

# How Biblical Ethics Puts Our Faith Into Action

The Bible is more than a storybook, or even “just” the anchor of our faith. It is a playbook for our day-to-day existence, a guidebook for every facet of life. According to Jewish tradition and teaching, it provides the foundation for application of biblical values in modern life. Through an ongoing application of these ideas in our lives today, even when we find ourselves in a situation in which there’s nothing obvious at all about biblical narrative and modern life, by paying close attention, it’s arguable that there’s nothing in life in which biblical values do not apply.

Centuries of rabbinic analysis and commentary on a myriad of modern developments play this out. By applying these values to our belief, we put our faith in action. There are limitless areas in which this is the case.

For instance, one topic that applies to virtually everyone, whether we own a business and employ others, or are the employees, there are biblical values in how we work and interact with our employees or employer matters on a day-to-day basis. The injunction to pay fair wages and to pay on time could not be more simple and clear. It should require no further explanation, but not everyone is as honest as another, so we need these rules even if self-evident to most. On the flip side, employees have an obligation not to steal from their employer. That should be obvious whether regarding material goods or wasting time for which one is being paid. Everyone with a smartphone is challenged and obliged not to waste time at the employer’s expense.

Loosely categorized as “Jewish business ethics,” we have obligations to one another, and to God, in multiple areas such as advertising and marketing, intellectual property rights and

broader corporate responsibility. Even at our best, are we expected to follow a minimum threshold, or do we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard, going beyond the letter of the law? Rabbis have pondered and taught about the implications of this in many areas for centuries and applied these rules to our changing world.

Abiding by these biblical ethics, we put action into our faith. That's important, but there's another dimension. When religious people are recognized for particularly righteous behavior (regarding business ethics or in other ways), they are seen as honoring God. Others see that behavior and associate it with faith. Conversely, when a religious person engages in embarrassing, even horrific behavior, it's considered in Hebrew a *chilul hashem*, a desecration of God's name. Simply put, all our actions have a myriad of earthly and heavenly consequences.

What about applying biblical ethics to something that's the essence of life and death? What about the ethics of war, or is that inherently a contradiction in terms? Sadly, there's no place in which that seeming conflict exists more on a day-to-day basis than Israel. Let's examine how that very aspect of day-to-day survival plays out in the only Jewish state, one rooted in God and the Bible, which also happens to be one of the most (if not the most) threatened countries in the world.

Israel is widely credited as having among the most moral armies, providing warning of impending attacks and holding off on attacks that might inflict civilian casualties. This is true in many ways, from dropping leaflets warning civilian residents; calling residents of specific buildings about to be targeted and telling them to get out, not bombing terrorist hideouts under or around civilian areas, sending in Israeli troops rather than widespread bombing to take out a threat; giving the "knock on the roof" that warns residents in a building to get out and attacking military targets in the middle of the night to avoid civilian deaths.

Despite all this, Israel is not perfect. Only a moral army and country will take the time and effort to consider its military ethics nationally and to address where individuals fall short. Israel confronts a balance between keeping ethics and winning a war. With so much at stake, not just individual lives but the existence of a whole country that many want to destroy, why is it not sufficient to employ the practice that simply winning a war is all that matters and what we do and how we do it doesn't matter?

Different circumstances apply to different scenarios as well; it's not one size fits all. There are considerations that vary between being under direct attack and calculating a preemptive strike. All in all, Israel measures up very well. As a model for the world, it is studied by both military analysts and military ethicists. .

There's a biblical prohibition on destroying fruit trees when making war. There are many modern implications of that, but the message is clear. Engaging in war is sometimes necessary and, when doing so, one has the legitimate imperative to win. But winning does not mean at all costs and surely not to harm the well-being of noncombatants.

Facing daily challenges and the overarching threat of a nuclear Iran, these are issues that weigh on Israel and its leaders, militarily and ethically, every day. The Bible provides strength and guidance in these areas and so many other aspects of life.

Join us for a conversation with Rabbi Shlomo Brody about these and other contemporary topics in applying biblical ethics in our lives today. {eo}

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