

Are the Jews Humanity's Moral Compass?

Who has said that the Jewish people are the moral conscience of the world?

No, it's not a great Jewish prophet or a righteous non-Jew who admired the Jewish people. These words are ascribed to none other than Adolf Hitler, may his name be erased.

*In Hitler's words, "**Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish like circumcision.**"*

He also said: "If one little Jewish boy survives without any Jewish education, with no synagogue and no Hebrew school, it [Judaism] is in his soul. Even if there had never been a synagogue or a Jewish school or an Old Testament, the Jewish spirit would still exist and exert its influence. It has been there from the beginning, and there is no Jew, not a single one, who does not personify it"(Hitler's Apocalypse²).

To Hitler, having a moral conscience was repugnant and despicable; scruples could deprive an individual from realizing his self-gratifying goals. Unbelievably, Hitler also understood that every Jewish soul inherently has such an ethical spirit.

In Lech Lecha, we are introduced to Abraham, the first Jew and the forefather of our people. Abraham is called Ivri, a Hebrew, and the name has stuck for his descendants.

On a simple level, he was called Ivri because geographically he came from *ever hanahar*, the "other side of the river." On a deeper level, he stood on the "other side" of the world in his principles and moral standing. In a dark, decadent world, he shined the light of monotheism and divine moral clarity.

You shall be for Me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.—Exodus 19:6
G-d entrusted the Jewish people with the obligation of being "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). It's a job description that not only is arduous, but has caused genuine envy as well as the deepest and most vile hatred. Most of humanity would rather yield to the prevailing status quo and social pressure than deviate from its accustomed behaviors.

Abraham, too, could easily have chosen to follow the norm; instead, he followed his soul. As a result, he was thrown into a burning furnace for not bowing to idols, was expelled from his home, was tested countless

times, and only miraculously escaped with his life. Nevertheless, he stood tall and firm in what he knew to be the truth.

He passed on this legacy to his descendants.

We all have choices: To follow the tide or to swim upstream. To be satisfied with the status quo, or to improve our world through a higher spiritual service or a greater moral code. Throughout the centuries, Abraham's descendants have made disproportionate contributions in these areas.

Our greatest haters realized that this was our fate. They also realized that this desire to make our world a home for G-d is inherently embedded within our Jewish soul.

Within each and every one of us.

1. Numbers Rabbah 3 2:12; Ta'anit 5b

"So shall thy seed be" (Gen. 15:5). R. Levi said in the name of R. Yohanan: How is God's promise to be understood? By the parable of a man who set out on a journey and traveled through the wilderness a day, two days, three days, up to ten days, without finding either town or wayside inn, either tree or water or any living creature. After traveling ten days,⁽⁴⁰²⁾ he espied a tree in the distance and thought: There may be water under it. When he reached the tree, he found that it indeed stood over a spring. He saw how beautiful it was, how delicious its fruit, how graceful its branches, how tempting its shade. So he sat down and cooled himself in the tree's shade, partook of its fruit, drank at the spring, and felt with pleasure that his spirit was refreshed. When he rose to go, he addressed himself to the tree: Tree, O tree, what blessing can I bestow upon you, and what parting word shall I offer you? That your wood may be fine? It is fine. That your shade be pleasant? It is already pleasant. That your branches be graceful? They are graceful.

That your fruit be delicious? It is delicious. That a spring issue from beneath your roots? Such a spring already issues from beneath your roots. That you stand in a desirable spot? You already stand in such a spot. How then shall I bless you? **Only that all the seedlings arising from you shall be like you.**

So it was when the Holy One created the world. Twenty generations came and went, but no good was found in them. Not a single righteous man rose up among them⁽⁴⁰³⁾ until after twenty generations. It was then that the Holy One espied Abraham hidden away in Chaldea.

1 Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Bereishit*, (Chabad.org), pp. 27-29.

2 A book by Robert S. Wistrich, *Hitler's Apocalypse: Jews and the Nazi Legacy* and the name of a multipart documentary made in 2011).

3 The *Rabbah* midrashim on the books of Exodus and Numbers were probably compiled in the early medieval period, though each also includes older material and, in some cases, the vestiges of a previously-edited work of midrash.

The Holy One said: How is one to know whether he will have the power to stand firm? But after he was cast into a fiery furnace, sanctified God's Name, and stood up to the test, at once the Holy One brought him nearer [to Himself, that is], to the Land of Israel. **There Abraham set to and built an inn, where he gave food to wayfarers and brought men beneath the wings of the Presence, making known the glory of the Holy One throughout the world.**

Then the Holy One said: Abraham, Abraham, what can I say to you or what blessing can I bestow upon you? That in My Presence you be deemed perfectly righteous? That Sarah your wife be deemed righteous in My Presence? Even in My Presence, both you and Sarah are so deemed. That all the members of your household be deemed righteous? Even in My Presence, they are so deemed. How then shall I bless you? **Only that all children who spring from you be like you.**

402 The ten days allude to the ten generations between Noah and Abraham.

403 The first ten generations, from Cain until Noah, were altogether wicked. The next ten, from Noah until Abraham, had not one among them worthy of preparing mankind to receive the Torah and make the world fit to have the Presence abide in it. (Mah by Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn [d. 1862], commentary on Midrash Rabbah, Vilna, 1878)

a. Seder Eliyahu Rabba,⁴ pp. 27-28; Genesis Rabbah⁵ 38:13

Abraham's family used to make images and sell them in the market. One day, when it was Abraham's turn to sell, his father Terah gave him several baskets of household gods and set him up in the marketplace. A man came to him and asked: Have you a god to sell? Abraham: What kind of god do you wish to buy? The man: I am a mighty man—give me a god as mighty as I am. So Abraham took an image that was standing on a shelf higher than all the others and said: Pay the money and take this one. The man asked: Is this god as mighty as I am? Abraham replied: You good-for-nothing! Don't you know the way of gods? The one who sits above all others is the mightiest of all. As the man was about to leave, Abraham asked him: How old are you? The man answered: Seventy years. Abraham said: **Woe to a man who is seventy, yet prostrates himself before this thing which was made only today.** At that, the man flung that god back into Abraham's basket, demanded the return of his money, and went his way.

Next came a widow, who said to Abraham: I am a poor woman—give me a god as poor as I am. At once Abraham took an image that was on a shelf lower than all the others and said: To suit your poverty, take this god who is humble, placed as he is on a shelf below all the others; but he will not budge until you pay me the money. [So she paid the price] and, as she was about to depart, he asked her: How old are you? She replied: Quite old. Abraham then said: **May the breath of such a woman be blasted! To think that one so old prostrates herself before a god who is only one day old.** She immediately dropped the god into the basket, got back her money from Abraham, and went her way.

Then Abraham took all the gods and brought them back to his father Terah. Terah's other sons said to their father: This Abraham does not know how to sell gods; come, then, and let us make him a priest. Abraham asked: What is a priest's work? They replied: He waits upon the gods, offers sacrifices to them, and serves them food and drink. So **they made him priest. Abraham promptly set food and drink before the images and said to them: Come and eat, come and drink, so that you may be able to bestow good upon human beings. But not one of them took anything at all to eat or to drink. Then Abraham began to recite the verse "They have mouths but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not; they have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not" (Ps. 115:5-7).**

A woman came carrying a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it to the gods. At that, **Abraham seized a stick, smashed all the images, and placed the stick in the hand of the biggest of them.**

When his father came, he asked: Who did this to the gods? Abraham answered: Would I hide anything from my father? A woman came with a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it up to them. When I offered it, one god said, "I will eat first," and another said, "No, I will eat first." Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others. **His father replied: Are you making sport of me? They cannot do anything! Abraham answered: You say they cannot. LET YOUR EARS HEAR WHAT YOUR MOUTH IS SAYING!**

2. **There, i.e., "in the land,"** Abram will be made into a **great nation** (12:2).
 - a. **Why "there"—why not in Ur?**
 - 1) Was it because of the idolatry in Ur?
 - 2) What about the idolatry in the Land?
 - a) The idolatry in Ur was in his "father's house."
 - b. "These are the main influences which mould a person's thoughts and actions. The words also indicate the severity of the trial which was being imposed upon (Avram). He was to cut himself completely

⁴ *Seder Elijah (Seder Eliyahu Rabba, ed. Friedman, 171-72)*—Composite name of a midrash, consisting of two parts, whose final redaction took place at the end of the tenth century of the common era. The first part is called "Seder Eliyahu Rabba" (thirty-one chapters); the second, "Seder Eliyahu Zuta" (fifteen chapters).

⁵ Genesis Rabbah is a collection of ancient rabbinical homiletical interpretations of the Genesis, probably written between 300 and 500 CE with some later additions.

adrift from all association that could possibly hinder his mission. **A similar 'call' comes to Abraham's descendants in every age and clime, to separate themselves from all associations and influences that are inimical (detrimental) to their Faith and Destiny**" (Hertz).

3. ²"I will make your name great ..."

a. "God did not have to promise Abram renown in order to entice him to obey his instructions. Avram was a selfless man who considered himself as lowly as dust and ashes, utterly unconcerned about his personal fame and glory. Furthermore, he is described by Maimonides **as someone who served God without any care for reward, physical or spiritual, who "followed the truth because it is the truth"** (*Mishnah Torah, Teshuvah* 10:2)."⁶

1) Avot 1:3

Antigonos, leader of Socho,⁷ received the tradition from Shimon the Righteous.⁸ He used to say: **Be not as servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving [even a token] reward, but rather, be like servants who serve the master not for the sake of receiving [a token] reward**; and [nonetheless] the fear of heaven should be upon you.

a) **The compensation is a reality but not a goal.** The motive of love, which emerges from a deep awe and reverence for God, should be the guiding principle of moral action and spiritual life.

The fulfillment of a commandment, doing good to help someone or simply obeying God, is the quintessence of Jewish faith and practice. Faith begins with knowing who God is and having no other god (Deu 6:4). But, true faith is accompanied by action because it involves so much more than belief.⁹

b) Avodah Zarah (Idolatry) 19a

"Blessed is the man that delights greatly in His commandments" [Ps 112:1]—in His commandments, **not in the reward of His commandments.**

6 The Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, *The Torah, Chumash Devarim (The Book of Deuteronomy)*, (Kehot Publishing Society), p. 77.

7 Antigonos of Sokho was the first scholar of whom Pharisee tradition has preserved not only the name but also an important theological doctrine. He flourished about the first half of the 3rd-century BCE. According to the Mishnah, he was the disciple and successor of Simon the Just. He is the first noted Jew to have a Greek name, a fact commonly discussed by scholars regarding the extent of Hellenic influence on Judaism following the conquest of Judaea by Alexander the Great.

8 Simeon the Righteous or Simeon the Just was a Jewish High Priest during the time of the Second Temple. He is also referred to in the Mishnah, where he is described as one of the last members of the Great Assembly.

9 Brad H. Young, *The Parables, Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 74.

c) Luke 17:7-10

⁷"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? **⁹Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰SO YOU ALSO, when you have done everything you were told to do, SHOULD SAY, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'**"

1) Avot de-Rabbi Natan,¹⁰ Version B, chpt. 31 (ed. Schechter, 66).

If you have performed many mitzvot [lit., If you have done much Torah], **do not think that you have any merit [i.e., that you are entitled to a reward]**. This is the purpose for which you have been created!

d) Pesikta Rabbati¹¹ 23/24:2

R. Hiyya taught: To a king who had an orchard into which he brought laborers without revealing to them the reward for planting each of several kinds of trees in the orchard. Had he revealed to them the reward for planting each of several kinds of trees in the orchard, the laborers would have picked out the kind of tree for whose planting there was the greatest reward and planted it; thus the work of the orchard would have been neglected in one section and not neglected in another section. **Even so, concluded R. Abba bar Kahana, the Holy One, blessed be He, did not reveal to Israel the reward for heeding the different precepts of the Torah. Had he revealed it to them, Israel might have picked out the most rewarding precept and heeded only that one. Then the Torah would be neglected at one Section and maintained only at another Section.**

4. 1Corinthians 10:6-14

⁶Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. **⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were**; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry" (Exo 32:6 [*the incident involving the Golden-calf*]). ⁸We should not commit **sexual immorality**, as some of them

10 *Avos de-Rabbi Nathan* (*[The] Fathers of Rabbi Nathan*) is usually printed together with the "minor" tractates of the Talmud. It was probably compiled between c. 700-900 CE. It elaborates on the teachings of Tractate Avos.

11 *Pesikta Rabbati* is a collection of Aggadic Midrash (homilies) on the Pentateuchal and prophetic lessons, special Sabbaths, etc. It was composed around 845 CE and called "rabbati" (*the larger*) to distinguish it from the earlier *Pesikta*.

did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died (Num 25:1-9 [*the incident involving the Moabite women*]).⁹We should not test Messiah, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes (Num 21:5-6 [*the occasion when the people spoke “against God and Moses”*]).¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel (Num 16:41-50 [*the occasion when the people accused “Moses and Aaron” of killing Korach and his company*]).¹¹These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!¹³No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, **flee from idolatry.**

a. Colossians 3:5

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: **sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.**

b. Ephesians 5:1-4

³But among you there must not be even a hint of **sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed (“which is idolatry” [Col 3:5])**, because these are improper for God's holy people.⁴Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

5. Ephesians 2:8-19

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰For we are God's workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua to do good works ...

¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” ...¹²remember that at that time **you were separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.**

¹³But now in Messiah Yeshua **you who once were far away have been brought near** through the blood of Messiah.¹⁴For he himself is our peace, **who has made the two one** and *has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,*¹⁵*by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.* His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, **by which he put to death their hostility.**

¹⁷He came and preached peace **to you who were far away** and peace to those who were near.¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but **fellow citizens** with God's people and members of God's household ...

a. ¹⁵*by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.*

1) Mathew 5:17

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

b. In what way is the Torah a barrier between Jews and Gentiles—a “dividing wall of hostility”? Does this make sense?

1) Romans 7:5-14

⁵For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, **the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies**, so that we bore fruit for death.⁶But now, by dying to what once bound us (i.e., our sinful passions), we have been released from the law (i.e., *the curse of the law*) so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

⁷What shall we say, then? **Is the law sin? Certainly not!** Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law ...⁸**But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment**, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.⁹Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.¹⁰I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.¹¹**For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment**, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

¹²So then, **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.**¹³**Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means!** But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

¹⁴We know that **the law is spiritual**; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

c. CJB - ^{2:15}“by destroying in his own body **the enmity occasioned by the Torah**, with its commands set forth in the form of ordinances.”

1) **This enmity between Jews and Gentiles had four components:**¹²

- a) **Gentile envy of the special status accorded by God to Israel in the *Torah*.**
 - b) **Jewish pride at being chosen.**
 - c) **Gentile resentment of that pride.**
 - d) **Mutual dislike of each other's customs. This is a common cause of friction between cultures, but in this instance, Jewish customs are different for a unique reason. They did not merely evolve; rather, they were the Jewish people's response to the *Torah*, with its commands set forth in ordinances.**
- 2) During the 2nd Temple period, there was a large Jewish community in the Diaspora.
- a) They were comprised mostly of freed slaves, i.e., Jews that were carried off by various peoples and enslaved—they were used to colonize new areas by Hellenistic rulers—they served in Hellenistic armies.
 - b) They were forced to leave Israel because of political reasons (internal strife).
 - c) They were allured outside of Israel by financial gain.
 - d) And, unlike in some other places (e.g., Parthia), the Romans strictly limited the communities under their control—they could not develop autonomously.
- 3) The Jews were different from all other nations because even while dispersed, they remained Jews—they did not assimilate into other cultures.
- a) They continued to send their Temple tax to Jerusalem—they depended upon Jerusalem for the intercalation of the calendar, i.e., to know when to celebrate the holidays.
 - b) Their presence was “felt” in the community.
- d) Acts 10:28
- ²⁸He (Peter) said to them (those assembled at the house of Cornelius): “You are well aware that **it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him**. But God has shown me that I should not call any *man* impure or unclean.