

Fundamentals of Economics and Jewish Business Ethics: The Jewish Literacy Dimension

Jewish schools are enjoined with the task of providing their students with Jewish Literacy. Within a range, schools do a fine job providing students with literacy around foundational Jewish texts (the Chumash and Prophets), foundational moments in Jewish History, and essential Jewish Laws needed for teenage life (see my recent article in *Jewish Educational Leadership* 13:1 (2014)). Yet, most of our schools give students little grounding in Judaism's approach to the wide gamut of economic activities, leaving a significant lacuna for them upon graduation.

Maimonides' *Book of Acquisitions*, which more directly describes the laws of economic life, contains the description of 18 commandments (3% of the total of our commandments), applied to issues like price setting, purchase and sales, agency theory, the governance of common/public goods, and labor laws. The *Book of Mishpatim* contains an additional 23 laws (4% of the total of 613 commandments) governing money-lending & finance, estates, and other aspects of labor. Yet, our students scarcely know that these laws exist, much less even have mastered their application to real-life situations, or relationship with modern economic theory.

Consequently, our school established a course teaching fundamentals of economics along with Jewish Business Ethics, in order to ensure that we as a school would fill this gap in Jewish literacy. In addition to learning basic theories, concepts, and definitions of economics – as high school students might learn in a regular economics course – students study and debate what the traditions of Judaism have to say and teach about these topics as well.

Many educators have long noted that American Jews study the narrative portions of the Chumash as part of their formal schooling, mastering large portions of Bereishit, Shemot, Bamidbar, and Devarim. Yet, the legal portions of our Torah, particularly the parts that deal with the laws of a Just and Equitable society and economic sphere (the Parshiot of Mishpatim, Kedoshim, Behar, and Ki Teitzei) – are often short-changed, leaving students disconnected with the laws both in their Biblical origins and in their modern applications. This course fills that void, ensuring that when our students mature to become Jewish adults, there is no aspect of their Judaism and its laws and texts that is foreign, or unknown to them.

Ironically, we spend so much time teaching our students about the historical, past-tense events in Judaism, which do not apply to their real world lives as adults; or to the ritual aspects of Judaism which manifest themselves in ritual-world spaces (the Shabbat, the kitchen). We shortchange Judaism's views on business and economics, though these are the most real-world parts of their tradition and their faith.

