

12 Study Guides for a Year's Worth of Inspiring Discussion about

A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS: VOLUME I, YOU SHALL BE HOLY

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

Getting Started

Reading Rabbi Telushkin's A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS will challenge you to consider how and why you live an ethical life; discussing what you've read with others will allow you to share these profound considerations.

Conversations about ethics will necessarily get personal as each participant shares examples from his or her life. An open, respectful environment will ensure that you have a lively discussion. Referring back to A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS as much as possible – bringing your discussion from the personal back to the rabbinic commentaries and contemporary stories in the book – will enrich your discussion experience.

We've provided a series of discussion questions on several key passages in A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS to help you focus your discussion. You may decide to move through these questions one by one, or you may decide to skip around a bit and tackle questions as they arise. The questions are here to provide a road map, to help you regain direction if your discussion veers off track, and to help you get where you're going: to a clearer, deeper, and more satisfying understanding of Rabbi Telushkin's remarkable book.

In addition to using the following questions to direct your conversation, we recommend that you begin your meeting by introducing yourself to the other members of your group. Why are you interested in Jewish ethical teachings? What do you hope to get out of your discussion? To be sure that each person gets what he or she wants, we suggest this simple exercise:

- Get yourself something big to write on so everyone can see—a poster-sized paper taped up on the wall, for instance, or a poster board propped up against a chair or table.

- Choose someone, maybe your hostess or discussion leader, to write down a word or phrase for each person's vital discussion issue, something basic to remind you of the big idea.
- Then go around the room and ask each person to contribute one *specific* aspect of the reading that he or she would like to discuss—a particular passage, a question left unanswered, a positive, negative, or neutral observation.
- Each time you notice you've discussed a new point from the list on your board, give the person who chose this topic a chance to expand on her question or observation.
- Ask one member to keep an eye on the clock and call time once you have only fifteen or twenty minutes remaining before the end of the meeting. The discussion-board secretary can then check off each of the topics that you've already hit upon and see if there are any big or burning issues still left unaddressed.

Best wishes for a stupendous discussion experience! Enjoy all the discoveries you will make about yourself, your faith, and your world as you read, study, and talk about A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS.

1

GOD AS THE BASIS OF MORALITY

- “I believe in morals but all morals are relative.”
“I have my own private moral code.”
“Morals are entirely a matter of opinion.”

Do any of these statements describe the way we understand morality in our own lives? Go to the footnote on page 481 to read more. Discuss 1940s educator Oliver Martin's provocative statement that “Hitler or Mussolini could accept every one of these statements.”

- Do we agree with Rabbi Telushkin that “in the absence of God, all that people can express about morality are opinions” (page 481 #2)?

- “Without God, by what authority can one argue that certain activities should be permitted and others forbidden?” See page 480 #1 and #2. If some of the greatest minds of the last few centuries couldn’t come up with an answer to this question, we probably can’t either, but perhaps most of us have never given much thought to why we observe a moral code. Why *do* we abstain from theft, murder, and other crimes? Why *do* we go out of our way to help others? Is it because we want people to treat us the way we treat them, or do we believe that there is a higher authority than the law of the land?
- “Unfortunately, the belief that reason will lead people to morality is itself unreasonable.” See page 482 #4. Read this passage in its entirety, including the footnote about Freud’s 1927 pronouncement. Most people believe that ethics is based on reason, but this passage shows clearly that this is faulty thinking. How can standards be set if we all see things differently?
- Where does the acknowledgment that God is the basis of morality leave atheists and agnostics? And what about people who are religious but believe God is more concerned with faith than with acts of kindness? Read #8 on page 486 and consider the best way to teach children that virtuous behavior is what matters most to God.

2

THE HEART OF JUDAISM

- In what is perhaps the Talmud’s most famous passage, a non-Jew asks Hillel to “convert me to Judaism on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Hillel replies, “What is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah! All the rest is commentary. Now, go and study.”

The four components of Hillel's response provide a key to the essence of Judaism. Read pages 10 and 11 and discuss the vital points that Rabbi Telushkin raises.

- When we give advice, are we sure that none of it is self-serving? Can we discern the ethical teachings embedded in many of the ritual laws? Is it possible to act honorably all the time without studying the Torah? As Lyndon Johnson once said, "A president's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right."
- Start on page 12, examine #3 - #7 and discuss why the Ten Words or Commandments focus on belief in God and ethical behavior and say nothing about ritual or circumcision.
- It is said that human beings are unique because they are created "in the image of God." What does this mean?
- On page 14 #8 Rabbi Telushkin quotes the prophet Micah (6:8): "And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." How do we practice this in our own lives?
- On pages 18 and 19 #15, Rabbi Telushkin cites Psalm 15:1: "Who will abide in Your tent? Who will dwell in Your holy mountain?" and lists the qualities of those worthy of dwelling with God. How can we use this template to refine the way we live?
- On page 37 #1, Rabbi Telushkin tells us that Judaism regards improving our character as the goal of life. "The Midrash teaches, 'The Torah's commandments were not given to mankind for any purpose other than to refine people' (*Genesis Rabbah* 44:1). The Rabbis did not say that it is one of the purposes of the Torah and its commandments to improve our character, but that this is their sole purpose." Are we truly becoming more honest, kind, and compassionate as we grow older? Reflect on this and share your observations with each other.

JUDGING OTHER PEOPLE

- Most of us rush to judgment but Leviticus 19:15 says, “In justice shall you judge your fellow man.” Read what Rabbi Telushkin has to say about “the ignored commandment” on page 70 #1 and #2. Are we aware of how uninformed and unreasonable our opinion of other people’s behavior often is? Why do we think this happens?
- As Rabbi Telushkin says on page 70 #3, “One reason many of us have a higher regard for our own character than that of others is that we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their acts, especially those acts we find annoying.” Do we recognize this and can we recall occasions when it has happened?
- On page 71, Rabbi Telushkin writes that “commenting on the difficult commandment to ‘love your neighbor as yourself,’ the Ba’al Shem Tov taught that just as we love ourselves despite our faults, so too should we love others despite their faults.” He points out that we tend to justify our own actions but “loving our neighbor as ourselves means seeking out rationalizations and excuses for others’ behavior in the same way we do for our own.” Are we willing to admit that we have one standard for ourselves and another for other people? Perhaps we should be tougher on ourselves and less tough on others? See also page 79 #13 where Albert Schweitzer is quoted as saying, “You don’t have to be an angel in order to be a saint.” On page 75 #7, Rabbi Telushkin suggests that for at least one day each month we try to see only good in all those we meet.
- On page 77 #11, Rabbi Telushkin suggests that when assessing someone, we should do so not “on the basis of one or two negative things” but on his behavior as a whole. Also, “if you hear about someone’s misdeeds, take into account that her good deeds may be more significant. As Maimonides writes

‘There are some merits which outweigh many sins.’” Has it ever occurred to us to look at things from this point of view?

- On page 91 #13, Rabbi Telushkin writes, “When we don’t know someone, or when something in the person’s behavior has struck us as inappropriate, we should regard the person with caution, but should still treat him graciously.” Read the story about Joshua in this paragraph and also the following page and discuss how we should treat people who behave badly.

4

GIVING THANKS

- The Hebrew for gratitude is *hakarat ha-tov*, “recognition of the good [another has done for you].” How often do we acknowledge all the blessings bestowed on us and take the trouble to thank people? Do we do this as frequently as we recite our litany of complaints?
- Read what Rabbi Telushkin has to say about both grateful and ungrateful people on pages 96-97 #1 and #2. Doesn’t ungratefulness summon its own reward (or perhaps punishment)? Is gratitude indeed a prerequisite for happiness?
- If someone has helped us at some point in our lives, it is important not to let this fade from memory. Discuss the points Rabbi Telushkin raises on pages 97-100. Don’t wait until you are dying to say thank you to those who have gone out of their way to be kind to you.
- On page 101 #6, Rabbi Telushkin stresses the importance of thanking our loved ones for all that they have done and continue to do for us. Sometimes we express gratitude to strangers but not those nearest and dearest to us. Explore the ways that we take what family and friends do for us for granted and what we can do to remedy this.

- On pages 101-102 #7 and #8, there are examples of famous people who have reciprocated the kindness shown to their family and friends, even though they themselves were not the beneficiaries. Is this something that has happened in our own lives?
- “Repay one person’s kindness by being kind to someone else.” See page 104 #13. Consider that it is not always possible to thank someone for a good deed but random acts of kindness can spread goodwill throughout the world.

5

WHO NEEDS TO REPENT AND WHEN?

- On page 150 #1, Rabbi Telushkin writes, “An old adage teaches, ‘Great men have great flaws.’ But ordinary people do also; the flaws are just more visible in great people. We all commit acts for which we need to repent.” He suggests that we reflect on some improper behavior in which we are currently engaged and offers a checklist in case we draw a blank. How often do we stop to think about this?
- As noted on page 152 #4, in Ezekiel 33:11 we read, “As I live, says God, it is not my desire that the wicked shall die, but that the wicked shall turn from his evil ways and live.” As described on pages 152 and 153, there is always hope of *teshuvah*, no matter how deeply we have transgressed. Examine this great blessing that is always available to us.
- On page 155 we find the words of Rabbi Eliezer: “Repent one day before your death.” How would our lives change if we followed his advice?
- On pages 156-171 #1- #28 Rabbi Telushkin explains the three steps of repentance: acknowledge the wrong you have committed; do what you can to undo the damage you have inflicted, and ask for forgiveness; resolve not to sin in this way

again, and carry out your commitment. What is our experience of following his advice?

- On page 171 #29, Rabbi Telushkin writes of the importance of repentance when death is approaching. Have we been present at a friend or relative's bedside and encouraged them to unburden themselves before they leave this life?

6

WHEN FORGIVENESS IS REQUIRED, WHEN OPTIONAL, AND WHEN FORBIDDEN

- On page 196 #3, Rabbi Telushkin cites the Talmud as saying: "One who overcomes his natural tendencies and instead forgives, all his sins are forgiven." This is an extraordinary statement. Do we think that this promise will enable us to find it in our hearts to forgive others?
- In most cases, you may not withhold forgiveness if the person who has hurt you asks sincerely. On page 197 #4, Rabbi Telushkin raises the issue of how to proceed if you are so upset you can't bring yourself to do so straight away. Have you ever tried to relinquish your anger so that you can forgive someone "with a complete heart and a willing spirit" (Maimonides)?
- If the perpetrator does not ask for forgiveness, then giving it is optional, even though it is probably a better idea to do so. But on page 199 #6, Rabbi Telushkin writes that he cannot think of a reason why a rape victim should forgive a rapist or a man wrongly accused of rape should forgive his accuser. Do you agree?
- Slander and libel do not have to be forgiven, even if the perpetrator asks because the damage to one's good name can never be fully remedied, particularly on the Internet. However, it might be better for us to forgive even these wrongs rather than face the possibility that on Yom Kippur God may withhold mercy

from us in like manner. See the story at the bottom of page 199.

- Christianity encourages forgiveness for all sins but Judaism states that we may not forgive a crime committed against someone else. It is not possible to forgive a murderer because the victim is already dead. Read all that Rabbi Telushkin has to say about this on pages 201-206 and discuss.

7

THE CORRODING EFFECTS OF ANGER

- There are times when (almost) all of us become angry but we do our best to rein our anger in. As Rabbi Telushkin says, “Uncontrolled anger is... the most destructive of emotions.” Read pages 248-252 #1- #7 and explore the consequences of allowing anger to overwhelm us.
- On pages 253-255 #8- #11, read about the self-destructive aspects of anger and discuss how rage supplants common sense, induces lying (particularly in children), and makes us both unproductive and unhappy.
- Rabbi Telushkin recommends avoiding bad-tempered people. As Jacob remarked, “Into their company let me not come.” Negative emotion is volatile and it is difficult not to be affected by it. Read pages 255-258 #1- #7 and consider the many ways other people’s anger influences our own behavior and how to deal with their anger if it is not possible to avoid it.
- There are times when anger is justified. Read pages 258-262 #1- #6 and review the circumstances when not getting angry would be inappropriate. Discriminate between being angry and how to express your feelings without making matters worse.
- We can be in the middle of a raging argument but still answer the phone or the doorbell relatively calmly. This proves that it is

possible to control our anger. Using page 262 #1 as a starting point, think of techniques to help us deal with the tendency to lash out.

8

WHAT HUMILIATING OTHERS DOES TO US

- “The Talmud declares that one who publicly humiliates another forfeits a place in the World-to-Come...Fortunately, given that most of us have been guilty of this offense at least once, other sources teach that eternal punishment is exacted only from those who routinely engage in such behavior.” See page 276 #2. Why is public humiliation considered such a heinous crime?
- When Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was dying, his students asked for one final teaching and his response was “Every one of you go and be very careful of the dignity of others.” See page 278 #7. What are the consequences of following this advice?
- Rabbenu Bachya taught, “It would be better for a person not to have been born at all than to experience these seven things: the death of his children in his lifetime, economic dependence upon others, an unnatural death, forgetting his learning, suffering, slavery, and publicly shaming his fellow man.” We may find it amazing that publicly shaming someone is included on this list but it is even more remarkable that it says this rather than “being publicly shamed.” See page 279 #9. Why is it worse to shame than to be shamed?
- “If you admonish someone for a wrong she has committed, never do so in the presence of others.” Read what the Chaffetz Chayyim has to say about this on page 281 #3 and consider the implications.
- Children are more vulnerable to all attacks, including humiliation, yet it is not unusual to see and hear parents scolding their children in public. Read page 285 #13 and explore why

criticizing in front of others is both wrong and counter-productive.

- “If you have humiliated someone, your first obligation is to beg for forgiveness. Since begging is humiliating in itself, this inflicts on you a little of what your victim experienced.” Read page 292 #25 and #26 and discuss this.

9

BEARING A GRUDGE

- As Rabbi Telushkin points out on page 314 #1 and #2, hatred and untamed anger cause more suffering than any other human emotion and violate Judaism’s most fundamental principles. He reminds us of what Hillel said (See “The Heart of Judaism” in Month 2 of this study guide). “Yet this is exactly what hate-filled people do: treat others in a way that they would hate to be treated.” It all starts on a personal level but soon escalates to group action. How does this happen?
- On pages 314-315 #3, Rabbi Telushkin examines the concept of “groundless hatred” and points out that few people are willing to acknowledge that their hatred is without basis, or even exaggerated. On page 320 #3, he draws attention to the fact that “our hatred often becomes disproportionate to the provocation and needs to be reined in.” Is this so in our own lives?
- “Hatred commonly causes people to hate those they believe to be their enemies more than love the people closest to them.” See page 315 #4. This may be hard to believe but reflect on it and see whether this has ever been your experience.
- On page 319 #2 we read, “The fact that we regard someone as our enemy does not mean that he deserves to starve, and if one feeds him, he might no longer be our enemy.” Such humanitarian acts are not uncommon, even on the battlefield, but why is it

that we so rarely take the next step and relinquish the hatred we have been harboring toward our enemy?

- Rabbi Telushkin quotes a recovering alcoholic as saying, “Carrying resentments is like letting someone whom you don’t like live inside your head rent-free.” Read pages 323-24 #12 and examine how this has played out in our own lives.

10

THE TEMPTATION OF *LASHON HARA*

- “The fact that a statement or incident is true does not mean that others have the right to know about it.” See page 332 #1. Most people do not consider this before they open their mouths. Is this your experience?
- One form of malicious speech is passing along to someone the hurtful things that someone else has said. Even God refrained from doing this when speaking to Sarah. Read pages 333-334 #2 and #3 and explore ways to avoid making matters worse by “telling all.”
- It is almost impossible to make amends for *lashon hara*, as can be seen in the traditional story about the pillow related on page 337 #10. This is particularly true in these internet times. Check out page 350 #9. What are your thoughts on this?
- Rabbi Telushkin suggests on page 348 #4 that one day a month we guard our tongues from saying anything negative about or to anyone and, on the other days, observe this abstinence for a two-hour period. What effect does this have on our behavior?
- Some people do their best to avoid gossiping about friends but enjoy discussing the reported failings of public figures. On page 353 #16, Rabbi Telushkin recommends avoiding this if we believe that the issue has no bearing on the person’s ability to do their job. Do you agree?

- “Not only should we not speak *lashon hara*; we should also not listen to it.” Read page 359 #27 and discuss the advice given there.

11

TRUTH AND LIES

- For some people, lying is no big deal but Rabbi Telushkin tells us on page 401 that “lying leads us to commit other sins, while truth-telling will stop us from doing so.” After reading the three examples in #5 on this page, explore the ramifications of the simple act of resolving not to lie under any circumstances.
- It’s not unusual for people to embellish the facts and mix half-truths with truths. Read the whole of page 403 and continue through page 406 #5. Can you discern situations in your own life where you could work toward being more truthful?
- Deuteronomy 23:24 says, “You must fulfill what has crossed your lips, and perform what you have vowed.” See page 411-414 #13 and #14. Would remembering this make us more careful about the commitments we make and less likely to let others down just because we find it inconvenient to keep our word?
- On page 419 #5, Rabbi Telushkin writes about *g’neivat da’at* (stealing another’s mind) by taking advantage of someone’s ignorance. He reminds us that “we each have areas of blindness as well as areas of expertise that enable us to take advantage of others.” In #4 on the same page, he points out that this often happens with sales people. How can we avoid this form of lying in our own lives?
- Pages 423-450 #1- #38 explore the circumstances under which it is permissible to lie—to prevent future harm or to promote peace—but we need to be very aware of our motives. Do you

agree or disagree that these examples warrant not telling the truth?

- “Even when lying is permitted, try to minimize the untruth,” writes Rabbi Telushkin on page 451 #40. Will this advice help us choose more carefully what we do or do not say?

12

KIDDUSH HASHEM

- Rabbi Telushkin identifies the elements of *Kiddush Hashem* (“sanctifying God’s Name”) on page 456 #1: to offer both non-Jews and non-observant Jews a shining example of how to “do the right thing” so that they are drawn to Judaism and, if necessary, show that Jews are willing to die for their faith rather than deny it. These are major responsibilities. How do we feel about each of them?
- On page 456 #2, Rabbi Telushkin points out that other people can become alienated from both God and Judaism when they observe our unethical behavior. Have you had experience of this?
- One of the ways in which we desecrate God’s Name (*Chillul Hashem*) is by associating it with unethical actions in order to justify what we do. See pages 457-458 #3. Yet God is very clear in the Third Commandment that this is an unforgivable sin. Do we see the effect of attaching the Name of God to something that is wrong?
- In the section on martyrdom beginning on page 469, Rabbi Telushkin examines the appropriate action for Jews to take when their lives are threatened because of their religion. And in #11 on page 475 he tells the story of a Jew who died on 9/11, sacrificing his own life in order to comfort a paraplegic friend. As Rabbi Telushkin points out, this is “a poignant example of

Kiddush Hashem.” Explore the question of martyrdom and what your personal response might be.

- On page 468 #18, Rabbi Telushkin reminds us that Jews are God’s ambassadors. He sums up the whole teaching of this book when he writes: “When Jews act with integrity, they not only bring credit on themselves, but they draw people to God. This has been the mission of the Jewish people since the time of Abraham, the first Jew, and it remains the mission of the Jewish people today.” Are we ready to be ambassadors of God?

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