



**JEWISH  
SCHOLARS  
PROGRAM**

# Morality

Is G-d Our Guide?



Inspiring the Jewish Future

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# MORALITY:

## IS G-D OUR GUIDE?

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### SETTING THE STAGE :

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LEE DYE, DO WE NEED G-D TO BE MORAL?, ABCNEWS.COM

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One of the world's leading primatologists believes his decades of research with apes answers a question that has plagued humans since the beginning of time.

Are we moral because we believe in God, or do we believe in God because we are moral?

Frans de Waal argues in his latest book that the answer is clearly the latter. The seeds for moral behavior preceded the emergence of our species by millions of years, and the need to codify that behavior so that all would have a clear blueprint for morality led to the creation of religion...

Through years of research all over the world, de Waal has reached these basic conclusions: Chimps and bonobos and other primates clearly show empathy with others who are suffering. They have a sense of fairness, they take care of those in need, and they will share what they have with others who are less fortunate.



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### RICHARD DAWKINS, THE G-D DELUSION, PG. 259

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If there is no God, why be good? Posed like that, the question sounds positively ignoble. When a religious person puts it to me in this way (and many of them do), my immediate temptation is to issue the following challenge: "Do you really mean to tell me the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward, or to avoid His disapproval and punishment? That's not morality, that's just [being ingratiating]..." Michael Shermer, in *The Science of Good and Evil*, calls it a debate stopper. If you agree that, in the absence of God, you would "commit robbery, rape, and murder," you reveal yourself as an immoral person ... If, on the other hand, you admit that you would continue to be a good person even when not under Divine surveillance, you have fatally undermined your claim that God is necessary for us to be good.



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### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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- ❖ WHAT DO YOU THINK? ARE WE MORAL BECAUSE WE BELIEVE IN G-D, OR DO WE BELIEVE IN G-D BECAUSE WE'RE MORAL?
  - ❖ DO YOU AGREE WITH DAWKINS' ARGUMENT?
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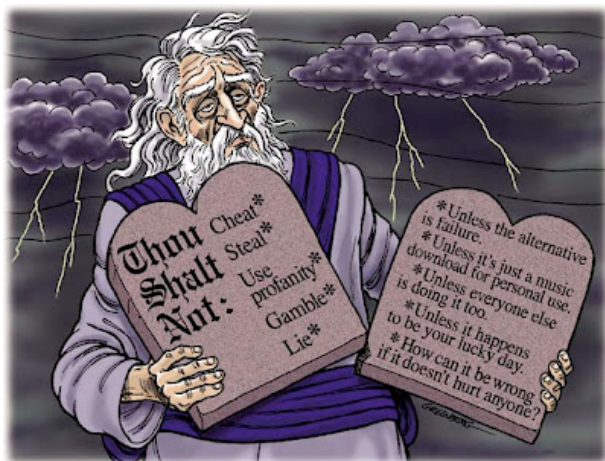
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## ENGAGING THE TEXT: THE MORAL ARGUMENT

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LAWRENCE KELEMEN, PERMISSION TO BELIEVE, PP. 21-28

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Many people believe in universal ethics, i.e. standards of right and wrong that extend across all geographic and temporal boundaries. The popular idea that murder is always wrong – that there is something unethical about slaughtering guiltless, non-threatening human beings in any country at any period in history – is an example of just such a universal ethic... Why is murder wrong? That is, who or what has the authority to establish such a universal ethical principle? Who or what made murder wrong?...

Maybe a federation of humanity established the eternal, universal moral principles that no person or society can? Maybe murder is always wrong because the majority of mankind decided so? ... [The problem with this suggestion is that] while there is only one humanity, the members of that group keep changing. Every time

someone is born, or someone dies, humanity changes. Which era, therefore, has the right to establish the ethical principles for all subsequent generations? What gives the people of 500 BCE or 1500 BCE more moral authority than the people of 500 CE or 1500 CE? Which humanity is the more logical heir to the moral throne? Ultimately, we must admit that murder cannot always be wrong just because a particular generation said so. Once again, we need a more authoritative source for eternal ethics.

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## NER LE'ELEF, MORASHA SYLLABUS, THE MORAL ARGUMENT

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It is important to point out that Dawkins' argument is attacking a straw man. The Moral Argument does not claim that "without God there is no reason to be good." The argument is that there is no such thing as "good" unless God exists to make it so. It does follow that if there is no right and wrong then there is no reason to conform to morality, but that is an outcome of the argument, not the argument itself. When Dawkins implies that it would still be evil to rob, rape, and murder even if one does not believe in God, he is himself appealing to the reality of moral truths. These acts are wrong whether or not one believes in God. But they cannot be absolutely wrong unless God says so.



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## TALMUD ERUVIN, 100B

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If the Torah had not been given, we would have learnt modesty from the cat, aversion to robbery from the ant, chastity from the dove, and manners from the rooster.

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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- ❖ CAN A UNIVERSAL SET OF MORALS BE ESTABLISHED BY ANY ONE GROUP OF PEOPLE IN ANY ONE TIME PERIOD?
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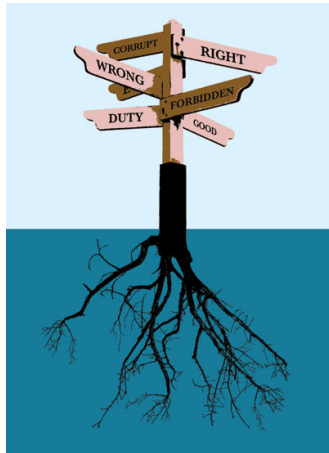
## ENGAGING THE TEXT: THE TORAH VIEW

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### DEVARIM (DEUTERONOMY) 15:7

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Do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your indigent brother.



### VAYIKRA (LEVITICUS), 19:15

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Do not commit injustice in adjudication ... do not show favor to a wealthy man; with fairness shall you judge your fellow man.

### RAMBAM (MAIMONIDES), HILCHOT CHANUKAH

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Great is peace! For the entire Torah was given to bring about peace.

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### DEVARIM (DEUTERONOMY) RABBAH, PARSHAT EIKEV, 3

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Once, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach bought a donkey from an Ishmaelite. His students inspected it and found a precious stone tied around its neck. His students said to him, "Our Master, the blessing of the Lord has made you rich!" But Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach replied, "I only bought a donkey, not a precious stone." So he went and returned it to the Ishmaelite. At that point the Ishmaelite exclaimed, "Blessed is the Lord of Shimon ben Shetach!"

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### BEREISHIT (GENESIS) 20:11, WITH COMMENTARY OF MALBIM

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Avimelech said to Avraham, "What did you see that made you [fear for your wife Sarah]?" Avraham replied, "I said, 'There is just no fear of God in this place, and [therefore] they will murder me to get my wife.'"

*Malbim –*

*Avraham was telling Avimelech (king of the Philistines) that even when individuals or nations appear to be great philosophers who have laid down just laws, who behave with good character in accordance with reason, and who adjudicate their laws with righteousness according to reason, nevertheless one can never be sure that such a person or nation, when faced with the desire to act wickedly, will always be able to overcome that desire. For when the time comes that his desire burns with a passion for a beautiful married woman or for someone else's property, at that point even his intellect will justify killing, committing adultery, or any other act of evil. There is only one force found in the soul of man that can ensure that he will not sin and that is the trait of fear that is planted in the soul, from which springs forth the fear of God.*



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### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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- ❖ WOULD YOU DO THE SAME THING AS RABBI SHIMON BEN SHETACH? DO YOU FEEL IT WOULD BE NECESSARY ACCORDING TO THE "MORAL CODE"?
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## ENGAGING THE TEXT: MORALS WITHOUT G-D

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RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND, RABBI FRAND ON THE PARSHA, PP. 38-41

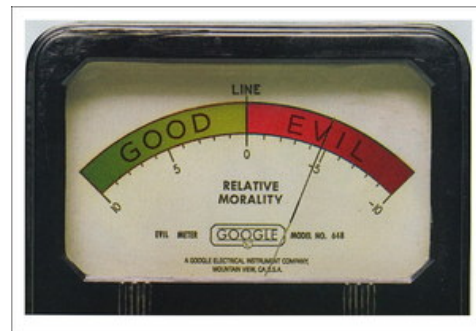
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Rav Elchonon [Wasserman, who was killed in the Holocaust] said [regarding] this Malbim [in the previous source] about what can happen in Germany in the decade immediately prior to the rise of Nazi power. The other Rabbis scoffed at him and said: “Not here. Never Again! Germany is a country of laws, moral standing, technologically advanced, not the Middle Ages. Not here.”

Yes, Germany was a country of laws. In 1933, one of the first laws that the Nazis passed was a law against cruelty to animals. Gypsies should not be allowed to perform with dancing bears. Why? Because it was not right for the German people to stand idly by when innocent animals were taken advantage of and perhaps not cared for properly. Those were the “laws” of Germany. A mere five years later there were different “laws” in Germany.

Rav Reuvain Bulka remembers learning in Cheder [school] in Germany after “Kristallnacht.” A child came into Cheder and told the Rebbe that his house was on fire. The Rebbe ran and called the fire department, pleading with them to extinguish the fire. The fire department responded, “We are sorry, we can’t put out the fire in your house. It is the law.” The law was changed. Fires in Jewish homes could not be put out...

If there is no Divine Law then laws mean nothing. The Germans, with all their culture and with all their manners and with all their propriety can worry about bears but not worry about humans.



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### THE MORAL ARGUMENT, EXISTENCE-OF-G-D.COM

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Some facts are facts about the way that the world is: It is a fact that Paris is the capital of France because there exists a city called Paris that is the capital of France. For most facts, there are objects in the world that make them true. Moral facts aren’t like that. The fact that we ought to do something about the problem of famine isn’t a fact about the way that the world is, it’s a fact about the way that the world ought to be. There is nothing out there in the physical world that makes moral facts true. This is because moral facts aren’t descriptive, they’re prescriptive; moral facts have the form of commands.

There are some things that can’t exist unless something else exists along with them. There can’t be something that is being carried unless there is something else that is carrying it. There can’t be something that is popular unless there are lots of people that like it. Commands are like this; commands can’t exist without something else existing that commanded them. The Moral Argument seeks to exploit this fact; If moral facts are a kind of command, the Moral Argument asks, then who commanded morality?



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### RABBI ZEV LEFF

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Rabbi Zev Leff relates that a professor of philosophy was once brought before his university’s ethics committee for compromising behavior in his personal life with one of his students. When questioned how a professor of philosophy can teach one thing in class and behave differently in his private life he replied: “Does the professor of mathematics take his triangle home at night?” In stark contrast, Torah study is not an “academic” pursuit. There is no division between what one studies and what one strives to practice. The goal is to study in order to integrate Torah ideas and ideals into our being so as to perfect our character.

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## ENGAGING THE TEXT: THE SECULAR OPINION

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### ALLAN GOULD, WHAT DID THEY THINK OF THE JEWS, QUOTING JOHN ADAMS (SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES)

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I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation ...  
Fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations.

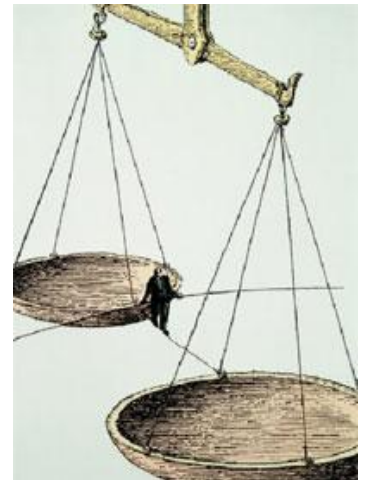
### PAUL JOHNSON, A HISTORY OF THE JEWS, PG. 585

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Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all the Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of:

- Equality before the law, both divine and human
- The sanctity of life and the dignity of a human person
- The individual conscience, and so a personal redemption
- Collective conscience, and so of social responsibility
- Peace as an abstract ideal, and
- Love as the foundation of justice

and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place.



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"Of course I can't in good conscience condone this, so one of you will have to knock me unconscious first."

### FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

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Without God everything is permitted.

### RICHARD TAYLOR, ETHICS, FAITH, AND REASON

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It may be convenient to talk about morality without god, but it is meaningless. The modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a Divine Lawgiver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that, in casting God aside, they have also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well. Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things as war, or abortion, or the violation of certain human rights, developing & strengthening belief are "morally wrong," and they imagine that they have said something true and significant. Educated people do not need to be told, however, that questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion.

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### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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- ❖ DO YOU AGREE THAT THE JEWS HAVE SUCH A LARGE MORAL INFLUENCE ON THE WORLD? WHY NOT ANY OTHER RELIGION THAT BELIEVES IN G-D?
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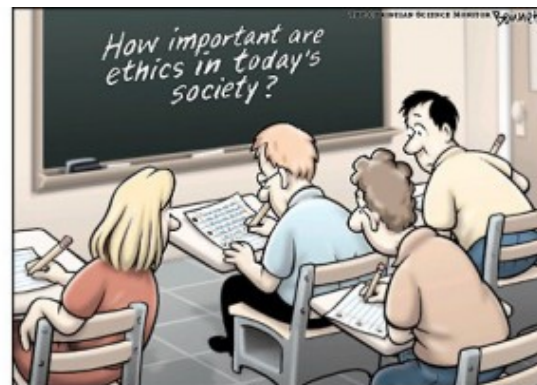
## KNOW HOW TO ANSWER

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RABBI ELAZAR MENACHEM MAN SHACH, MACHSHEVET MUSSAR, PG. 99

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The Torah gives us the description of what is the real image of humanity, of who is worthy of carrying the title “Man”... Everything in Torah is relevant to our lives. Every verse, every paragraph in the Torah is there to teach something. Even something that is not counted as a commandment – “Do or do not do such-and-such” – is there to teach something. The Torah is called, “Torat Chaim,” the Torah of Life. This means that the Torah teaches us how to live life. There is no greater pleasure than when one is able to study a section from the Torah and see that it is relevant, it makes sense ... There is so much evil in the world – theft, murder, all types of degenerate behavior. The Torah, on the other hand, is the Torah of life. It teaches man how to live correctly.



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## MAHARAL, BE'ER HAGOLAH, CHAPTER 2

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The Torah is perfect: On the one hand, it is a Torah of Truth, teaching what one is absolutely obligated to do, based on absolutes; but at the same time, it teaches what one should do, based on kindness. The Torah is thus missing nothing as it integrates both truth and peace.

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## RABBI YOSEF DOVID EPSTEIN, MITZVOT HABAYIT, INTRODUCTION, PG. 28

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Etiquette in the general secular world, with all of its stress and exactitude in the ways of pleasantness and cordial social relations, is not on the level the ethical. Etiquette and morality occupy two separate spheres in the world. But the etiquette of the Torah is not just moral; it is actually a legal obligation. The ethical is subsumed within the legal to such an extent that a Jewish court has the right to enforce it. (Whereas amongst the wise non-Jews of the world this would constitute the dividing line between morality and the law: only the law is enforceable and not morality.) But the Torah actually enforces going beyond the letter of the law.



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## ROLE PLAY

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Someone approaches you and says, “I can’t believe that the only reason someone would be a good person is because ‘G-d told him so’. Who are you to say what is right or wrong?”

**What do you respond?**