



# A book that urges Jews to think and act ethically

**IN RECENT** years, I have been saddened by the growing extremism of so-called “religious Zionists” in Israel who have become increasingly unethical in their behavior towards other Jews and non-Jews who they don’t regard as fully human. They have attacked and vandalized churches and mosques, and have even killed innocent Palestinian families by burning them to death, all in the name of their distorted views of Judaism, which they apparently have learned in various yeshivot in Israel and especially in the West Bank.

In contrast, there are large numbers of Modern Orthodox Jews who live both exemplary observant and ethical lives in Israel. But I fear that their voices are drowned out by the fanatics, perhaps because their extremist ideas have become too attractive to the cynical media in Israel, which promote them by their constant coverage of these outrageous individuals (much the same as the way the media brought Trump to power in America). In so doing, they lend their hands to besmirk the authentic teachings and values of Judaism.

In the light of these problems, I was happy to receive an excellent book recently by the Modern Orthodox Jewish scholar and inter-faith activist Eugene Korn, who grew up in America and lived there for most of his life, and now lives in Jerusalem. Korn has been thinking, writing and speaking about the ethical values that he effectively argues are at the heart of authentic Judaism for a long time. This new book of essays is both a summary of his thinking about these values as well as a call for reclaiming the essence of Judaism from the intolerant Jews who have become not only xenophobic but violent as well.

There are many good essays in this book, but for me the most important one is the one entitled “Religious Violence, Sacred Texts, and Theological Values.” This is especially important in the light of the growing violence against so many “others” mentioned above.

Violence in the name of one’s religion is



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Author Eugene Korn

all too prevalent in our world, not only in Israel and Palestine but in many other places. As Korn points out in his essay, it is almost always embedded in political, historical, psychological conditions, like poverty, inequality, greed, shame, disempowerment and subjugation. It is also all too often based on a certain fundamentalist understanding of God on the part of those who commit this violence. In other words, it is usually theologically based. For Korn, the way to do counter this effectively is to confront religious violence by reshaping our understanding of our sacred texts and our values. This is exactly what he does in this outstanding essay.

There are sacred texts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam which can incite to violence. They can be very dangerous. But as Korn points out, it all depends on how one interprets these texts. According to him, *the existence of dangerous sacred texts is the ‘dark side’ of text-based religions.* When he states

*that the real challenge is how we understand, appropriate and live by these texts, he raises some very important questions.*

Do our communities follow their literal authority and raise their prescribed violence to a religious ideal? Do believers and authorities disregard the moral character of God and plunge the world back to its primordial chaos? Or do we confront the problem and refashion and teach different normative understandings of God and His revelation, understandings that are consistent with a human social order suffused with moral consciousness?

Korn explains clearly how Jewish interpretation has dealt successfully with some of the most difficult sacred texts. For example, the way that the rabbis interpreted the figure of Pinhas the Zealot in the Bible is illuminating. They rejected his zealotry because the sanctity of human life was a higher theological value. Similarly, even though the Torah says that all the Amalekites should be exterminated, *the rabbis of the Talmud reject this idea and made this genocidal commandment non-operational. Instead, they asserted that any attack on innocent persons no matter what their racial, tribal or genetic backgrounds is theologically and legally untenable.*

I wish that these statements by Korn were broadcast every day on the media in Israel, in contradistinction to so many intolerant, inciteful and insidious statements by extreme right-wing politicians—and their rabbis! —which infuriate me all the time. Indeed, so many ultra-orthodox/ultra-nationalist rabbis are perpetuating a Judaism of violence, based on their misguided misinterpretations of Judaism which border on blasphemy. They should all read this important essay by Korn in this book about Jewish Ethics, based on traditional Jewish sources.

In addition to this important essay which presents an important authentic alternative to the idea of violence based on religious texts, Korn’s book is essential reading for all

those who care about ethics in general, and are looking for a well-reasoned explanation of ethics, from a Jewish traditional and philosophical point of view. It will help anyone who reads it that Judaism is not just a religion of ritual practice, with a focus on prayer, eating kosher and family purity. It is much more than that and has actually so for a very long time.

One of the best essays in the book is Korn's opening chapter on "Jewish Ethics: Foundations, Development and Future." This is where he outlines his basic contentions about the need for a serious philosophy of Jewish ethics for our contemporary world. He raises some very important questions which he feels deserve bold responses from Jewish tradition and current thinking.

*Can age-old Jewish practices be justified in the face of our modern understanding of justice, equality and human flourishing? How can 'commandedness' and mitzvot be defended in the light of personal autonomy and modernity's particularism be able to co-exist with contemporary universalism? And now that Jews have sovereignty and military power, how can their religious fervor be tamed so that it doesn't lead to violence and fanaticism, the way it has in some other religions?*

These are very important questions, especially since, as mentioned above, violence and fanaticism have become prevalent in some extreme sections of contemporary Jewry in Israel. Judaism is no longer immune to this, and was never completely immune to this (see the historical books of Joshua, Samuel, Kings in the Bible!). We have had zealots before in Jewish history, but the current religious zealots in Israel are particularly dangerous right now.

Korn makes a very strong case as to why the development of a systematic philosophy and practice of Jewish Ethics is important for contemporary Jewry:

*Presenting Jewish Ethics systematically contains great value to Jews and gentiles*

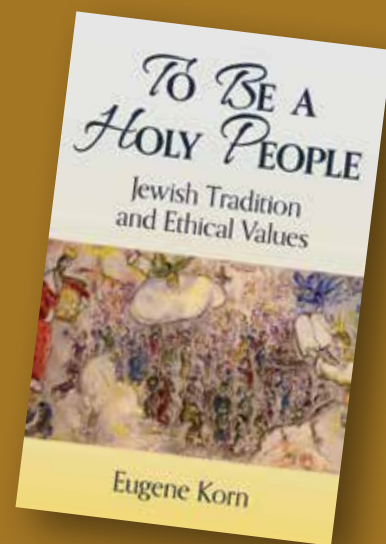
*alike. It can help guide Jews toward correct behavior in the new situations and dilemmas that modern life presents. It can also help shed light on the relation between formal legal obligations and those duties and responsibilities that transcend halakhah. For Christians, it can assist in correcting the traditional political notions of Judaism and Jewish values. For Muslims, it may help encounter anti-Jewish political rhetoric that has arisen around the tragic Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And for thinkers of all backgrounds, it can assist in resolving the age-old problem of Judaism and Jewish culture.*

This is a tall order and Korn makes a valiant effort at presenting serious ideas throughout this book about Jewish Ethics for the current situation. For this, he is to be applauded and thanked.

This book is not for everyone. It is certainly for scholars, rabbis, and clergy of other faiths. It requires a great deal of advanced knowledge. Yet, it is relevant and important for educated laypersons—of diverse religions—who would like to learn about not only the essence of Jewish ethics but about particular issues, such as how modern Jewish ethics should be confronting religious violence, an issue with which all religions must grapple today.

Nevertheless, I think that the book is especially targeting contemporary Jews. Korn wants us all to be ethical Jews, not just observant ones. As we become moral agents, according to him, it will be important for all of us to *take responsibility for our future and that of humankind by creating good and defeating evil. In the conceptualization of the ancient Jewish teaching, when we do this, we not only imitate God, we become partners with The Holy One to help Him perfect Creation.*

This is a noble goal for Jews today. It reminds us of our original mission in the world. And it urges us to think and act ethically and justly, not only for ourselves, but also for the sake of humanity and the planet. ■



**To Be A Holy People:  
Jewish Tradition And Ethical Values**  
Eugene Korn  
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