To Be a Holy People: Review of New Book by Rabbi Eugene Korn

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To Be a Holy People: Jewish Tradition and Ethical Values, by Eugene Korn (Urim Publications, 2021)

Reviewed by Israel Drazin

(Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin is a retired US Army Brigadier General. His latest book is “Mysteries of Judaism V: More than 150 Mistaken Ideas about God and the Bible”.)

Most people, Jews and non-Jews, think that Judaism prefers that Jews observe Jewish Law, called halakha, rather than ethics, and if the two come in conflict the Jew must follow the halakha. Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn shows in his excellent easy to understand book that they are wrong.

What is Jewish Ethics? How does it differ from Jewish law?

Three things must be understood about Jewish Ethics. The first is to recognize that the goal of the Torah is proper behavior and many practices were essential only in the early history of the Jewish people. For example, the Torah requires certain procedures in regard to sacrifices, but Jewish tradition has understood

that the Bible wants people to behave properly with one another not spend time trying to please God.

Second, we need to identify overarching values such as the Tzelem Elokim, the image of God which is implanted in all human beings, Jews and non-Jews, as reflected in Genesis 1:26. The concept of Tzelem Elokim proclaims that human life has immeasurable value. Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5 states it clearly: “One who saves a single life is [i.e. morally equivalent to] as if he saves the entire world; one who destroys a single life is as if he destroys the entire world.”

Another significant value is to implement justice as required in Deuteronomy 16:20 “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” Others include love of neighbor in Leviticus 19:18, holiness in Leviticus 19:2, peace as emphasized in Isaiah 57:19, and the general concept of moral rightness and goodness in Deuteronomy 6:18.

Still other fundamental guiding value in Jewish ethics include the imperative to imitate God, to clothe the naked, feed the poor, visit the sick, comfort mourners, and perform acts of loving-kindness – because Jewish tradition understood that God did these acts. Another, one that recognizes that the commandments were not the goal but a path toward the goal, is lifnim mishurat ha-din, going beyond the requirements of the commandments, the halakha. Another aspect of Jewish ethics is Tikkun Olam, commonly translated repairing the world, the requirement to be active, to improve one’s self and society, not to sit passively studying halakha or praying or reciting Psalms.

The third item that must be understood about Jewish Ethics is that its final objective, the vision that animates the commands and the ethics they teach, is the messianic vision of a society suffused with peace and justice. The goal of the commandments is not the doing of the command; the goal, indeed the purpose of the command is to live ethically according the above-mentioned values.

The ancient rabbis recognized the importance of ethics. They said such things as Derekh erets kadmah l'Torah, "Proper behavior preceded the Torah itself." And R. Yohanan said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because [Jews] judged according to the law of the Torah." In essence, R. Yohanan's assertion is saying that Jews who wrap themselves in a life of halakha, ignoring Jewish Ethics are laying the groundwork to Judaism's destruction.

The classic example of Jewish ethics vs. "the law of the Torah" is the story of Shimon ben Shetach in the Palestinian Talmud Baba Metsi'a 2:5. Simeon ben Shetach, circa 140-60 BCE, was a Pharisee scholar and Nasi of the Sanhedrin, i.e. head of the seventy-one-member court. His students bought a donkey for him from a non-Jewish trader. After the sale, they found a precious gem on it. They told their teacher that he was now rich and did not need to work anymore. Their teacher asked if the trader knew about the gem. "No," they replied. He then said. "Go and return it." His students argued, "Is it not the law that you are permitted to keep the gem?" Shimon ben Shetach answered them: "Do you think that Shimon ben Shetach is a barbarian?"

We should note that it is clear, beyond dispute, that halakha allowed the teacher to keep the jewel. But Shimon ben Shetach knew that following the law was morally wrong and he must "go beyond the strict line of the law." His use of the term "barbarian" is shocking, but it indicates his moral outrage," an outrage against those who follow the law when morality is demanded.

The prophets stressed ethical behavior before Shimon ben Shetach. Micah wrote in 6:8, "It has been told to you man what is good, and what the Lord requires of you; only to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Zechariah proclaimed in 7:8-9, "This is what the Lord almighty said, 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.'" These are example of many similar statements, none of which mention halakha.

The rabbis continued the teachings of the prophets. Shimon Ben Azzai of the second century CE asserted that the basic teaching of the Torah is that all humans were created in the image of God, as stated in Genesis 6:1, "God created

man. In the likeness of God, He made him." Rabbi Akiva (50 CE -135) said that Leviticus 19:18 has the Torah's basic teaching, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Hillel (circa 110 BCE-10 CE) said it this way to a would-be convert to whom he was teaching Judaism, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole of the Torah, the rest is explanation, go and learn," Nachmanides (1194-1270) explained that Leviticus 19:2's "You shall be holy" and Deuteronomy 6:18's "You shall do what is right and good in God's eyes" requires Jews to go beyond the requirements of halakha and promote human welfare, interpersonal relations, and protect individual interests fairly. Maimonides (1038-1204) before him said the same.

It should be clear that a central purpose of halakha is the realization of moral values. But this realization does not go far enough. Jewish ethics needs to honor tradition while taking into account the modern sensibilities of justice and equality. The ancient rabbis did it by doing away with slavery, sacrifices, allowing interest on certain loans, stopping executions, turning "an eye for an eye" into monetary compensation, and dozens of other practices. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the first head of the military rabbinate in the Israel Defense Force (1917-1994), ruled for the IDF, "God forbid that those laws [in the Torah] are applied to non-biblical wars or wars of our times." We need to copy the initiatives of the rabbis who stressed Jewish Ethics and urge them to do more.

"Like the Torah itself, Jewish ethics may have started at Sinai, but it no longer resides there. The Torah and our talmudic rabbis tell us Lo ba'shamayim hi – "It is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). Jewish life, and the possibilities of holiness and ethics are in our hands. There is much that still needs to be done. While the fundamental Jewish values of justice and mercy are eternal, how, when, and if they are realized are up to us.