

Living with Integrity

Navigating Everyday Moral Dilemmas

Course Rationale and Syllabus

Ask most people if they are moral and ethical and they will answer affirmatively. Ask them what it means to be moral and ethical and their answers will grow vaguer. Any honest discussion of real-life dilemmas—complex relationships with parents, the struggle to keep commitments, the emotionally vexing art of forgiving a grievous wrong—leads us to the realization that living with integrity means facing a nonstop series of complex challenges on a daily basis. Knowing ourselves from the inside, we bear intimate witness to the magnitude of inner turmoil and difficulty that such compound choices can inspire.

Since time immemorial, philosophers, religious figures, and political thinkers grappled with the question, “What is the correct thing to do?” This course, *Living with Integrity: Navigating Everyday Moral Dilemmas*, offers the unique approach of the Torah and Jewish law to ethics. At its core lies an understanding of what we instinctively hear as a vague inner voice that urgently insists, “Matters of cosmic importance are being played out through the minute choices of our daily lives.” Deep within, we sense that what we often disregard as trifling—a casual comment, an inconsequential act—somehow matters a great deal. The integrity of each human being, not only our public figures, conveys destiny-altering, universal import.

This course will open new vistas of moral awareness. The Torah takes us along a path that requires an artful balance. It does not suppress the complexity of the choices we face by offering the false refuge of simplistic formulas. Neither does it surrender to the cynicism and despair that an overly honest lens may be tempted to suggest. Rather, it empowers us to embrace the challenge by providing the knowledge that we require in order to navigate our daily tasks accompanied by a clear, coherent, and competent sense of moral purpose.



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This course is designed to help us identify our personal core of integrity and to discover methods of engaging it regularly in our everyday decisions, thereby establishing our moral character within the world. The course is drawn from ancient wisdom that continues to inform and inspire humanity, sharpens awareness of the issues, and empowers a better today and even brighter tomorrow.

Lesson One: Privacy

George Orwell's disturbing vision of a society under total surveillance is not entirely distant from modern reality. But the means for full invasion of privacy lie in the hands not of a Big Brother government, but of the millions of ordinary citizens. Computers track every stroke; a “forward” option beckons roguishly in each e-mail; high-res cameras peek from each pocket with high-speed connections eager to dispatch.

Judaism reminds us that human dignity is sacred. A vital element of human dignity is respect for the privacy of others. Deep within ourselves, we all recognize this, which is why we are so offended by a government that breathes down the backs of its citizens and conducts an excess of monitoring.

But how are we to act when we require information—perhaps to protect human rights or dignity—but recognize that obtaining it conflicts with the same? Does an employer have a right to read employee e-mails sent during work hours? Should a mother share private information about her teenage daughter with a neighbor in the hopes of getting her help? May I share information about a third party that is indispensable for my friend's life choices?



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Lesson Two: **Forgiveness**

In the hustle-bustle of real life, it is inevitable that even the best-intentioned among us occasionally may offend or be offended greatly. Such injury is unpredictable. It may involve someone we just met; it may even spring from someone close to us. While some offenses are trivial, others can be deep and profound.

“Forgiveness is a virtue,” we repeat by rote. While the abstract concept of forgiveness sounds rosy, someone who has suffered deep pain may discover that actual forgiveness can be a formidable, soul-wrenching task that is loaded with questions. Why should I be willing to forgive? Is the moral imperative always to forgive? To what extent is forgiveness dependent on my feelings? Might it sometimes be wrong to forgive?

There must be a boundary that divides the moral act of forgiving a perpetrator of wrong and the immoral act of encouraging him to continue wronging with impunity. How do we mark that boundary clearly, thereby ensuring the desired outcome?

Lesson Three: **Charity**

One week before the holiday, we discover our mailbox stuffed with letters seeking donations. A reminder from the local synagogue, three appeals from various Israeli institutions, requests from a symphony orchestra, self-proclaimed friends of nature, and the fraternal order of police, topped off with a request from a toy drive for a children’s hospital.

As you consider replying to some of them, you recall that your cousin recently asked to borrow a significant sum—he is out of work and in trouble with his



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mortgage. Have you any obligation to help? In deciding to assist, how should you determine your priorities? What about the two pitiful beggars you encounter each morning on your commute to work?

While charity is globally acclaimed, we still need to discover its guidelines. Are synagogue dues charity? What about our taxes—do they not assist the poor and the sick? Could a percentage of our tax money be considered charity?

Lesson Four: Parents

Ideally, our parents provide us with life as well as a model for human relations. The Torah recognizes the tremendous input of parents and the crucial impact that this most basic relationship holds for all of humanity. Thus, the Torah demands that we shower our parents with honor and respect. This commandment is so important that it was set in stone at Sinai and handed to the Jewish people as one of the Ten Commandments.

The directive appears straightforward, but what does it actually entail? How are we to react to the prospect of aging parents who devour our time, savings, and energy? Do we have an obligation to take our parents into our homes or pay for their care and medications? Should a more prosperous sibling be obligated to bear more of the financial burden? Are we expected to sacrifice ourselves for an abusive parent? Does welcoming a parent into our home triumph our marital stability? Living in the sandwich generation forces us to probe the parameters of our moral obligation to our parents.



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Lesson Five: Lying

Honesty is the best policy. Who can deny that without surrendering his or her integrity? Immanuel Kant famously said, “By a lie, a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being.”

Even so, our complex world has succeeded too often in framing honesty as a profound dilemma. While slanderous lies and obstruction of justice in a court of law are obvious wrongs, many instances of dishonesty do not effect such dramatic consequences. Are they truly so terrible?

May we adjust the truth, perhaps by a small increment, in order to shield a loved one from unnecessary hurt or to avoid an embarrassing admission of ignorance? Can a repentant criminal lie in order to keep his past in the shadows? Should it be deemed laudable to lie in order to protect children from frightening information, or to keep heartbreaking news from an elderly and fragile patient?

Can a mammoth untruth ever be justified? Do good intentions morally defend a lie?

Lesson Six: Commitments

In our personal lives, we often make pledges. We gladly agree to do a friend a favor. We indicate that we would like to spend an evening with an acquaintance. We communicate our readiness to join a business venture.

All of a sudden, circumstances change. There is no longer time for that favor. A difficult day drained the energy that a night out demands. A more attractive option emerges. An unforeseen crisis clamors for our attention. A financial proposal arises from another field that dwarfs the first venture.



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Is it immoral to renege on our commitments? To what extent are we bound by them? What if all parties are aware of our good intentions and that our commitments are now overly difficult or insufficiently rewarding?

Which commitments must endure under pain of law, and which are merely matters of personal decency? When can we be released without damaging our integrity? We certainly must consider that if commitments can be allowed to wither at whim, then so can the fabric of our society.



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