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Jewish Influence on Secular Society

Hazzan Menes

Jewish Influence on the Law

From The Bible Study, Source: Dennis Farrell

Law and Morality

It was previously stated that the basis of the concepts of law and morality was the Bible. Whether this basis is the Ten Commandments or the Noachic Covenant,²⁵ the Bible is the original source. The Jews, with their Torah, wielded such great moral influence on the pagan world that they altered history. For example, Matthew Arnold calls Israel the "restraining influence" because its monotheism may have prevented mankind from fully realizing its pleasurable and humanistic desires. This is true because only the Jews combined their moral codes with their religion in such a way as to actually live and exist through God.²⁶ The prophets were a prime example. They were great moral forces" in Jewish history, controlling and leading people and Kings.²⁷ Of course, Christianity is the fruition of Biblical morality, but the Jews of the diaspora were not to be forgotten. It has been suggested that, thanks to the Jewish scholars' interpretations and original ideas, Europe was able to progress as civilization rather than remain as backward as China did.²⁸

The laws of Moses (the Ten Commandments and the Torah in general) are also considered to be identified with the administration and codification of law in modern lands, indeed, perhaps the primary foundation of Western Law. For example, Anglo-Saxon Law quotes Moses. The Colonies, of course, had rules based on the Old Testament, and the natural law derived from the Noachic Covenant led to the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.²⁹ The Democratic idea of equality in the eyes of God, which emphasizes the "similarities and not the differences in man," is from Jewish Law.³⁰ Not all agree that the Torah is the only source of law,³¹ but surely it has contributed more than any other ancient writing or tradition.

What about individual Jews and their participation in legal and judicial matters? Besides the prophets there have been numerous others since the advent of Christianity. The Jews of the diaspora are often found as public officials, intermediaries, advisors, statesmen, and diplomats. In these offices, they have benefited governments and figured in the nationalization of Europe.³² Consider the great Benjamin Disraeli-Beaconsfield who was instrumental in expanding the British Empire. He encouraged the purchase of shares in the Suez Canal and helped to increase England's prosperity during his office. It has been said that in English history there has been "no more striking figure".³³ George Jessel may have been the "strongest judicial intellect on the English bench." He was the Master of Rolls "who decided some of the most important commercial cases of the 19th century."³⁴ Sir David Salomons was the first English Jew in a "political post." He succeeded in removing from the London Museum a tablet falsely blaming the fire of 1666 on the Catholics. Adolphe Cremieux was a French Jewish lawyer who not only helped his own fellow Jews, but also appealed to them to aid the Eastern Christians in Lebanon who were experiencing terrible persecution due to fanaticism prevalent at that time. He also succeeded in getting capital punishment abolished for political offenders. He even offered money to pay reparations to Germany during the Louis Napoleon "peace."³⁵ In the United States, Judah Benjamin was a U.S. Senator from Louisiana, Secretary of State for the Confederacy, and was even offered a cabinet post by President Taylor. After the Civil War he fled to England, practiced law, and became the Queen's counsel.³⁶ Of course, there are many others.



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[Note: **Benjamin Disraeli, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield**, [KG](#), [PC](#), [FRS](#), (21 December 1804 – 19 April 1881) was a [British Prime Minister](#), parliamentarian, [Conservative](#) statesman and literary figure. He served in government for three decades, twice as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Although his father had him baptised to [Anglicanism](#) at age 13, he was nonetheless the country's first and thus far only Prime Minister who was born [Jewish](#).^[1] He played an instrumental role in the creation of the modern [Conservative Party](#) after the [Corn Laws](#) schism of 1846.]

From The Jewish Press

Social Justice Fetishism

Steven Plaut

Posted Nov 19 2008

Liberal Jews have invented the myth that Judaism is a synonym for the pursuit of "social justice."

On Internet search engines, the combination of the terms "Judaism" and "social justice" yields a considerably greater number of web-page hits than a search for "Judaism" and "kosher" or "Judaism" and "Passover," and nearly all of these are Internet sites proclaiming the quest for "social justice" as the essence of Jewish ethics. Many of the websites are, unsurprisingly, associated with Reform and Conservative synagogues or organizations.

But is social justice really the essence of Judaism? It would be an exaggeration, but only a small one, to say that nothing in Judaism directs us to the pursuit of social (as opposed to judicial) justice. It is therefore an absurdity to claim that social justice is somehow synonymous with Judaism and even the essence thereof.

Like those old advertisements about Levy's rye bread, you don't have to be Jewish to pursue social justice. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and atheists are just as capable of caring about social justice and pursuing it as are Jews. Moreover, pursuing social-action fads is hardly the same thing as pursuing justice.

Murder is considered wrong by all religious traditions and in all strands of secularist humanist philosophy. So who needs Judaism to teach us that murder is unjust? And if Judaism is simply a quest for social justice, would not a gentile who pursues it be practicing the essence of Judaism? In that case, intermarriage between a Jew and a socially concerned gentile would not be intermarriage at all, since in essence they practice the same religion.

As it turns out, the Torah clearly decrees capital punishment for murderers. Yet to the extent that the issue is addressed at all by Jewish practitioners of social justice fetishism, one would think Judaism unambiguously condemns capital punishment. One would be hard pressed to find a single synagogue social action committee promoting the death penalty.

A major problem with social action fetishism is that it refuses to acknowledge the tradeoffs involved in real-world choices over issues of social justice. In the name of social justice, should Jews be siding with the Ossetians against the Georgians or with the Georgians against the Russians? Or if subsidizing



ethanol reduces American import dependence on carbon fuels but causes grain and food prices to rise, is the subsidization socially just or socially unjust?

Practitioners of social justice fetishism do not want to be bothered with such complications; they seek instant moral gratification, effortless armchair recreational compassion. Studying cost-benefit analysis would be such a distraction.

The Torah does, of course, attach considerable importance to justice - court justice. In fact, the requirement to operate a functional legal and judicial system is one of the commandments to Noah according to Jewish understanding and so obligates all gentile societies.

But social justice generally concerns the relationships between groups of people in society and concentrates on collective economic well-being and power. In this narrow sense, Jewish ethical teaching has little if anything to say about group social justice. Indeed, the proper understanding of tikkun olam, that mantra recited senselessly and obsessively by all Jewish practitioners of social justice fetishism, has nothing at all to do with social justice.

The only mention of tikkun olam in traditional Jewish prayer has to do with the eradication of pagan idolatry from the world. More generally, one can squeeze under the notional umbrella of tikkun olam the demand that courts do their work properly.

This point cannot be stressed enough. Justice in Judaism, be it social or not, means mainly that courts function well and fairly. But courts only function well when they ignore group social considerations altogether. The Torah explicitly warns judges against favoring a poor individual over a rich one out of any sense of misplaced compassion.

And while judges are commanded to protect orphans and widows, they are instructed to do so by applying the laws to them without bias. Poor people do not get to dodge their legal obligations - paying debts, restoring property, etc. - because of some affirmative action-type preference on their behalf.

As for economic "discrimination" and income disparities, under Judaism these are none of the court's business. The Torah deals with income disparity by requiring the giving of tzedakah, or charity, and the economic inequities that concern Judaism are internal Jewish ones. Jews are required by Judaism to look after other Jews living in hardship. Jews of course are not prohibited from helping out non-Jews in economic distress, but they are not religiously obligated to do so.

I suppose one could argue that there is socially utilitarian merit to the charity-related commandments - i.e., giving charity contributes to a more harmonious society by reducing resentment and jealousy. But that is a modern sociological gloss. Charity is obligatory because it is the good thing to do. True wealth, the Talmud tells us, is being satisfied with your lot in life and not coveting your neighbor's Porsche.

As for group entitlements in the name of social justice, according to the Torah the primary groups entitled to collective allotments and wealth-sharing are the Levites and the priests. Converts to Judaism are often mentioned as a group deserving compassionate treatment and consideration, but specifically as it concerns their feeding themselves (alongside the poor or destitute) from fields owned by Jews and being treated fairly in courts of law.

One can just imagine how Moses would react were he to hear modern practitioners of social justice fetishism touting as "Jewish social justice" affirmative action programs that discriminate against Jews through quotas and reduced standards.



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And since Moses was known to have a sharp temper, I do not suggest anyone try going back in time to ask him his thoughts on gay marriage.

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From The Forward

Two Lawyers, Three Opinions

On the Jewishness of Law, and Vice Versa

By Jay Michaelson

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Lawyers: Are they good for the Jews?

It doesn't take a statistician to observe that there are a lot of Jews in the legal profession, and even more in the legal academy. But why are there so many Jews in the American legal world, and what significance, if any, do the numbers have?

To address these questions, and many others, more than 150 scholars, lawyers and observers gathered last week at Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law for a conference on "Jews and the Legal Profession." Presenters ranged from legal celebrities (Alan Dershowitz, Hebrew University's Ruth Gavison and others) to younger scholars, like myself. And topics ran the gamut, from whether the separation of church and state is "good for the Jews" to the legal theories of Satmar Hasidim.

Sanford Levinson, a noted constitutional theorist who teaches at The University of Texas School of Law, put the central question this way: "Sandy Koufax was a legendary Jewish baseball player because he didn't pitch the World Series on Yom Kippur - not because he 'pitched like a Jew.' But we do ask what's Jewish about Jewish lawyers."

Suzanne Last Stone, professor at the Cardozo School of Law and co-host of the conference, with University of Wisconsin Law School professor Marc Galanter, said that there is something distinctive to Jewish law and lawyers - what she called "an odd intellectual grammar, that can be traced to deep structures in rabbinic thought, that has to do with holding to ideas that are somehow dialectically linked, and you keep them in tension with each other. You never resolve the contradiction - you just keep using them to travel through time."

In other words, I joked, Jews like to argue.

Curiously, though, most of this Jewish legal sensibility is expressed by Jews who have very little traditional religious background. As Galanter observed, almost none of today's Jewish constitutional theorists - who make up not only a disproportionate share but also an overwhelming majority of the constitutional law professors at Harvard and Yale - had a religious education. Indeed, as Yale law professor Robert Post noted in his presentation, the real religious division today is between not Christians and Jews but religionists and secularists. And Jews - at least the elite, educated Jews who dominate the legal academy - are overwhelmingly on the side of the secularists.

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From Jewish Law and Commentary

Those Insular Orthodox --
Cave Dwellers or Those Who Refuse to Cave?
Eytan Kobre, Esq.*

Media coverage of Sen. Joseph Lieberman, following his nomination as the Democrat's vice-presidential candidate, created a brief national fascination with Orthodox Jews and Judaism, during which numerous pundits undertook the varieties of Orthodoxy and where Sen. Joseph Lieberman fits on the spectrum of observance: The Modern Orthodox, so the conventional punditry goes, embrace modernity and the world at large. Their fervently Orthodox compatriots to the right, however, see that the world as a forbidding and irredeemably impure place from which they recoil in horror and retreat to their insular communities.

This neat little street map of Orthodoxy undoubtedly plays well in the American heartland, where at least until recently, people learned all they know about Orthodox from Woody Allen films.

But equally certain that as the commentators drone on about the "insular ultra-Orthodox," many New Yorkers of all faiths from Midwood to mid-Manhattan and all points in between, must be shaking their heads in disbelief. Those who live and work in the "Ortho" capital of America know the reality of observant Jewish life far more accurately than either the media's "talking heads" or those who pose as "authorities on the Orthodox community" for bewildered reporters on deadline.

This is the real world, one in which Orthodox Jews are visibly, even disproportionately, represented in the city's largest law firms, most prestigious hospitals, and throughout its corporation, universities and government. They are very much in the thick of New York's business life, to the point where the sight of an identifiably Orthodox Jew strolling down Fifth Avenue or seated in a bank on Broadway, a cell phone to his ear and a laptop on his side, elicits nary a second glance from passersby.

All of this is true not only of the Modern Orthodox, but also the fervently Orthodox, many of whom sport beards and dark suits and hats -- the full nine yards. In fact, a recent cover of *Upside*, a glossy business monthly of the high-tech community, featured a photo of a decidedly fervent-looking Orthodox international venture capitalist.

It is true that Hasidic Jews largely shun pursuit to secular education that gives entree to many professions (although even in the professions one encounters the occasional Hasid who artfully tucks his long payot under his yarmulke or behind his ears).

The lack of a sheepskin has not, however prevented large numbers of Hasidim from making successful



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marks in a host of fields, from computers consulting and financial planning to high-tech hardware, which brings them into daily close contact with secular Jews and non-Jews alike.

Even the community of yeshiva scholars, who, because they pursue intensive programs of high-level Torah study, are less engaged with the so-called "real world" are by no means hermetically sealed off from it.

Consider that for the last two decades, when yeshivot recess for three weeks each summer, hundreds of single students and married scholars and their families spend their vacations as volunteer scholars-in-residence in scores of Jewish communities nationwide, where they study and interact with Jews across the religious spectrum.

What of the attitudes of the fervently Orthodox toward the scientific, cultural and natural resources that the broader world has to offer?

Once again, New Yorkers can readily attest to the remarkable twice-yearly ritual, when for several days each autumn and spring institutions devoted to science, culture and nature, and recreational facilities throughout the greater metropolitan region are inundated by fervently Orthodox families whose children are on holiday break.

There are, of course, certain venues in which one will not find these Orthodox families out in force -- movie houses, Broadway theaters and public beaches -- and there's the rub.

Within Orthodoxy, there are varying approaches, as might be expected in any diverse, intellectually vigorous and spiritually serious community, to the issue of involvement with the larger surrounding society. Certainly, however, the fervently Orthodox do not, in wholesale fashion, spurn engagement with contemporary society; they merely choose to engage it on their own thoughtful, principled terms.

There is a conscious, and conscientious, choice not to "buy," reflexively and indiscriminately whatever media and entertainment regimes wish to peddle as the fad or moral posture du jour. Instead, they reserve, and regularly exercise, the right to sift through current societal values and behaviors to determine which are consonant with what they believe are the timeless spiritual and ethical teachings of a God-given Torah.

It is not lack of familiarity with secular culture that motivates this circumspection. On the contrary, these Orthodox folks are only too savvy about who and what reigns supreme in presentday American culture. They know that Eminem and 'N Sync rule, not Tanglewood and NPR; Lopez and Combs are the couple of the moment, not Astaire and Rogers.

They believe that pursuing the goal of, in sociologist Samuel Heilman's phrase, "finding some harmony with contemporary America, which....[is associated] with its high rather than its popular culture" is not necessarily wrong, just rather naive, and frankly not worth the effort it entails given the danger with which it is fraught.

When wildy popular flicks like Scary Movie and South Park escape teen-proof ratings they deserve, and



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prime-time TV is saturated with fare of the Married With Children genre, can parents who wish to raise decent kids to be faulted for pulling the plug/swimming against the societal current? When millions of American homes observe a sacred weekly ritual of watching Survivor, which the show's own publicist described as confirming that "the mean shall inherit the earth". is it not sensible for people who aspire to ethical living to dissent?

As for the oft-heard claim that sophisticated adults and well-adjusted teens aren't affected by a mere two-hour movie, perhaps someone should tell that to the corporate sponsors who paid \$600,000 per second advertising slot on Survivor's finale.

Late this [past] summer, but tragically decades too late for generations of kids. four major medical and mental health associations announced their findings that-surprise-viewing violent entertainment fosters aggressive and destructive behavior.

In contrast to the one-dimensional caricatures often used to depict them, fervently Orthodox endeavor to chart a nuanced, ethically-based path through the very midst of the world, while preserving for an eternal Torah veto power over the temporal vagaries of society. That is genuine "engagement."

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