

**Ten Principles  
of  
Spiritual Judaism  
Commentary**





## TEN PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL JUDAISM COMMENTARY

Judaism is a vast and very old religion. It encompasses scriptures, customs, legal, ethical, and historical material. It is not easy to collect all this material and present it in a form that states it as a system of beliefs. Judaism has continually stressed creativity and questioning. It has interpretive commentaries that bring new light to ancient texts. Judaism does not insist on a declaration of faith within a fixed formula that identifies one as Jewish in the same way that the Apostles' and other creeds define one as Christian. In fact, Judaism on the whole has been quite tolerant of different theological positions. Furthermore, faith in Judaism has more of an association with trust, confidence and loyalty, and less of an association with a system of beliefs. And that is why it is generally understood that Judaism is not a creedal religion. Even the word 'emet' – meaning 'truth' – has more of a connection with holding true, meeting the test, and being shown to be true. In Judaism, faith is coupled with hope. The Talmud states that come Judgment Day, each individual will not be asked, "Did you believe this-or-that," but, "Did you give up hope?"

However, some guidance is needed in reviewing the kaleidoscope of Jewish writing and experience in attempting to clarify what makes Judaism different from other religions. Jews in the past have tried to define what is central and what is peripheral in our religion. We have sought to establish and understand basic principles of Judaism.

In deciding to pick one sentence that affirms the essential element in Judaism, the Rabbis chose the declaration from The Book of Deuteronomy, "Hear O Israel the Lord Our God, the Lord alone." There were some who claimed that the beliefs of Judaism can best be summarized in The Ten Commandments. Indeed, The Ten Commandments were read as part of the service in the early Rabbinic Period but later discarded since the Rabbis did not want to leave the impression that this was all there was to Judaism. During The Middle Ages, Maimonides articulated thirteen principles of the faith in order to clarify the minimal beliefs that Jews must hold to achieve immortality. He never formulated these principles as a creed and mentioned them only once in his commentary on the Mishna, never referring to them again. Much later, these principles were incorporated into the prayer book and became part of the liturgy. However, these principles were never universally accepted and other Jewish scholars and Rabbis would eventually formulate other sets of essential principles.

That Judaism does not have a creed does not mean that it has no central beliefs, nor does it mean that one can believe anything and still be Jewish. It is clear that Judaism introduced important teachings, many of which were later adopted by Christianity and Islam. Such teachings as 'one spiritual Creator who creates the world as an ordered cosmos' and that 'human beings were created in the Divine

Image' are basic Jewish ideas. Additionally, the notion of a time of peace for all as the ultimate goal of history, the very concept of humanity with its institution of the Sabbath – as well as the synagogue – all came from Judaism. Much that we simply take for granted is what Jews have taught and subsequently embodied in the values and ideals of modern life.

In the past, many Jews were content to simply ask and respond to the question, "How can I be Jewish?" Jews were taught how to observe and practice Jewish customs and ceremonies. But today we face a crisis of continuity. There are too many people who say that the Judaism that has been taught to them is not reflective of their modern lives. We need fundamental principles that are firmly rooted in Judaism, yet speak to this and future generations in a new way. The question being asked today is no longer 'How can I be Jewish', but rather 'Why *should* I be Jewish?' The answers we give as Rabbis are essential for Judaism to remain a viable religion in our time.

The popular notion that Judaism is more concerned with 'deed than creed' has been misinterpreted. Jews do have important beliefs. We do accept specific principles. Yet each generation has to try to define its principles for its time. These Ten Principles are being presented as a guide for this generation, to help it interpret Judaism and convey how to live a Jewish life. We hope that the following will clarify the fundamental teachings of Judaism and show that Jews should believe in their religion because they believe these fundamental ideals are worthy of belief.

### **Principle 1:**

**Judaism teaches us that all human beings are created in the Divine Image and therefore are linked to God by the Divine Spark within them.**

In opposition to those scientific and philosophical views that define human beings in predominantly biological or psychological terms, Judaism tries to understand individuals from the spiritual side of humanity. It is an understanding of what is within us that can transcend and transform the physical, biological and mental, enabling us to recognize what makes human beings special and unique individuals.

Judaism seeks to define human beings in terms of what they are able to envision and strive for. The spiritual side of humanity aspires to create a nobler and greater order that embodies the values of truth, beauty, goodness and holiness. It is this element within us that the Bible refers to as 'the image of God in humanity' and which our principle refers to as the spark of the Divine. Human beings are all endowed with a sense of the holy, a sense that cannot be reduced to our biological or psychological nature.

Consider this as a ladder of values: Life finds its true expression in the Mind, and the Mind finds its true expression in the Spirit. We attain the higher life not by denying or denigrating our biological selves, but by transforming them into something nobler and of greater value. Physical life is needed as an instrument of the spirit. By being connected to that which is above us, we become aware of our own personality and self-consciousness in a way no animal can. We are aware not only of our inner selves, but also of the pain, suffering and anguish of other human beings. We are aware of the creativity of others as well as our own. We can express such awareness through language, novels, poetry and other forms of communication. We can also express such awareness through music and art, by painting or sculpture that can capture feelings and meanings that are not clearly evidenced in the natural world. This awareness totally transcends any material, physical, chemical or biological aspect. A story is told about the great painter J.M.W. Turner. A patron viewing one of his classic sunsets said, "I have never seen such a sunset." Turner replied, "Wouldn't you want to see such a sunset, and don't you see it now?"

We also transcend our biological nature by establishing communities, organizations, and governments to help one another live better lives. Furthermore, we are concerned with – and strive for – the Truth. Finally, we are conscious of that which makes us what we are: We are aware that we have souls, that component of the self that gives us an inkling of eternity and infinity. We realize not only that we are living in the present, but that we are connected to the past and anticipate a future.

The physical dimension is the foundation for – and is carried onto – the spiritual. As the Book of Deuteronomy states, "Man does not live by bread alone." Judaism hardly ever deprecated pleasure or enjoying life. It has, however, reflected on what constitutes genuine and enduring happiness and regularly questioned how much reality exists in often too-evanescent pleasures. Truth, beauty and goodness are enduring and do not cease in their attainment; they are infinite goals. Food and drink are essential to life, but a spiritual soul needs more than these, something beyond "pangs of want or sadness of satiety."

We couldn't have any of these inner understandings unless we were connected to a transcendent reality. Therefore, what this first Principle asserts is that unless human beings are connected to those values that transcend the physical, biological and psychological, and are rooted in the spiritual – namely truth, goodness, beauty and holiness – then we are not fully human. The only way to be fully human is to strengthen that which is an ideal for us: beliefs that inspire us, nourish us, and to which we can be devoted.

## **Principle 2:**

**Judaism teaches us how to nurture the Divine Spark within us, elevating us in moral worth and dignity and linking us to The Divine.**

Spirituality is inner growth nurtured by ethical behavior. Spirituality deals with those potentialities in our natures that elevate us in moral worth and dignity, and thereby link us to God. This is what makes us uniquely human - the taking upon ourselves the tasks of character development, the paths of righteousness, and the acceptance of responsibility to live an ethical life. It is this striving that realizes and embodies in others and ourselves a higher, broader and more enhanced way of life. For Judaism, there is no spirituality without responsibility and the facing of the burden of moral ascent. Through this work, we can transform ourselves, transform others, and ultimately transform the world. It is in this sense that spirituality gives us the possibility of growth in being.

The spiritual path begins with a dual awareness of those elements in us that are expressions of our basest desires and motivations, as well as those elements that are conducive to our highest aspirations. It begins when we learn how to understand and manage both the 'good' and 'evil' we confront in ourselves. The connectedness between the physical and the sacred in oneself is the ground for our transcending and transforming ourselves, thus lifting us to a higher spiritual plane.

Because this is the true meaning of spirituality, then God's Being must be a continuing process of the Creation, conservation, the enhancement of value and personality; the true, the good, the beautiful and the holy. God is the foundation for the creation of the world, life, mind, personality and spirit. Such creation of values requires not just an orderly and intelligible universe, but also a universe that gives rise to personal values; a place for human actions.

One can ascend to a higher level by gaining a fuller sense of self, toward a dimension that links us to the best in ourselves and others. Or we can descend, giving up the higher for the lower so as to become less than what we could have been. The prophets Jeremiah and Hosea said that we take on the character of what we pursue. Jeremiah says if we go after things of naught, then we become naught (2:5). Hosea says if we go after detestable things we become detestable (9:10). On the other hand, if we go after things of worth that actualize our best selves, we gradually take on those qualities. This is why proper ideals are so important: They serve as guides that fashion and mold us in their direction.

The prophets condemned evil as the perversion, frustration and degradation of all that is Divine within us. Its opposite – the good – is the development of

the image of God within us, giving us the strength to turn away from vanity and to aspire to a higher ethical and spiritual life. But the spiritual growth we are concerned with cannot be reduced to merely a growth in knowledge. Instead, it deals with a growth in being, a transformation of self.

The ancient rabbinic text, the Mishnah, in Sanhedrin 4:5, states: “A single man was created in the world, to teach that if any man has caused a single soul to perish, scripture imputes it to him as if he had caused a whole world to perish, and if any man saves alive a single soul, scripture imputes it to him as if he had saved alive a whole world... Therefore everyone must say, for my sake the world was created.”

Another Mishna in Eduyoth recounts a significant debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, about whether or not it was better for human beings to have been created. After considerable discussion, a vote was taken and the school of Shammai’s claim that it was better for man not to have been created received the most votes. Thereupon the Hillellites taught that since man was already created, people should examine their past and future deeds so that one’s past would not necessarily become one’s future. However, since everyone does not know whether in their particular case it would have been better or not if they were created, everyone should live one’s life as if they were worthy of having been created.

We read in Deuteronomy, “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; choose life so that you and your children may live.” The word ‘blessing’/‘bracha’ means ‘an increase in being.’ In other words, when you bless someone or want someone to be blessed, you are saying that you want that person to be greater in goodness, beauty, power and nobility. You want them to become something more. The word ‘curse’/‘klalah’ means becoming something less. If we are blessed we become greater. We have more self-assurance, more integrity and more dignity. All these things that we link to the Divine are qualities that empower our own lives.

### **Principle 3:**

**Judaism rejects intermediaries. It is never the responsibility of any one individual to determine and define our lives. We can learn from a great many individuals, from prophets and sages to ordinary people.**

In Judaism, each individual is unique. Personally and socially, Judaism makes the ethical our central focus and gives us a blueprint for living a meaningful life. Judaism rejects intermediaries and hero worship of any single individual, as that places an undue burden on the intermediary and diminishes our individual roles. Each of us has the awesome privilege and the awesome power to make decisive differences for good or ill, for ourselves and for others.

For Judaism, it is never a single individual – be he Moses, Buddha, Jesus or Mohammed – who determines and defines our lives for us, who acts as an intermediary or savior. Instead, there are many individuals – prophets, sages and ordinary people, including non-Jews – from whom we can learn how to live. As Ben Zoma says, “Who is wise? The wise person is the one who can learn from everyone and everything.” (*Pirke Avot 4:1*) In community there is mutuality, which can enable each to achieve the best that he or she can be.

Any intermediary diminishes us. We don’t have intermediaries since we do not believe that there was, is, or could be, a perfect individual. No human being is perfect. Even though the king was seen in ancient religions as the incarnation of God and had dominion over all things, in Judaism, no one – not even a king – is above the law.

Judaism believes that we do not live through our heroes. Just as no one can live our lives for us, no one can suffer for us either. Each of our lives is our own to live. As the great Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen writes, “No priest, in the function of the Vicar of God, and no God-Man is permitted to say, ‘I am the way to God’. Without anyone to intercede, the soul struggles with its own battles, and in private penitence, in prayer and in the resolve to moral action, it attains its salvation.” Each of us must develop and embody the virtues that will enable us to have an effective influence on who we become and the world around us. In other words, each of us must take responsibility for one’s own life.

Even though the Bible calls Moses “the greatest prophet,” he dies a sinner and therefore does not enter the Promised Land. This teaches us that no human being is anything but that: human. This also provides the opportunity for each of us – as well as allowing others – to do his and her part in improving one’s life and the world, and in making a decisive difference for others. This makes history central in Judaism, in that no one individual or epoch can do it all. Each generation must do its part.

#### **Principle 4:**

**Judaism teaches us that the revelations of God cannot be limited to one document, person or time. Life, knowledge and reality are alive and changing. Therefore, Judaism cannot be bound by any particular text without the possibility of modification. The improved status of women today is one result of this perspective.**

We are God seekers, not God possessors. We are concerned, not with religious certainty, but with religious understanding. Our understanding of Judaism is a continuous process of revision, taking on new understanding and bringing in new ideas, so as to incorporate the latest ethical and rational developments. In this

way, we will be able to bring together the best of our experiences and integrate it with the best of Judaism.

Science, for example, invites and integrates new ideas to ensure its progress. Shouldn't religion have the same sense of experimentation and investigation? A dogmatic, static religion precludes us from attaining knowledge about God unknown to us before.

What if we had been prohibited from changing the views of pre-biblical times? We would then be required to reject the major ideas of monotheistic religion, including:

- ❖ God as creator
- ❖ God as creating all human beings in the Divine image
- ❖ God as a God of justice and peace
- ❖ God as a God who is concerned for the realization of universal good
- ❖ An ethic that is concerned for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger

All these radical concepts would have been rejected because they were not part of the theology of the time.

In his book *Religion In The Making*, Alfred North Whitehead states, "You cannot claim absolute finality for a dogma without claiming a commensurate finality for the sphere of thought within which it arose." A theology must have the inherent freedom to modify and restate the application and extension of its basic ideals. Paul Tillich makes a similar criticism of Fundamentalism in his *Systemic Theology*. He writes, "The fundamentalists confuse eternal truth with a temporal expression of this truth. The theological truth of yesterday is defended as an unchangeable message against the theological truth of today and tomorrow. It elevates something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity."

We can't change religion by the rejection of religion. In fact, the only cure in our world for the wrong use of faith is the right use of faith. The divorce of religion from rational inspection is fatal to religion. We must take the very best of what Judaism has brought us and build upon it from generation to generation.

To recognize something as sacred or holy is to invest it with a dignity or status that is denied to other things. Yet all religions at one time or another have invested objects and events with holiness that later were seen not to be sacred at all. Furthermore, all religious traditions have some negative elements in them. If we believe that a sacred text is inerrant or eternal, we will be unable to read the text correctly as a historical document from a particular time and place subject to reinterpretation or revision. Instead, we will rationalize all those elements in these texts that may even have been at one time a force for progress, turning it into a force for reaction.

Because of such beliefs in the infallibility of certain texts, the Jewish people have consistently been the victims of 'true believers' for whom any position not in conformity with their understanding of 'divine dogma' was condemned as error and heresy.

The Bible was new and creative for its time and the prophets laid the foundations for all genuine religion in the Western World. The Bible rejected child sacrifice, it made the ethical the central element of the holy, and it established the belief that all human beings are made in the image of God. We are eternally grateful for its wisdom, and Judaism continues to represent its ideals and build on them. The Torah – the wisdom of Judaism – is the whole patrimony of all Jewish teaching.

However, our renewed understanding of Scriptures should function as a way of leading us to vital moral and religious ideals. The Scriptures give us the opportunity to ponder and test their wisdom against our own experience. They mandate that we must look at our texts with reverence, but also take advantage of the critical study in our day.

Historical understanding is essential. With history we can see the differences between 'pseudo essences' and 'genuine essences'. Pseudo essences are those forms that were dominant in their time but which did not survive their time. Genuine essences are those doctrines or beliefs that have endured and stood the test of time. These are the truths that give meaning and significance to our lives.

We read other religions historically, especially those that include prejudicial statements about Jews. We do our best to change Christian and Muslim attitudes towards Judaism. At the same time, we must hold ourselves to the same standards. We must review the entirety of our sacred literature and separate what we can sanction from what we cannot. All religions must do this. Our task is not to find excuses for obsolete and immoral ideas, but to find ways of expressing the fundamental truths of religion without the baggage of the negative elements.

Both religion and life are alive and changing, and God cannot be made a hostage to past conceptions or historically conditioned perspectives. This is most clearly seen in the way women and individuals from other religions are treated. Reform Judaism arose because of the inability of the Judaism of that time to change. But all forms of Judaism should be open to change.

Truth is not an end state, but a continual process of seeking and finding. Hermann Cohen has a beautiful expression: "Truth is the true fountain of youth."

## Principle 5:

**Judaism teaches us that ritual without ethics is not only fruitless, but idolatrous and anti-religious. Ritual serves the purpose of implementing and embodying the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Judaism. Ritual should never be a substitute for ethics or charitable acts.**

Ethics and ritual must have their proper place in Judaism. However, in the Bible and in Judaism, ethics trumps ritual in the sense that one cannot engage in ritual for immoral purposes like curses, incantations, or to bribe and propitiate God.

Leviticus 19 clearly states that the foundation for holiness is ethical action. Nothing can be holy if it is unethical. Ethics are not only superior to ritual practice, but ritual practice must be the implementation of the ethical.

The Prophets condemn the belief that ritual can replace ethics in binding oneself to the Divine. They categorically proclaim the centrality of ethical life. Amos states that God wants ethical behavior. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24) Michah summarizes the demands on us, "It hath been told you...what is good and what the Lord requires of you but to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God." (6:6)

Rabbinic passages abound that stress the centrality of the ethical. For example, "All the precepts and ritual laws (of the Torah) put together cannot equal in importance one ethical principle of the Torah" (*Peah 16D*) or, "A ritual precept or ceremonial law is strictly prohibited if it involves the disregarding of an ethical principle." (*Sukkot 30A*)

Ritual without ethics is not only fruitless, but also ultimately idolatrous, since it seeks to achieve by ritual what should have been achieved from ethical living.

Religious ritual is meant to foster closeness with God. But again, ritual without ethics is ultimately idolatrous because unethical behavior avows subservience to self-centered desires.

There is a deep consciousness in all of us when – if even only to ourselves – we face the truth about ourselves. Thus there is a true self that not only needs to be nourished and fulfilled, but that endeavors to face the truth about oneself. There is also a false self that only wants to be praised and to feel good, not by any genuine effort of personal responsibility, but from lording over others. As Martin Buber states, "Evil is self-assertion of an imaginary self obstinately insisting on itself."

Ritual is intended to awaken in us a search for our true selves. It is for this reason that the ritual on the Day of Atonement has such significance. In the

confession of sins, only ethical sins are enumerated. The Day of Atonement deals with the ethical, and as the traditional liturgy rises to a crescendo in the Neilah service, with a repetition of the Midot affirming God's attributes, it culminates in the affirmation that a God with the attributes of compassion, graciousness, patience, steadfast love and truth, is the true description of God. Here the ethical is indissolubly connected to the religious.

The Sabbath is one of Judaism's great contributions to the world. Its true meaning is the idea that all human beings should have one day of rest when they are not seen as objects, but rather as subjects with an intrinsic dignity. Isaiah said the Sabbath is the day when you should strive not to do evil. By setting aside a day that frees us from all other obligations, each of us can use that time to try to become a better person by feeding the soul. The Sabbath epitomizes how a ritual embodies a spiritual principle.

Ritual can also be invaluable when we have to deal with the ultimate mysteries of life, because it can reinforce our faith in the good and the holy. Think of something as personal as a birth or a funeral. Remember the Kennedy assassination or the 9/11 attacks, times of crisis that brought us together to reaffirm our basic values. In the face of overwhelming moral challenge, we gathered as a community to confirm – via rituals – our solidarity as a people. Ritual reaffirmed our faith's power of hope over despair.

Perhaps the best example of ritual is prayer. If we assume that prayer is the way in which we feed the soul, just as food and drink is the way we feed the body, and thinking is the way we feed the mind, then the task of prayer is to discover the symbols and ideas that appeal directly to the needs of the soul. Prayer and ritual practice should provide the individual with concepts and symbols that make the soul sufficiently strong and independent.

Hermann Cohen maintained that prayer is how we make the God of the universe our God. In Judaism, the most important aspect of prayer is truth. When we pray, we are literally seeking the truth about ourselves in the presence of God and in the privacy of our own soul. In prayer, ritual leads the way to truth (*Religion Of Reason, Chapter 17*).

The spiritual realm is associated with the four ideals we mentioned earlier, that can help the soul to strengthen itself: Truth (in its non-pragmatic aspect), goodness, beauty and holiness. The Prophets felt that the fundamental road to the holy was the ethical. We need ideals that will strengthen the inner life, endowing it with the power of inner light. This is why rituals are needed to help with the development of character and our call to creativity.

## **Principle 6:**

**Judaism teaches us that the world is a work in progress. Judaism is a call to creativity — a call to make ourselves, our society and the world into something better.**

Judaism maintains that this is not a fallen world but an unfinished one, and each one of us must do our part in the creative process of bringing about a world that is better. Every single one of us has a sphere of obligations and duties that, in a sense, carries on the work of Divine Creation. For Jews, Creation is a process that remains incomplete until we do our part. Hermann Cohen put it best when he said, "Man is free not insofar as he is autonomous, but insofar as he realized in himself his humanity." We are free to the extent that we fulfill our own basic humanity. Therefore, a fundamental way for us to be in touch with our humanity is by our own creativity.

In the early chapters of Genesis, God created the cosmological world and gave human beings the power and ability to create the social world. The social world is our setting in our attempt to bring about a society of justice and peace. And in order to bring about this society, we must be creative. Truly, the greatest form of creativity is moral. Not everyone is an artist in the arts or sciences, but everyone is an artist with respect to his or her own life. We create the person we become. Once we accomplish this on a personal level, we can strive to do it on a social and historical level as well.

Judaism is a religion of ideals and tasks, not of the status quo. It is not a religion whose primary purpose is to pacify us and leave us as we are; trying to fulfill the needs that we have. Rather, it is a religion that teaches that where we are isn't necessarily where we should be. There's a difference between a religion that gives us what we want and a religion that gives us what we need. Judaism came into this world to transform people, not simply to console them. It attempts to give people the tools they need to attain their own spirituality, each in his or her own unique way.

It is wrong to give people what will give them a false sense of self, or what will appeal to a lesser sense of self. We must always appeal to the creative potential in all human beings. We do this through precepts, through examples, and through actions. By doing this, each of us can turn the world into something better.

## Principle 7:

**Judaism deeply values the search for truth. It is a religion of strong ideals, and ethical and spiritual principles.**

Truth is a central pillar of Judaism. For the Rabbis, truth is God's seal. How significant this is can be gathered from a passage in the Talmudic tractate Yoma (59b), which states: "Moses had come and said the Great God, Almighty and Awful." Then came Jeremiah and said, "Foreigners are destroying His Temple! Where then are His awful deeds?" Hence he omitted from his prayer the attribute 'awful'. Daniel came and said, "Foreigners are enslaving His sons, where are His mighty deeds?" Hence he omitted from his prayer the attribute of 'might'. How could these prophets dare abolish something established by Moses? Rabbi Eleazar answered: Since they knew that the Holy One insists on truth, they will not ascribe false things to Him."

Can we affirm anything in Judaism that we do not believe is credible? Can we seriously affirm anything that cannot meet the most rigorous tests of reason and experience? Do our religious beliefs cohere with our affirmations in all the other things in all other areas of experience? And, most particularly, does it also meet the highest ethical standards? Judaism affirms that within the human soul, there is a will to truth. Faith and reason unite in this search for truth. We accept Judaism ultimately because we believe that on the essential issues of hope, despair, the world and its meaning, Judaism expresses fundamental truths. In his *Essence of Judaism*, Leo Baeck maintains only through our recognition of its truth, can "the religion to which we belong by birth become our own religion."

Judaism believes that it is inconceivable that God should encompass anything untrue. Its rejection of idolatry rested on the belief that the truth demanded that God cannot behave with all the faults and defects of human beings. Truth is essential to us as a people. It demands that we pursue our true interests and that we must treat one another faithfully and honestly. Truth is not only about statements of fact, but also about ethics, ideals and values. We should not only be concerned with being truthful to others, but with inward truth as well. Self-consciousness can only arrive at self-knowledge by being truthful with oneself.

The prophets not only stressed the importance of truth, but connected truth with the ideals and principles one should embody in one's life. These ideals represent basic Jewish teachings. The ideals of humanity, of peace for the entire world, of equality and of bringing the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger up to our level are all strongly stressed in Judaism. It was Judaism that gave the ideal of justice and peace to the world. It was Isaiah who said, "Let them beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor be accustomed to war anymore." The Torah later

says, “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Why does it say justice twice? Not only must we have a just end, but also a just means of bringing about that end.

The ideals of Judaism must be seen as the goals that guide us and constitute an impetus to action. By having these ideals, we create goals toward which we strive, both as Jews and as citizens of the world. As we complete ourselves, we complete society for the good of all.

### **Principle 8:**

**Judaism teaches us that the severest consequence of evil doing is that it separates one from God. Such isolation not only becomes a spiritual death, but it ultimately destroys one’s creative potential.**

It is not simply falling short of what we potentially could have been, or indulging those least significant aspects of ourselves that constitutes wrongdoing. It is the very doing of those things that we know to be wrong that give us a sense of guilt and shame – guilt for knowing that what we did was wrong and shame for not living up to our best selves. The effects of wrongdoing cause a division within oneself that drains us. It is a constant tug of war within that causes us to hide from ourselves. The result is that we cannot be internally truthful and we begin to deceive ourselves. The lessening of self then calls for acts of repentance. Yet genuine repentance is not simply acknowledging that we have fallen short of our potential, but the changing of our behavior, so that we become better people.

Evildoing is the recognition that we all too often know what is right but do what is wrong. How can we confront that in ourselves that knows it has done wrong? The Prophets introduced the concept of repentance, ‘teshuvah’/a change of direction. Human beings can examine what they have done that has been hurtful to themselves and others and change their ways. Repentance is the self-healing of the soul. Without repentance, we are mired in a self-destructive pattern that continues to hurt others and ourselves, a process of self-punishment that becomes self-limitation. Repentance is the power that liberates us from guilt by showing us a different path.

Self-revision is always possible – and necessary – since it is only through repentance that we can get a proper sense of ourselves. It means that we are not condemned to repeat our past failings. Our past does not have to be reenacted in the future. And it means that the future affects the past by integrating it in a new way, into a new whole, and producing an improved self. Consequently, we create a new and different future.

In *The Essence Of Judaism*, Leo Baeck states:

*“Man can ‘return’ to this freedom and purity, to God, then turn and to find his way back to the Holy, which is more than the earthly and beyond the limitations of his life: He can hallow and purify himself again; he can atone. He can always decide anew and begin anew. For man there is always the constant possibility of a new*

*ethical beginning. The task of choice and realization, of freedom and deed, is never completed. 'Return' – thus does Judaism speak to men as long as they breathe; 'return' – but not as misunderstanding has interpreted it, "do penance" this return, this teshuvah, is the atonement of which man is never bereft and in which he is always able to renew his life."*

Further on (p. 230), Baeck writes:

*"All reconciliation involves the way to the future; for in all return there is a progression. Mankind has the capacity of continual self-renewal, of continual rebirth, of breaking obstruction, of turning ever again to atonement and reconciliation. For the path of history, the good remains mankind's task despite all the bypaths of its errors. As an old saying has it: 'A sin may extinguish a commandment, but it cannot extinguish the Torah' (Sotah 21A). The 'light' remains and in its radiance mankind finds its future. As another saying of the Talmud has it, the 'day of atonement is the day which never ends.'"*

Judaism teaches us that we are free to act, but we are not free from the consequences of our actions. The teaching that the past can be redeemed – if it can be connected to a present that endeavors to redeem it – is at the heart of the Jewish teaching of repentance. Our past does not have to determine our future. Judaism allows us to overcome that which stands in the way of our better selves and a better world.

### **Principle 9:**

**Judaism teaches us the importance of embodying democratic values and stresses the significance of education towards fulfilling our mission.**

Democracy is based on a combination of two fundamental ideas: equality and individual uniqueness. Every individual counts and must be counted, so that ordinary individuals – given the proper opportunities – can continually surprise us by doing remarkable things. The result is often that from the most unlikely sources, great leaders, thinkers, and role models may emerge.

The concept of equality is intrinsic to Judaism, if only for the simple reason of the story of Adam and Eve. If all human beings come from one set of parents, then clearly we are all equal. The concept of humanity is also inherent in the principle that every human being is made in the Divine image as an equal person and must be given the opportunity to express his or her own individuality.

Judaism continually reaffirms this concept. When for example, Joshua turns to Moses because a number of people have prophesized, he tells Moses, "They are going to take your place; they are trying to prophesize." What does Moses say? "Would that all God's children were prophets." Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone were a prophet? Everyone can be a prophet and achieve our highest

selves. And in the Bible, all human beings have the potential to be prophets. All of us are capable of greatness.

Judaism has done the most to establish the concepts of free will and personal responsibility that are basic to democracy. The very fact that we reject intermediaries is in itself a major principle of democracy. The insistence that the king is subject to the law is a fundamental principle of democracy. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 states that a King is not above the law but subservient to it. It establishes a set of regulations to ensure that the King is thoroughly familiar with and guided by God's laws, while always being aware that his own nature is the same as those he serves:

*"And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, [to] the right hand, or [to] the left: to the end that he may prolong [his] days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel."*

This is just one of many passages that have a direct connection to our venerated American system of government. The Declaration of Independence echoes this essential assertion that "the law is above the king".

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness --That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."*

As a religion, Judaism is built upon the belief that ethical behavior, personal liberty and fundamental equality of worth are essential requirements for a good society. It is a connection that led our founding fathers to directly inscribe Leviticus 25:10 – "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" – on The Liberty Bell in 1751. In fact, many of the democratic concepts that created America come directly from the Torah. The covenant between God and the Israelites speaks to the essential concepts of mutual responsibility, obligation and consent.

Basic Jewish values have become a fundamental component of our Constitution. Consider the preamble alone:

*“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”*

So many significant correlations can be drawn between the basic moral principles of Judaism and the documents that still serve as the supreme laws of the United States of America.

Education, for example, is one of the most essential of democratic ideals and the fundamental ingredient in a free society. Only through education can every individual receive the chance to learn how to freely organize his or her life and become a responsible, accountable, and productive citizen.

From its inception, the synagogue was created as an institution of universal education, as well as a place of prayer and community, because education is absolutely essential to Jewish understanding. The highlight of the service consists of reading the Torah and expounding on it. Ezra, who understood the vital need for education, established such a system more than 2,400 years ago. The great sage Hillel said that an uneducated person cannot be truly religious. The rabbis who followed them provided the Jews with universal education and their creation remains a central pillar of Judaism, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It was through the process of education that Jews learned to cherish and preserve our religion throughout history. It gave our forefathers the fortitude and courage to preserve Judaism even in the most difficult of times. The sage and learned individuals were the most respected persons in society, regardless of what they came from: craftsman, laborers, all were expected to study and many became expert teachers of Judaism.

The American Jewish community, making constructive use of these ideals, has been the most prosperous and creative Jewish community in history. The Jews in America not only took from American values, but found in America the opportunity to draw from the great storehouse of Jewish ideals; values which emphasized creativity, the intrinsic dignity of every human being, the need for ongoing study and a sense of responsibility and industry. America would not be as great a nation without Judaism. And we would not be as proud a religion without America.

## **Principle 10:**

**Judaism teaches us to fulfill our obligations and our promise as a people. It compels us to see the world with all its faults and teaches us that its evils and injustices are a call to make the world a better place and to engage in charitable acts of loving kindness.**

Quite simply, this principle teaches us to fulfill our obligations as a people. As we've discussed, Judaism does not believe that this is a fallen world but an unfinished one, and stresses the responsibility of all individuals to complete it. As Rabbi Tarphon said, "It is not yours to finish the task, but neither is it yours to exempt yourself from it."

As we review Jewish history, we see how often we have tried to improve our surroundings by continually working for the betterment of the society of which we are a part. Jews were the first to establish universal charity and universal education for all. Jews remain at the forefront in contributing to charitable causes, establishing hospitals, contributing to institutions of learning and culture, and aiding the common good. These actions all have a foundation in the Biblical Teachings championing the rights of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Equality meant raising those individuals who were vulnerable and destitute and helping them to help themselves.

For hundreds of generations before us, Jews participated in the social, economic, and intellectual life of the countries in which they lived, making significant contributions in any number of endeavors. These are the values we have inherited from our ancestors.

## **Conclusion:**

From a biblical, rabbinical and contemporary point of view, the Jewish people are wholly unique. We have taken upon ourselves – not only as individuals, but also as a people – the challenges of bringing justice to the world. We have stood up for monotheism in a world of paganism. We have stood up for humanity in a world of blatant inequality. We have embodied these values throughout history and must continue to do so. The prophet Isaiah called upon the Jewish people to be "a light unto the nations." The challenge today is for us to continue to embody the prophetic teachings of Judaism.

The Divine Spark within us instills the core values for living our lives: integrity, honesty, trust and respect. We are all part of a community, not just of fellow Jews, but all of humankind. And as a member of this community, Judaism

teaches that we all have a moral responsibility to help others. Throughout history and everywhere we have lived, Jews have stood up when people were doing the wrong thing and fought for the right thing. In America, we defended the rights of women and workers. We stood up for civil rights, the poor and the homeless. This is our contribution to the world. We fight for justice in the face of all opposition. We have an obligation to be a people of charity. We must believe that we can make a difference. And through meaningful ethical behavior, Judaism gives us an ethical blueprint for living an exceptional life.

What these Ten Principles affirm is that God is the source of power working through us for Good. Our faith in God and Creation enables us to face the experience of suffering so that our suffering does not embitter all our experience. Our faith teaches us that the best way to face our own suffering is to engage in unselfish acts, revealing the confidence that the world can be made better through our own action for good. In spite of all the sin and evil in the world, we have a sense of the pervasive value of the world and the ultimate worth of life.

Religion must reaffirm its ethical essence, because religion – and Judaism – can provide Jews with an ultimate ground for hope. These are the principles of an authentic religion for the future, a religion that is sane, civilized and enlightened, a religion that speaks to the individual creativity and humanity of all human beings. These principles enable us to say, as we have done for so long in the past, that we are blessed because we are Jews.

– **Rabbi Jack Bemporad**

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