

Fundamentals of Economics and Jewish Business Ethics: The Moral Dimension

Increasingly, Jewish millennials and post-millennials have looked at their Jewish Faith using a moral lens, and in their estimation, found it wanting. As modern, liberal American society has embraced a higher moral standard governing human interaction, millennials and post-millennials hold up Judaism to that same new standard, and question whether Judaism's treatment of the disadvantaged classes: foreigners, immigrants, converts, women, the poor, matches with contemporary expectations.

Yet, Judaism is profoundly moral and ethical in its approaches to the disadvantaged and victimized groups of society, particularly the economically disadvantaged. In fact, Eric Nelson (in *The Hebrew Republic*) has recently demonstrated that the set of Jewish economic laws actually inspired the values of care and concern for those less fortunate that underlie modern, western, liberalism. Yet, few students are even aware of the moral quality of the Jewish approach to economics – since American Orthodox Jewish Education tends to teach students only about the laws that they must keep as teenagers, and not the laws that only adults keep, as I demonstrated in a survey summarized recently in *Jewish Educational Leadership* 13:1 (2014).

Consequently, our school established a course teaching fundamentals of economics along with Jewish Business Ethics, in order to not merely address the void in Jewish literacy that students have, but also to ensure that students are exposed to the Jewish economic laws in all of their moral grandeur. Students learn Judaism's insistence that the monopolist keeps prices fair and that the money-lender refrain from taking instance. Students discuss how both employers and lenders have a series of commandments ensuring that their economic power can never be used as a tool to abuse those without economic power. Laws of Marketing and Truth in business also demonstrate the monumental ethical standard Halakha insists upon for all actors in the economic sphere. Students debate and argue these topics with each other, refining their own sense of the moral dimension of Jewish economic law.

Most, if not all, of our students will one day become actors in the economic sphere, and our hope – as would be the hope of any educator – is that our students will use the lessons they learn in high school to become dramatically moral actors in their professional lives as well. And even before they reach that point, it is our hope and aspiration that opening their eyes to the ethical standards of Judaism will develop and engender a more general commitment towards and faith in a religious code whose underlying purpose is to enable people to live better lives, as better people, in better communities and societies.