



Judaism's Gifts to the World

How Major Jewish Ideas Have Become Universal Values

A fraction of the human race in number, the Jewish nation has wielded an entirely disproportional degree of influence on human development and discovery throughout history until the present day.

"All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect," wrote the British historian Paul Johnson, "seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jew has this gift." Humankind ought to thank the Jewish people, he insists, for the many values that "constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind," to the extent that without the Jews, the world "might have been a much emptier place."

Judaism's Gifts to the World is an in-depth exploration of the most notable values and attitudes that the Jews have successfully shared with humanity. Many of these concepts were once considered preposterous, but today they are taken for granted. The stories of such transitions are as fascinating as they are instructive for the present. *Judaism's Gifts to the World* also considers how Judaism might continue its role as a beacon of clarity and fountain of wisdom for all of humankind.

■ LESSON ONE

Responsibility

It is often assumed that throughout the ages, good people instinctively felt an obligation concerning the welfare of all members of society, such as assisting the poor and establishing livelihoods for the masses. In truth, the Hebrew Bible first introduced the concept of mutual responsibility for all others, and it took many centuries for the idea to filter into common thinking. At first, civilization learned to show compassion by distributing alms; it took much longer to realize that governments must concern themselves with this project, that recipients deserve not just aid but dignity, and that preemptive measures must be implemented to prevent people from falling into poverty altogether.

While most governments today have policies to help the vulnerable, the average citizen often has a deficient sense of responsibility toward others. Through reinforcing the uniquely Jewish concept of *tzedakah* in our lives, we hope to recapture that communitarian ethic that Judaism introduced to humanity.

■ LESSON TWO

Purpose and Trust

The Hebrew Bible insists on the existence of one G-d, not many gods. Is it merely a matter of theological math, or are there practical differences? Deeper analysis reveals that belief in divine plurality implies a lack of purpose to life and that no Higher Being is in ultimate control of what happens to human beings. The inevitable result is existential anxiety that stems from not knowing why we exist, and a daily apprehension at the randomness and chaos of a G-dless universe.

Judaism's monotheism first introduced the human consciousness to the concepts of purpose in life and trust in a single higher power—specifically, that G-d created each of us for a reason, cares for us, and is in complete control of every event. By contrast, the modern experiment of agnosticism may differ in theory from polytheism, but the inner anxieties it fosters are the same.

■ LESSON THREE

Sanctity of Life

We have forged a consensus that human life is sacred and that murder is abhorrent. But what is the source for this belief? Ancient societies did not think likewise, hence widespread infanticide, celebration of warfare, gladiator matches, and so on. Even their deities were believed to regard human life as horrifically dispensable, so nothing more could be expected of humans. Change arrived when the Bible proclaimed that all humans are created in the divine image, and that all murder is wrong—not for social considerations, but as a crime against G-d. It took many centuries for much of humanity to gradually adopt this viewpoint.

In some quarters today, the sanctity of human life has been surpassed by the value of autonomy, leading to support for endeavors such as physician-assisted suicide. A fresh Jewish voice must be heard that permits today's humanity to see the divine image in themselves and in others, generating a paradigm shift that guides not only dilemmas involving death, but, more critically, how we utilize the gift of life.

■ LESSON FOUR

Created Equal

The ancients universally considered it self-evident that all people were *not* created equal. Their hierarchical mind-set upheld a "golden rule": he who owned the gold ruled, and with power came the right to abuse. If we maintain today that we are all endowed with equal value, and that "we may not do unto others"—*all* others—"what is hateful to us," it is thanks to concepts deeply entrenched in the Bible's timeless passages. Judaism was the first to claim that in G-d's eyes, all people are equally valuable.

This is one of the considerations that led the Jews of antiquity to break ranks with the rest of ancient civilization by promoting universal education. For if we are equally significant, we all deserve a chance to unleash our potentials. John Locke, the "father of liberalism," was profoundly impacted by the Torah's concept of equality, and he incorporated it into a political philosophy that today influences the entire world.

■ LESSON FIVE

A Pause

Originally, those who labored did so endlessly. One of the Bible's major innovations was the Shabbat, on which *all* members of Jewish society paused for a full day each week from the daily urgency of earning a livelihood to focus on life's purpose, their relationship with G-d, and the sacredness of the family unit. The ancient societies scoffed loudly at the laziness and irresponsibility of Jewish Shabbat observance.

Humanity has since come to recognize the tremendous benefits of the Shabbat. Indeed, Judaism calls for all people to discover the importance of scheduling set times to focus on what is truly important rather than satisfying immediate needs. Today, with overexposure to technology taking a heavy toll, this call is more critical than ever.

■ LESSON SIX

A Way Forward

Ancient civilization viewed all of human history as a series of eternal recurrences. Beneath the apparent changes, the world and its inhabitants remained the same. The concept of progress was unthinkable, and any will to shape a better future was considered doomed to fail. War was glorified largely because it was inevitable and eternal. The Torah introduced a radical innovation by insisting that time was a vehicle for change. Judaism disparaged war and envisioned its end because it did not consider life to be married to the given moment.

Today, most movements believe that the world can become better—although few recognize the Jewishness of this idea. Judaism's path to achieving this goal is via global commitment to the letter and the spirit of ethical monotheism. The modern move to disengage moral principles from their scriptural context saps the vitality from these values. Jews can play a leading role in this effort now that, for the first time, we are invited to join public debates on free and equal terms—an unprecedented opportunity to foster global harmony and moral awareness.

"As long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration, as to the people who have had the sense for righteousness most glowing and strongest; and in hearing and reading the words Israel has uttered for us, carers for conduct will find a glow and a force they could nowhere else."

—Matthew Arnold