



**Developing a Yeshiva High School Course  
in Jewish Ethics**

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### **A. Why teach Jewish Ethics?**

The Israeli Ministry of Education requires every Yeshiva High School student to take at least one bagrut exam in "Machshevet Yisrael" – Jewish Philosophy. There are a variety of topics offered in the Misrad Hachinuch curriculum, including Am Yisrael, Free Choice, Reward and Punishment, Emunah, Torah and Mitzvot, Tefilla, etc. The ministry is working on writing a new curriculum, based of the same topics, only with a "student-friendly" approach. However, there is currently no curriculum that directly attempts to discuss ethical issues from the Jewish perspectives. In many academic institutions there are courses in Ethics as part of the Philosophy department. There is a direct link between Ethics and Philosophy and I believe there is room for adding a course in Jewish Ethics in the Machshevet Yisrael curriculum.

Such a curriculum would attempt to accomplish the following goals:

- to impress upon our students the Jewish idea that G-d is the ultimate authority and any decisions in our lives must take into account G-d's will – in the form of Halacha, etc.
- to raise many modern-day issues and questions that thinking people face - or at least think about - during their life. Our students are eventually bound to think of the question of morality and religion, and the morality of our religion.
- to raise issues that will affect the decision-making process when our students find themselves in situations of dilemmas or ethical behavior – whether in their personal life or in the work force.
- to shape our students' character – into kind, moral, ethical, and polite people. This follows in the footsteps of Chazal (in Pirkei Avot and numerous quotes in the Talmud) and other Jewish thinkers (Rishonim and Acharonim that wrote mussar books) who had similar goals.

## **B. Bibliography of Existing Curricula and Materials**

In Jewish middle schools and high schools across the world some Jewish Ethics curricula exist. For instance:

1. The Israeli Ministry of Education for secular (Mamlachti) high schools has a curriculum entitled "U'bacharta B'chaim – The Value of Human Life in Jewish Culture". This course discusses issues of life and death from the Jewish perspective, including the halachic view as well as the views of secular thinkers. The course jumps from theoretical discussions to modern day examples from hospital emergency rooms to questions that arose in the Holocaust. In its present form, this curriculum is not appropriate for religious schools, however a large part of the content can be applied for religious schools. The parts of this material that could be used have been incorporated into Chapter 4 (Jewish View on Matters of Life and Death) of the "Recommended Outline for Jewish Ethics Course" (Part D. in this paper).

2. CHAT, Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, has a Jewish Course (12JE-1). The course, written internally by the school's teachers, is an elective 12<sup>th</sup> grade course for advanced students. The material covered is encompassing, touching on many of the main issues in Jewish Ethics, but Mr. Samuel Kapustin, head of the Jewish Studies department and co-author of the curriculum, explained that the course was written in a fashion that would meet the requirements of the Ontario Ministry of Education. As such, in addition to the Jewish view, there is much discussion of general ethics and social and political philosophy. The 400 page curriculum is mainly based on approximately 75 articles printed in different journals and books, for the students to read and discuss with the teacher. This would be difficult for use in Israel (Hebrew speaking) classrooms.

3. Rabbi Chaim Sacknovitz, a former administrator in CHAT, wrote an article entitled "Teaching Values in a Community High School" (available at <http://www.lookstein.org/articles/Jewish%20Values%20Curriculum.htm>.) In the article Rabbi Sacknovitz describes the Grade 12 Rabbinics curriculum in CHAT. He shares his thoughts to explain why teaching Torah Ethics has been a formidable task, explaining that the students do not necessarily share the view of their teachers that ethics are to be seen through the eyes of Judaism but rather through modern ethical norms. Rabbi Sacknovitz realizes that the task is even more challenging in his school

since it is a community school, where the student and parent body, at large, do not necessarily have commitment to halacha, nor do they accept the authority of the Jewish tradition as a daily part of their lives. To back up his point, he quotes an article written in 1986 by Michael Rosenak entitled "Teaching Jewish values: a conceptual guide". The author describes similar concerns of teaching Jewish ethics in a community school and presents a project called "The Jewish Values Project" worked on by a team from the Melton Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora.

Rabbi Sacknovitz is critical of the Melton approach, and therefore suggests his own. He defines his goal as such:

"The goal is not, necessarily, to convince the students that the Jewish ethical system is superior to their own (Oh, if we could only do that !!) but simply that Jewish values are built upon principles and axioms that are logical and have withstood the passage of time... the hope is for students to at least appreciate the Jewish value system and respect those who believe in and follow such a system."

To do so, Rabbi Sacknovitz recommends a mini-course on Ethics and moral decision-making, where he provides lesson plans, case studies, and work sheets. Being only an introductory course he has five suggested lessons, where he introduces moral terminology, basics in decision making, and classic ethical theories. Only in the fifth lesson does he reach Jewish issues and sources. His goal in this lesson is to emphasize that Jewish ethics are derived from rabbinic sources, interpretations, and traditions. He recommends that students be given selections from Mishna, Talmud, Aggadah, Halacha, responsa literature, etc., to derive the underlying ethical principle.

Since Rabbi Sacknovitz geared his curriculum for community school students, using an approach that is appropriate for people who do not necessarily live a halachic lifestyle, and since he does not provide any examples of Jewish literature, Torah topics or sources, I could not make use of his work in preparing my suggested curriculum.

4. Mr. Trevor Donenberg from SABJE – South African Board OF Jewish Education put together a Moral Dilemma curriculum intended for students in grades 7-8. It is heavily based on Kohlberg's theories, and is fashioned as a case-study discussion. A moral dilemma is raised in the form of a "real-life" situation, and the Jewish view of

how to act is learned with Torah sources. (Jewish studies teachers in Johannesburg have been trained to teach the course in the King David schools). The curriculum is intended for Grades 7-8, and is probably age appropriate, especially for the level of students in South Africa. It seems that this would be on a low level for high school students in the Diaspora and surely for those in Israel.

#### 5. Printed Material:

While the aforementioned curricula are meant for classroom use, there is an abundance of written materials about Jewish Ethics that could be used as a basis for preparing courses. The following is a short list of examples of existing materials:

##### Books:

Amsel, Rabbi Nachum. *The Jewish Encyclopedia of Moral and Ethical Issues*, (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995)

This encyclopedia has essays filled with information on over seventy ethical values. In each essay the author answers the questions "What does Jewish tradition say about this subject?" Topics include money, sex, honesty, family life, charity, friendship, etc.

Feldman, Rabbi Daniel Z. *The Right and the Good – Halacha and Human Relations*, (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999)

This is scholarly work, covering classic Jewish thinkers on topics such as honesty, proper etiquette in relating to other people.

Levine, Rabbi Aaron. *Case Studies in Jewish Business Ethics*, (Ktav Publishing House (November 1999)

The book presents case illustrations and then explores which Jewish laws apply and which principles can be induced. The cases include the following categories: advertising and marketing, salesmanship, pricing policies, labor relations, and consumer and social ethics in the marketplace.

Spero, Shubert. *Morality, Halacha and the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1983).

Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *G-d as the Basis of Morality Volume 1: You Shall Be Holy* (U.S.A. Random House Inc. 2006)

This book has a strong emphasis on character development, with chapters on G-d and ethics.

Internet websites:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/medtoc.html>

<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/ethics.html>

[http://www.darchenoam.org/ethics/business/bus\\_home.htm](http://www.darchenoam.org/ethics/business/bus_home.htm)

[http://www.ocweb.org/index.php/torah\\_ethics/](http://www.ocweb.org/index.php/torah_ethics/)

**C. Strategies and methods of how to teach Jewish Ethics**

The existing curricula mentioned above (in section B) utilize different pedagogic styles of teaching, each with its advantages and disadvantages.

The Mamlachti curriculum: "The Value of Human Life in Jewish Culture"

This curriculum has an interesting variety of styles. Many chapters begin with a case (some true, some imaginary) to spark interest and discussion, followed by classic halachic Jewish sources with leading questions, and then passages from other secular Jewish thinkers. Each chapter concludes with a modern day dilemma, either from the medical field or from the Holocaust, with comparative approaches (often even quoting the Christian attitude.)

Regarding the case study that begins many chapters, I have expressed my preferences in the previous paragraph. However, I would recommend adopting the method of learning sources and then checking the application of this learning in a "real" and modern situation like the Holocaust or hospital setting.

In preparation of this paper, I spoke with a teacher who taught this curriculum for several years in a Mamlachti school, towards the bagrut exam. His impression is that this curriculum over-emphasizes the theme of the value of human life and is too drawn out to be a year-long course. Each chapter discusses different sides of the same idea, and the students lose interest after several months. Using this insight, I have recommended condensing this curriculum into only 6 lessons out of a year long course. (See Chapter 4 of the recommended curriculum in Part D.)

### The CHAT curriculum

The CHAT curriculum is heavily based on readings of English articles that summarize the Jewish view of ethics. Such articles include Shubert Spero, Dennis Prager, and Rabbis Joseph Telushkin, Jonathan Sacks, Nahum Amsel, Aaron Levine, Alan Dershowitz, David Horowitz, David Hartman, and others. The students are expected to read the articles prior to class and class time is used to discuss the ideas found in the articles. The articles present many pressing issues and positions and, thus, much of the appropriate material is covered. However, the material provided in the school-made text book are on a high level and are not "inviting" to draw the interest of teenagers today, thus limiting the type of student that would choose the course and the chances that students would excel in it.. As well, the many English articles, taken from books and journals do not have equivalent parallels in Hebrew to serve an Israeli curriculum (unless these articles would be translated.) Additionally, this approach has chosen to discuss the topic of Jewish Ethics "from above", rather than learning the original sources. While this may be due the type of the students in CHAT and their skills, this leaves out the opportunity to have yeshiva high school students learn the authentic writings of our greatest thinkers in their own words.

### The SABJE curriculum

The moral dilemma course put out by SABJE – South African Board OF Jewish Education – is a case study curriculum. The following is an excerpt from a sample lesson:

#### ***The Bar Mitzvah Dilemma***

#### ***Grade 7***

*Researched by Rabbi C. Kacev, Rabbi C. Shein, Trevor Donenberg*

#### **DILEMMA STORY**

*Daniel is in Grade 7, and his Barmitzvah is in three months time. The unwritten rule of the class is that everyone is invited to one another's functions. In fact, a few months ago, Daniel and his parents attended Jimmy's Barmitzvah.*

*However, shortly after his Barmitzvah, Jimmy started bullying Daniel.*

*Now, Daniel is making the list for his function and leaves Jimmy and his parents off the guest list. Daniel's parents ask him why he has left Jimmy out, to which Daniel responds, "I will not have Jimmy at my Barmy. He makes my life miserable; he also encourages others in my class to do the same. I hate him."*

*Daniel's parents nevertheless argue, "Isn't it a rule in your class to invite everybody? Also, his parents are our friends."*

*"I know it's a rule, but I don't want to invite him -- he bullies me!"*

*"We understand, but two wrongs don't make a right," add his parents.*

*"Think about it."*

*Daniel needs to decide what to do.*

*Should Daniel invite Jimmy? Why or Why not?*

In the teacher's guide, which outlines the way the lesson should be taught, there are points of discussion why or why not Daniel should invite Jimmy, with leading questions to the moral issues at hand. Finally, the teacher's guide provides the Jewish ethical issues and their original Hebrew sources to be learned with the students. In this example:

**Issue 1 - Hating others:**

- *Source 1a (Vayikra 19:1),*
- *Source 1b. Sefer HaChinuch*

**Issue 2 - Revenge**

- *Source 2: (Vayikra 19:18)*

**Issue 3 - Bearing a grudge**

- *Source 3. Rashi (on Vayikra 19:18)*

**Issue 4 - Loving one's fellow as oneself**

- *Source 4a (Vayikra 19:18)*

**Issue 5 – Rebuking one's fellow**

**Source 5:** *Vayikra 19:17*

**Source 6. R. Manachem Mendel of Kotzk** *Note to Teachers: if there is time, discuss this quote with the students.*

*“If I am I because I am I and you are you because you are you, then I am and you are.*

*But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not and you are not.”*

Following the sources, the teachers guide has 3 appendices with a story and 2 articles on the topic of the dilemma. In this example:

**1. STORY** - adapted from <http://lissahay.tripod.com/fables/id2.html>

*"Dedicated to the children of the world who have seen the Shadow of hate and fear. With this story you are given the power of the light. Go out and love , Go out there and shine."*

**2. ARTICLE** - from "Jewish Ethicist" web site. Written by Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir, and produced by the Center for Business Ethics in cooperation with Aish.com. <http://www.besr.org/ethicist/archive.html>

**3. ARTICLE - Right to Revenge - is taking revenge ever justified?**

This pedagogic style of teaching ethics attempts to engage the students in a real-life dilemma, hoping to peak interest and to spark a meaningful discussion. The presentation of the authentic and classic sources, as well as the extra material available to the teacher (in the appendices), will probably lead to an in-depth study of the issue.

However, there is a major drawback of teaching Jewish Ethics as a case study discussion. In general ethical dilemmas there are usually different sides that are arguable and not one correct solution. However, in Judaism, often the halacha dictates the more correct approach to the dilemma. In the case study method, the story/dilemma is presented first and the students are encouraged to think for themselves and then debate the issue. Only then is the Jewish approach presented and learned, usually choosing only one side. Those students that intuitively chose the other side will find themselves in a conflict between their personal attitudes to that of the Torah, which may lead to more harm than good.

### My preferred method

In my opinion, the correct approach is to build the curriculum in stages, first instilling in the students the belief and understanding that G-d's morality is just and often we need to "fold" to the will of G-d. Once the students understand that this belief is crucial, they will be more open to deal with their conflict, and accept that the Torah position is different than their own. This is the rationale behind the approach presented in the suggested curriculum (Section D), where the course begins with the Fundamentals of Ethics, and specifically stresses the differences between general ethics and Jewish Ethics, between human morality and G-d's morality. The chapter ending with Akeidat Yitzchak exemplifies the idea that man is meant to fold to G-d's will. Once these basics are understood, the maturing high school student will be able to have a meaningful discussion of an ethical dilemma, debate the different sides, and then understand that the halacha has the final say on the matter.

As well, in order to provide an element of variety throughout the curriculum, different styles of teaching are utilized. Some lessons are more discussions of ideas and sources, while others are "heavy" halacha-oriented learning. Some lessons will be based on more simple moral dilemmas, while others will lead to heated debates about "loaded" moral issues. As this curriculum is intended for high school yeshiva students, this variety of styles will hopefully keep a high interest level, without forfeiting the high Torah level they are capable of.

This is the basis for the outline recommended in the next section of this paper.

### **D. Recommended Outline for Jewish Ethics Course**

After researching and analyzing the existing curricula, I have built an outline for the Jewish Ethics course that I feel would be most appropriate for today's Yeshiva High School students. (Of course, a complete teacher's guide would include triggers, sources, and related articles of interest.)

#### **Chapter 1. Fundamentals of Ethics:**

- Lesson 1. General Ethics vs. Torah Ethics
  - Differences:
    - a. Torah ethics are G-d given, while general ethics are based on man's natural and societal norms, and human reason.
    - b. Torah has no difference between the realm of ethics and realm of law-halacha. In general society there is a clear differentiation between law and ethics.
    - c. Rights vs responsibilities. General ethics are mainly based on individuals' rights. Torah is based on individuals' rights as well as their responsibilities / duties to others.
    - d. General ethics demand ethical actions. The Torah demands moral actions and thoughts!
- Lesson 2. There are parts of the Torah which raise questions of tension between G-d's morality and accepted human morality:
  - **Stories** in the Torah in which man challenges Divine decisions, such as Avraham challenging G-d in Sdom, Moshe challenging G-d during Korah rebellion **כל העדה יקצף**, Yonah challenging G-d's ways (before and after being in Ninve)
  - **Mitzvot and halachot** that do not correspond to modern human morality. For example genocide of an entire nation – Amalek.
- Lesson 3. Jewish Ethics – Is it matter of machshava or halacha?
  - On the one hand - Machshava:
    - In Judaism we have Principles of faith: Creation by G-d, Oneness of G-d. If these are the principles of faith, my "responsibilities" are first and foremost to the eternal G-d, and only secondary to people and to values of my era.



### Chapter 3. Jewish Ethics in Chazal and throughout the generations

Similar to the previous chapter, in this chapter we show how our Oral Tradition is rich in discussions of moral and ethical values.

- Lesson 1. Ethical Values in Chazal – מפני דרכי שלום, etc.
- Lesson 2. Pirkei Avot – a sampling of mishnayot on moral and ethical issues
- Lesson 3. Introduction to the Mussar movement.

### Chapter 4. Jewish View on Matters of Life and Death

Ethical dilemmas are often posed as a contradiction between two values and the need to choose one over the other. Making such decisions is difficult and even more so in Medical Ethics, as the decision to save one person's life often means letting another person die. In Jewish literature there are classic "sugyot" on matters of Life and Death that are heavily based in Halachic terms, but have underlying principles of ethics.

The lessons in this chapter will tend to have more halachic sources, and the skilled teacher should be able to effectively point to the ethical sides of the discussion.

- Lesson 1. Two people walking in the desert and only one has a canteen of water. (The argument between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Petora). A modern example of this dilemma is who to take care of first in emergency rooms or who to give medication to if there is only enough for one.
- Lesson 2. "Whose blood is redder?" A person is threatened either to kill or to be killed. The modern dilemma could be aborting if the mother is sick, or in a case of siamese twins where one will live and the other will die if separated. "Din Rodef" is stressed here.
- Lesson 3. The value of one person's life vs. saving many lives. Modern cases of this dilemma include diving on a grenade and dying in order to save many others, killing the crying baby in order to save the whole family from being caught by the Nazis.
- Lesson 4. Endangering one's self in order to save another. A modern issue would be organ donations.

- Lesson 5. Dying for Kiddush Hashem - giving up your life for a greater cause, יהרג ואל יעבור, suicide of Masada Martyrs, and the Warsaw ghetto uprising,
- Lesson 6. Euthenasia. - Who has the authority to decide about the time to end life?

### Chapter 5. Jewish Business Ethics

While only some of our students will become businessmen, all of our students will deal with business transactions and need to be prepared, knowing the Jewish view on honesty and morality in monetary issues. Once again, much of this chapter involves halachic discussions in Choshen Mishpat, etc)

- Lesson 1. Advertising – Gneivat Da'at, Lifnei Iver,
- Lesson 2. Fraud – Onat Mammon, Stealing, Nasata V'netata Be'emunah
- Lesson 3. Employer-Employee relationships. Stealing from the office, stealing time
- Lesson 4. Bargaining - Onaat Devrarim, etc
- Lesson 5. Competition – Lashon Hara, etc
- Lesson 6. Copyright laws - Stealing
- Lesson 7. Kiddush Hashem / Chillul Hashem in business
- Lesson 8. Strikes and their ramifications – Doctors, teachers

### Chapter 6. Jewish values vs modern ethical values

There are numerous issues in Judaism for which we are often criticized as being immoral (as relative to modern day ethical norms.) In this chapter we discuss and defend the Jewish position on these sensitive issues.

- Lesson 1. Military ethics:
  - Is it permissible to killing innocent citizens during war?
  - What is the Torah's view of war? – based on Ramban Shmot 15, 25
  - Definitions of and differences between Milchemet Reshut – Milchemet Chovah. One important difference regarding morality is that in Milchemet Reshut the king needs permission from the Umin V'Tumim and Sanhedrin to wage war. Perhaps this is so to check if the king is justified in endangering lives of thousands soldiers!

- Capturing the Land of Israel and the war against the 7 nations. A modern day discussion of this issue could include Shulamit Aloni's ban of Sefer Yehoshua. Shulamit Aloni, who was the Education Minister under Yitzhak Rabin, forbade the teaching of the Sefer Yehoshua in the Israeli school system, since she considered it a book of conquest, and as such unethical, and not educational.)
- The prohibition of surrounding the enemy, as appears in Bamidbar 31). A modern day discussion of this issue could include Rav Goren and 1982 Lebanon War. Rav Goren applied this halachic rule to the Beirut siege and said that Israel was required to allow a way out of the city.
- Lesson 2. Issues of Racism. Does being the chosen nation - "Am segula" – mean we are racists? What is the Jewish attitude to non-Jews? How can we explain halachot that alter when dealing with Jews or Non-Jews, (for example laws of hashavat aveidah, saving a life on Shabbat, charging interest)?
- Lesson 3. What is the Jewish view of the prevalent value of "Equality"? What is the proper way to view on non-observant Jews? Are they equal citizens of the Jewish community?

#### Chapter 7. Torah View of General Ethical Issues

There are many universal issues of ethics that are often discussed in media and places of higher learning. Many organizations have been established to further these issues. These are not specifically Jewish issues, however, it is important to expose students to the Jewish view on these issues.

- Lesson 1. The Jewish view on abortion.
- Lesson 2. The Jewish view on vegetarianism and animal rights, (Tza'ar Baalei Chaim)
- Lesson 3. The Jewish view on capital punishment.
- Lesson 4. The Jewish view on the Heinz dilemma and other Kohlberg dilemmas.

### **E. Challenges and pitfalls of teaching Jewish Ethics**

Teaching ethics, and especially Jewish ethics, has some potential pitfalls. We will raise the issues, recognize their importance, and attempt to express an attitude and approach to deal with them.

#### **Controversial issues**

In a formal Jewish educational setting how safe is it to include controversial issues, where in some cases, the questions posed are better than the answers offered? For instance, "loaded" issues such as Equality are very prevalent in today's society, yet in Jewish law there are preferences given to Jewish people over non Jews, as well as harsh attitudes towards non-observant Jews, indicating a lack of equality. (This also connects to the question of Judaism and Racism.) Such halachot include chilul shabbat in order to save a non-Jew's life, the lack of the obligation to return a non-Jew's lost item, disqualifying non-observant Jews from being witnesses in court, and others. Often these questions touch sensitive chords in students, who are influenced by modern value thinking and are quick to challenge and dismiss our tradition, and our answers may not be convincing enough. Is this safe?

I believe that there is great value in raising these questions and attempting to address them in the formal classroom. Education is not afraid of challenges, and our religion will often present us with challenges! Many students are bound to meet these questions later in life, either because they will think of them themselves or through anti-religious missionaries, such as "Daat Emet" ([www.daatemet.org.il](http://www.daatemet.org.il)) or "Chofesh" (<http://www.hofesh.org.il>). If teachers do not raise these difficult issues, the Jew will decide what to do haphazardly rather than thinking about it. However, if educators present these questions and have meaningful discussions in the high school classroom, the message is conveyed that we are not afraid or threatened by difficult questions, and neither is our belief weakened by challenges.

#### **Does learning of ethics lead to practice of ethics?**

There is much literature on the impact ethics courses in schools and universities have on the students. It is not to be taken for granted that after studying ethics (and Jewish Ethics) the student will automatically behave ethically in every situation. Is it still worth it to have an ethics course in our Machshevet Yisrael curriculum?

I believe there is value in exposing students to the Jewish attitude and way of behaving. If they are never informed, we can not expect them to know what the Jewish ethical approach is. Having learned these ethical issues, hopefully our students will see the Jewish approach as a consideration (among others) when they find themselves making life decisions or business transactions.

As well, we cannot try to outsmart our Jewish tradition, which has many written teachings on ethics, such as Pirkei Avot, aggadic passages in the Talmud, and mussar books – all intended to shape character – hoping that these teachings will lead to behavior.

#### **F. Summary and Conclusion**

The first and most famous composition we have on the topic of Jewish Ethics is Pirkei Avot. The first mishna describes the transmission of the Torah from Moshe at Sinai, to Yeshoshua, to the Zekainim, etc. Why is this an appropriate opening to a tractate about ethical behavior? Bartenura explains that one could think that moral behavior is made up by man, however, in Judaism we believe that our ethical behavior is also demanded of us by G-d, transmitted though His Torah, just like the rest of our mitzvot.

This message is no less (and possibly more) important than discussions about Am Yisrael, Free Choice, Reward and Punishment, Emunah, Torah and Mitzvot, Tefilla. If built correctly, a Machshevet Yisrael curriculum on the topic of Jewish ethics can be very interesting and important for students of the yeshiva high school system.