

Jewish ethics and its relevance for our time

By Ron Kronish

THE IDEA of living a moral life has always seemed to me to be one of the pillars of Judaism, even though that is not the way that Judaism is always perceived. In Israel, for example, Judaism has been relegated by the government to issues of ritual observance, with almost no focus on personal or societal ethics, which I have found to be a huge distortion of what Judaism is all about.

This is the main reason that I was so happy to come across a spectacular book by a wonderful teacher and scholar which clearly places ethics at the center of Judaism and Jewish living. In his beautiful introduction to this book of essays, Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff brought three classical Jewish texts to the readers' attention and then explained his position as follows:

Notice that in all three of these classic texts, especially the last one, although rituals are easily more than half of the 613 commandments, not a single ritual commandment appears on the list of their essence. When push comes to shove, I believe, although rituals and family and communal connections are very important parts of what Judaism adds to the lives of Jews, ethics is at the center of Judaism.

I will confess that as a Reform rabbi, I always thought that ethics was central to Judaism. But reading this from the words of one of the leading lights of Conservative Judaism in America, I can say that my views about this have been substantially re-enforced.

Rabbi Dorff is the rector and the Sol and Ann Dorff Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at American Jewish University

(Conservative) in Los Angeles, where he has taught for many years. He has written several books on Jewish ethics already. This new book is essentially a compilation of his best essays as part of the JPS Scholar of Distinction Series.



Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff

AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

In addition, Rabbi Dorff has written twenty-nine major responsa (legal position papers) for the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law Standards, for which he served as chairperson from 2007 to 2022, and he has written and many articles in the journal of the Conservative Movement, which was known as *Conservative Judaism* (but is no longer published). As such, he has developed an approach to contemporary ethics which is on the one hand his own and on the other hand emblematic of the academic wing of Conservative Judaism. Moreover, according to Professor Louis Newman, who wrote the forward to this book, Rabbi Dorff's influence goes way beyond his publications:

He has shaped the education of two generations of rabbis, Jewish educators and lawyers through his courses at the American Jewish University (formerly called the University of Judaism) and UCLA law school. As a teacher he is known for his clear and engaging lectures, his ability to make classical texts come alive, and his insistence that students take the teachings of this tradition seriously, which means that they must be applied in a spirit of creativity commensurate with that which created them in the first place.

Now in his early eighties, this book has provided Rabbi Dorff with an opportunity to look back at his life's work and think

about it deeply. He does this beautifully and brilliantly in his own introduction to the book when he talks about the two foundational commitments that guided his work: 1) Epistemological humility, and 2) Gratitude as the central religious response to life and foundation for ethics. I was very moved by these ideas. What did he mean by them?

For Rabbi Dorff, epistemological humility is “the realization that even though God may be omniscient, no human being is, so each of us should understand one’s own beliefs about what is true and good and those of others with a high degree of humility about what anyone can know.” I love this! I am impressed that a great academic views the complicated topic of ethics (or any other topic) with humility. I wish that more academics would adopt this idea!

When he writes about gratitude, Rabbi Dorff compares his approach to that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who thought that the central Jewish response to life should be awe and wonder, an idea that is expressed in many of the Psalms and in much of Jewish liturgy. However, Rabbi Dorff thinks that “one can have awe and wonder about the world and treat people terribly.” (I know some people who are successful in doing that!). Instead, Rabbi Dorff approaches life differently:

In contrast, for me the central response to life is one of gratitude, voiced as the first thing we are supposed to say when we get up in the morning and through all one hundred blessings the Talmud tells us we are supposed to proclaim each day... People whose consciousness is filled with gratitude for their very lives and for these normal “miracles” may vary in personality, but, in my view, gratitude is a much stronger foundation than awe for sensitivity to other people and hence moral conduct.

I very much agree with Rabbi Dorff on this point. In my own life, especially as I have grown older, I would agree with him that gratitude is at the center of my Jewish being and my Jewish ethics. Every day I wake up and feel grateful for those people in my life whom I love dearly and who love me. This is what keeps me going.

Also, in thinking back about his writings during his prolific career, Rabbi Dorff tells us that this book brings to the attention of the reader the best of his ethical insights over more than five decades in the field, to

stress three essential ideas:

- *Whether each of us is conscious of this or not, how we view moral issues ultimately depends upon our own foundational conceptions about the nature of both human beings and God.*

- *Jewish law, theology, prayer, history and community all play roles in defining and motivating Jewish responses to moral issues, for they are all part of the organic whole that is the Jewish tradition.*

- *Western philosophy and other religions offer important and honorable but also divergent ideas about morality that are best understood in contrast to Judaism’s foundational stances.*

Following this last point, I was particularly struck by Rabbi Dorff’s comments about the cover of the book (see the attached photo) which was done by a United Methodist minister. He related that he loved this painting, based on Micah 6:8 “Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God” and he added this thought about his involvement in interfaith dialogue:

I have spent much of my life engaged in interfaith relations. I strongly believe that people of all religions and none can be both smart and moral, and therefore it is vitally important for each of us to learn from religious and philosophical traditions other than one’s own. For me, doing so sheds light on my commitment to Judaism, and strengthens it.

I enthusiastically second this insight of Rabbi Dorff. I too have benefited from a long career in interreligious dialogue, in which I have not only learned a great deal about other religions’ approaches to morality, but also my own, which has always been reinforced through the dialogue.

One of my favorite chapters in this book is the one on “a modern Jewish approach to war” (chapter 16). As Israel is in the middle of a protracted war with Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north, I found this chapter to be particularly relevant.

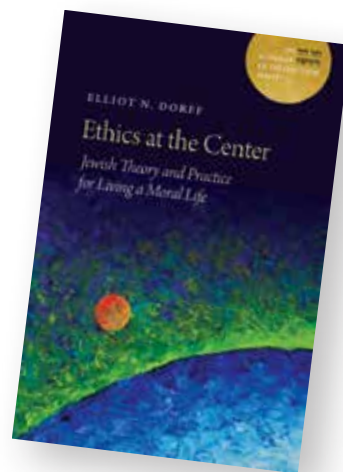
In 2010, Rabbi Dorff attended a conference in Israel to help think about a new code of Ethics for the Israel Defense Forces, along with scholars from Israel and abroad. Professor Asa Kasher of Tel Aviv University had updated the code in 2001 and felt that the IDF needed to reconsider its ethi-

cal standards periodically. This would be even more true today, in the light of the Israel-Hamas war, in which thousands of innocent Palestinians have been killed, not necessarily all of them in “self-defense”.

In this chapter, Rabbi Dorff argues that in order to articulate an authentic Jewish ethic of war for modern times, one must do what he calls “depth theology.” This involves “considering the ultimate Jewish understandings of God and humans, including the degree on the one hand, to which they are understood to be prone to war in their character and activities, and, on the other, their penchant and hope for peace.” After reviewing the most important Jewish sources on war and peace, Rabbi Dorff proposes some of the elements of a contemporary approach to war and peace, which includes the following justifications for going to war:

- War sometimes must be fought.
- Although conquest of territory justified war in the past, now only self-defense and avoidance of idolatry are acceptable reasons to go to war.
- War should be avoided if at all possible; peace must be actively sought.

In sum, this is a highly relevant book for our time, for scholars and laypersons alike, who are concerned with leading a moral life, as people and as peoples. ■



**Ethics at the Center:
Jewish Theory and Practice
for Living a Moral Life**

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