creatures can give Him.

Some later thinkers have argued that it is incorrect to say, as Baḥya does, that the only human motive for doing good is a selfish one. It can be argued that man has altruistic as well as egotistic instinct and when he does good it can be in response to his altruistic instinct. Ethics must be concerned with man's basic nature and more specifically with the conflicts which arise between his good and evil urges.