
IN REVIEW

Ethical Behavior: A Torah-Based View *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* by Alan Mittleman reviewed by Jeremy Kridel

In 1966, Alasdair MacIntyre published *A Short History of Ethics*. Later, he repented of his rather colorful past and became a Catholic proselyte. He also repented of his history of ethics, concluding that Western ethical philosophers were talking past one another.

Because MacIntyre's book was the inspiration for Alan Mittleman's *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), it is not surprising to find in Mittleman's work shortcomings somewhat similar to MacIntyre's. But whereas Mittleman avoids MacIntyre's despair over the diversity of Western ethics, Mittleman seems content simply to disregard dissenting voices in Jewish ethics.

Mittleman acknowledges at the outset that the very notion of Jewish ethics is fraught. Rabbinic Judaism focuses on *halakha* (law), which purports to be a system of rules promulgated by a superior being. It encompasses relationships between individuals and relationships between human beings and the supposed author of the law. Furthermore, *halakha* claims to be *revealed* law. According to the rabbinic account, all of the written Torah and at least some of its interpretation are the actual word of God.

For that reason, as Mittleman notes, talking about ethics as we know it in the Western world is difficult in biblical and rabbinic Judaism, which have no such concept as "legal but unethical" or of ethical rules at which one

may arrive entirely through reason. Even the Noachide laws (the commandments that, as the story goes, God gave Noah and his children as they left the ark) are said to have been revealed. Superficially, there are only "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not."

Thus, the rabbinic tradition denies ethicists the ability to discuss whether ethics is a matter of duties to one another. In the rabbinic view, divine revelation sets forth our duties toward others. Discussion of what is ethical is often limited to parsing out the content of revealed principles. The ethical propriety of the results – for example, the general rules for charging interest to non-Jews but not to Jews – often seems dubious. In that context, the only wedge into developing an independent ethics is to discuss attitudes that will lead to greater compliance with the Torah's dictates – an essentially virtue-based approach.

Mittleman (correctly, I think) settles upon precisely this sort of account of Jewish ethics. His book gives the impression that if Western-style ethical reasoning had a place in pre-modern Jewish ethics, it was in helping to identify and develop personal traits that would make Torah observance more likely, or in infusing observance with additional levels of meaning.

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This was the case, according to Mittleman, even among the most forward-looking of the medieval philosophers. Moses Maimonides wanted to show that *halakha* was compatible with reason, but he stopped short of saying that *halakha* was based in something beyond its revealed roots. The medieval spiritualists – mostly Sephardic kabbalists, but also German *hasidim* who long predated the modern Hasidic movement – focused on explaining the virtues and habits associated with obedience to the rabbinic view of Torah, rather than on identifying what might make up ethical conduct.

Thus, Mittleman's account of ethical speculation in pre-modern Jewish tradition tells us less about ethical *content* than it does about ethical *attitudes*. Pre-modern Jewish ethical literature explores which dispositions might enhance one's ability to follow Torah and which dispositions are enhanced by observing Torah precepts. Each work Mittleman samples favors one or the other side of a chicken-egg speculation about whether Torah study and observance create virtue or whether developing virtue sets one on the path of greater observance and Torah knowledge. The point of all this, Mittleman observes, is to accelerate the process of perfecting one's soul or of drawing divine redemption into the world, or both.

Unfortunately, Mittleman's discussion of Jewish ethical literature is oddly shallow in all the eras he examines. For example, Maimonides garners only about thirteen pages of discussion – despite his place as the medieval Jewish philosopher *par excellence*, the relatively large and specialized field of study that centers on his thought and work, and his place as a model for later Jewish philosophers. And Mittleman concludes his examination of medieval Jewish philosophy with Maimonides, ignoring three subsequent centuries of material.

We might hope upon entering the modern period, when Jewish ethics begins to separate from Torah observance, for some insight into what makes Jewish ethics distinctively Jewish. Yet in Mittleman's book, what makes ethics Jewish is no more distinct than what we might get from any other discussion of markers of

Jewish identity: interaction with and analysis of Jewish texts. Even Baruch Spinoza, whom Mittleman claims as Jewish with one hand but pushes away with the other, is primarily described as struggling with the rabbinic tradition in asking what it means to live in the world and pursue the good. (Spinoza's conclusion that ceremonial laws of the Torah pertained only to Israelite polity and thus are obsolete is not unlike that of another Jew, the early Christian missionary Paul; Mittleman, of course, never mentions this point.)

As we move into Mittleman's account of the beginning of the modern era of Jewish ethics, we do see more of the diversity that marks contemporary Jewish life. Some of the thinkers he highlights include the Baal Shem Tov, founder of modern *Hasidism*, and the *musar* luminary Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. But these two ethical traditions remain nearly entirely within the context of traditional Torah observance, either making accessible to ordinary Jews knowledge of the Torah's supposed mystical underpinnings or attempting to infuse yeshiva-style Judaism with the virtues and ethical sensitivities that Talmud study fails to impart. Yet as Mittleman notes, this virtue-based approach holds true even as more rationalist approaches to Judaism emerge, like that of Moses Mendelssohn. After these thinkers, we are faced with another gap in Mittleman's work.

Differences even among nineteenth and twentieth century ethicists become more pronounced, in his view, when they grapple with the continued relevance or irrelevance of the Torah's ritual laws. Some of these ethicists, such as the German Jewish Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, equated the divine with nothing more than a universal moral imperative to action. From that perspective, Torah observance seems somehow irrelevant, even though Cohen tried to prove it to be rational. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig took a less systematic view of ethics, seeing it as emerging in the personal encounter between individuals. Because they placed less emphasis on the rational underpinnings of *halakha*, Buber and Rosenzweig had less difficulty in finding continued relevance for the ritual dictates of Torah. Beyond these

two thinkers and the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (whose work seeks to upend aspects of traditional philosophical discourse), Mittleman does little more than to name-check many contemporary Jewish ethicists.

From our secular humanistic Jewish perspective, what should we make of Mittleman's book? Mittleman initially frames his problem as distinguishing *halakha* from an independent body of ethics, but the works he reviews largely address how the two serve one another. He hardly addresses contemporary Jewish thought that grapples with ethical principles that do not center on enhancing Torah observance. And it is only toward the end of the book that Mittleman takes a (rather conservative) position on what makes Jewish ethics distinctly Jewish. Even there, he says little about this salient question except that it centers on "a covenantal partnership between what is ultimate and what is fleeting" (p. 193).

As frequent dissenters within the Jewish tradition, we might hope to see more discussion of thinkers we consider predecessors and fellow travelers. Mittleman largely disregards Ecclesiastes, Job, and even Proverbs in favor of more classically *halakhic* biblical material. We might also hope to see some of the

ethical thinkers that were shunted aside in the development of rabbinic Judaism, such as Philo of Alexandria; but Mittleman mentions Philo only in relation to the works of Saadia Gaon, a medieval thinker, and Mendelssohn. Mittleman's survey of late-modern thinkers bizarrely omits Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan. Those he does choose to mention are, with only a few exceptions, quite conservative.

Moreover, except for an occasional discussion of Kant, Plato, or Aristotle, Mittleman rarely addresses the interactions between Jewish ethics and philosophy and the work of non-Jewish thinkers. There is very little in formal Jewish philosophical inquiry that does not fundamentally depend upon the work of non-Jewish philosophers. Yet Mittleman treats Jewish ethics in a near-vacuum.

Thus, although Mittleman's descriptions of his subject texts are fair, his book is weak as a work of history. *A Short History of Jewish Ethics* suffers from the winners-write-history syndrome that such historians as Howard Zinn have tried to correct. The book focuses on a few works of Jewish ethics that have mattered to Jewish history's winners without revealing much of the diversity that has always marked Jewish discourse on ultimate matters.

Our UU Connection

Jewish Voices in Unitarian Universalism

Edited by Leah Hart-Landsberg and Marti Keller
Reviewed by Louis Altman

There is an extensive intersection between Unitarian-Universalism (UU) and liberal Judaism that is dramatized in this slim volume. The editors have collected twenty brief personal vignettes, written by people who have connections to both of these religious communities. Each vignette reads like a warm letter from a friend, describing a happy adjustment in their philosophical life

There are a great many Jewish UU's (this reviewer is one of them), and the stories of the individuals who contributed their reflections to

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