

Learning and Discussing the Laws and Ethics

Unlike the case in most societies, learning and discussing the law are not just obvious background activities in Judaism. These are very much emphasized and they are laws themselves. What are we to make of this?

The Five Books of Moses, which I take to be the heart of Judaism, command us very clearly to make not just obedience of the laws but also their acquisition and propagation central to our daily lives. The intellectual study and discussion of the laws along with an emotional appreciation (i.e. love) of their beneficial intentions is to be part of our daily activities and outlook. The laws are supposed to be in our consciousness from morning until night and to be part of our speech. We are to have physical reminders with us at all times along with reminders on our dwellings that we are the people of the laws. Finally we are required to teach the laws to our children. Let me elaborate on these components.

1. Intellectual understanding of the law

To be able to do the law, one must know the law. That means it needs to be studied first as it appears in the Five Books of Moses and then in greater detail, with a view to its application in the present.

Studying can be done to some extent individually but it is also highly desirable to study in a group and with the help of qualified teachers; Judaism is, after all, not designed for isolated individuals but rather for interaction. The intellectual activities such as the widespread study of the law and the discussion of ethics have over the centuries distinguished Jewish society from all others. This type of study is responsible for our people's valuing all forms of study; and it has always inspired us to take full advantage of any secular education that was available.

2. Love of the law

What does it mean to love the law? This means a love of its wonderful logic, sensitivity, and intentions. For me, the no-nonsense handling of many issues, the amazing sensitivity to humans, animals, the land, and nature in general, and the intention to create good lives for individuals, families, communities, and for the Jewish people (and ultimately for all of humanity) make me sincerely appreciate receiving these principles, make me defend them and be proud of them, make me celebrate them on various occasions, make me encourage Jews to give them a chance, and make me want to tell the whole world about them.

3. To speak of the law, from morning until night

What the Five Books of Moses are trying to say here is that we need to examine the ethical aspects of our and others' activities in the form of speech, i.e..not just by quiet meditation on our own but by actual discussions with those around us. To engage in serious talk, on topics of importance, (i.e. what is the right thing to do in a large variety of situations), is very much encouraged on a daily basis. The topics can present themselves to us early in the day, in fact soon after waking, or anytime before we lie down at night. The topics can also be broader than just family or workplace issues; they can relate to community or national affairs.

4. Physical reminders

We are commanded to have reminders on our person and on our dwellings. Nowadays many Jews say

that these are silly and no longer necessary, that the laws or our identity are private matters of the heart and should not be conspicuous at all. That's not Judaism. We are not ashamed of the fact that we've been entrusted with the greatest treasure, the guidelines for humanity's achieving social and natural harmony, as laid out in the Five Books. Therefore we are not ashamed of wearing a small reminder meant primarily for ourselves. If we truly don't mind being called to our ethical responsibilities, if we enjoy thinking and speaking of the law, and if we really love its intentions, then why not carry modest physical reminders? They are obviously a form of communicationwith ourselves.

The bible suggests that reminders be placed on the head and on the arms. Some small things, tasteful but attractive, would be a good start. A piece of jewelry for the head or neck and a band of some sort for the wrist or arm.

The bible also recommends some visual modification of dress. I would be happy if Jews had a reminder on their clothing that would be fairly inconspicuous and had meaning only for the wearer. Of course, in Israel, these reminders could probably be more obvious.

Finally, we are to put a reminder on our doorpost. Again, a Jewish household should have some slight visible reminder, for itself, that they should carry their principles wherever their day takes them and then to exercise those principles within their homes also. This would have a particularly valuable effect on friends, acquaintances, others coming to the house, and on the children that we are trying to inspire with a reverence for the law.

5. Teach your children well

We are commanded to teach the law to our children. This is a parent's next most urgent responsibility after the child's physical welfare. Its importance cannot be overemphasized. This is the way to ensure the ethical development of a future community member. Jewish education outside the home has never been and will never be a substitute for the training that a child should be receiving at home and wherever he/she is in the company of the parents.

How do we do this? First and most important is the parents' pointing out to the child and discussing with him the ethical implications of his various activities. A child, as he gets older, must be directed also to the sources of our ideas so that he will know where to go for additional guidance. Securing good teachers of the law is the last piece of the puzzle. What puzzle is that? It is the timeless challenge of raising children who will know, love, and follow the law and thereby come to live satisfying and constructive lives.

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