

The Moral Ties within the Family of Abraham: A Primer on Shared Social Values in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Joseph V. Montville

P R E C I S

A detailed study of sacred literature in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveals an extraordinarily similar teaching of social values and individual morals. The most important revelation for Jews and Christians is the Muslim belief that their holy book, the Qur'ān, is the third and final volume of God's great book in heaven. The first two volumes were the Torah and the Injil—or Gospels. In terms of values, the three Abrahamic religions are, indeed, a family.



The great Hebrew Prophet Isaiah taught a universal lesson to humanity when he wrote: “Learn to do good, Seek Justice, Aid the oppressed, Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow” (Is. 1:17).¹ It is remarkable how consistent these teachings are to be found in the New Testament and in the revelations of the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.

¹Authorized (King James) Version (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1978); hereafter, A.V.

In Judaism

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief Orthodox rabbi of Great Britain, has described the essential moral concept of “*hesed*,” which is often translated “kindness” but also means “love.” This is not passionate love but, rather, love displayed through deeds. *Hesed* is *covenant love* in which parties pledge loyalty to each other and respect the freedom and integrity of the other. *Hesed* means doing acts of kindness for others. It is the gift of love that produces love. Rabbi Hama said, “Just as [God] clothes, the naked . . . so shall you clothe the naked. Just as He visits the sick . . . so you visit the sick. Just as [God] comforts the mourners . . . so you comfort mourners. Just as He buries the dead . . . so you bury the dead” (Babylonian Talmud *Sotah* 14a).

Another classic example of *hesed* is the story in Genesis wherein Abraham, sitting at the entrance of his tent, spots three strangers approaching. He greets them and brings them inside to give them food and drink. Abraham does not know that the three are angels, but the implication is that Abraham and Sarah, his wife, treated all strangers as if they were angels. As Sacks put it, Abraham and Sarah reached out to embrace the strangers because they were made in the image of God. They saw “the divine Other in the human other, because that is how God reveals himself.”²

Finally, there is the concept of “*darkhei shalom*,” the “ways of peace,” which took the kindness and love of others to a universal application. It was the sages after the destruction of the Second Temple in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Babylonian Talmud, who illustrated the application of *darkhei shalom* to non-Jews:

For the sake of peace, the poor of the heathens should not be prevented from gathering gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and corners of the field.

Our masters taught: for the sake of peace, the poor of the heathens should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the heathens should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the heathens should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel.³

Further on, justice, the practice of justice, and the seeking of a just society are divine commandments for Jews. While cultivating a pious life

²Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 47.

³*Darkhei shalom* (Mishna 4,5 Gittin).

through study and contemplation is at the heart of Jewish worship of God, the Torah makes clear that that piety must necessarily translate in society through a striving for justice. The pursuit of justice itself or the striving against injustice is a path to piety in Judaism.

Richard Schwarz noted Rabbi Emanuel Rackman's observation that "Judaism teaches a special kind of justice," an "empathic justice," which "seeks to make people identify with each other—with each other's needs, with each other's hopes and aspirations, with each other's defeats and frustrations. Because Jews have known the distress of slaves and the loneliness of strangers, we are to project ourselves into their souls and make their plight our own."⁴

The measure of the community's righteousness, then, can be found in the status and care of the poorest and most powerless. It is on their well-being and on the righteousness of society that God has judged and carried out divine blessings and punishments (Shabbat 139a). The significance of the pursuit of justice for the people of Israel becomes clear in the full verse of Dt. 16:20: "Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God gave you."⁵

Most powerfully and dramatically, the Hebrew prophets throughout history have proclaimed that authentic worship of God cannot coexist with the perpetration of injustice or unethical treatment of others. Rejecting the pretense or show of piety while the powerless suffered, God in Isaiah writes:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;

⁴Richard H. Schwarz, *Judaism and Global Survival*, new rev. ed. (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), p. 27, quoting Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, "Torah Concept of Empathic Justice Can Bring Peace," *The Jewish Week*, April 3, 1977, p. 19.

⁵*The Contemporary Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).

incense is an abomination to me. (Is. 1:11–13a, New Revised Standard Version).

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Is. 58:7, NRSV)

To conclude, we offer the Prophet Jeremiah's summary exhortation: "[I]f you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, . . . then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever" (Jer. 7:5b–6a, 7, NRSV).

In Christianity

In the matter of love and universality of humankind, Christianity inherited Judaism's concern for the individual relationship with God and the importance of manifesting that love in relations with others. When Jesus was asked which of God's commandments was most important, Mark records Jesus' response: "The [most important one] is: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mk. 12:29–30, NRSV, citing Dt. 6:4). He then added: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk. 12:31, NRSV).

Elaborating on biblical ethics, Jesus famously proclaims, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt. 7:12, NRSV). As in Judaism, Jesus asks believers to love all others as God loves creation: God sends sunshine and rain on the good as well as the bad (Mt. 5:43–48), as God does not distinguish among the creation, nor should God's believers.

The evangelist Paul, the most passionate advocate of love in the New Testament, wrote: "Love is patient; love is kind, It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:4–7, New International Version).

As the Hebrew prophets had proclaimed, there was a fundamental contradiction between authentic worship of God and mistreatment of others. Early Christians pointed this out in embedded Christian values of love in community. For example: “We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 Jn. 4:19–21, A.V.).

Christian social values, while centrally based in the cardinal principle of love, also carry over many of the ethical precepts found in Judaism. As the writer of Hebrews explains: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it [compare the open tent of Abraham]. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb. 13:1–3, NRSV).

Forgiveness is a central moral value in Christianity. It brings together the Christian values of love, agape, compassion, humility, mercy, and redemptive salvation. Forgiveness is a defining virtue and practice of Christianity, which follows from the recognition that humanity is deeply flawed and yet always within reach of redemption and God’s mercy. More than an ideal, forgiveness is a central part of Christian worship and identity; it is prominently and frequently stated in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Having faith in God is related directly to God’s forgiveness of one’s sins and one’s ability to forgive others (Lk. 5:20, 7:47–50; Mt. 18:35). As God forgives, so are Christians expected to forgive. The Bible is clear on this point. Mark warns that “when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mk. 11:25).⁶ Matthew reinforces the point: “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Mt. 6:14–15, New Living Translation).

⁶*The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*, Priests for Equality, A Sheed & Ward Book (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

The transformation of the heart, being so important to Christian faith, is essential to forgiveness. Christians are asked to “forgive your brother from your heart” (Mt. 18:35, A.V.) if they are to receive the blessings of God’s forgiveness and find peace. So important is this principle that to be Christian *means* to forgive when asked by another in sincerity. Luke describes the relationship among love, faith, and the forgiveness of sins: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little. Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ . . . Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” (Lk. 7:48 and 50, A.V.).

When Jesus was asked whether there were limits to such acts—if the seventh time of bestowing forgiveness to a repeat offender was enough—Jesus replied, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven” (Mt. 18:22, A.V.). Luke reaffirms this: “So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (Lk. 17:3–4, A.V.).

Generosity, the instinct to charity, is an essential moral value. The New Testament speaks to the importance of generosity, remarking, “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again” (Lk. 6:30, NRSV). The Christian manual *Didache* (ca. 100 C.E.) claims that the true Christian must give to everyone who asks, without looking for repayment. While Jesus emphasized the importance of the spiritual over the material, nevertheless, he strongly advocated for social justice and generosity for the poor. This includes lending practices that are just (Lk. 6:33–36). Jesus reminds his followers to “lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Lk. 6:35b–36, NRSV).

There is a profound concern for “the least among us.” Jesus’ ministry was devoted to the poor and the vulnerable in his community. The needy were the most deserving of love and fellowship, and they were closest to God because of their piety and faith. Jesus’ message of worldly renunciation and God’s special blessings to those who were steadfast in the face of hardship gave particular dignity to the poor. James records that Jesus said: “Listen my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be

rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?" (Jas. 2:5–7, *Inclusive Bible*).

Jesus particularly singles out the needy and the vulnerable for special blessings by God. Luke records that Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets" (Lk. 6:20–23, NRSV).

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus devoted his energy to speaking out and addressing the plight of the poor and the powerless. His ministry focused on the suffering class—lepers, despised women, the sick, the blind, the hungry, the persecuted, and other marginalized peoples (Lk. 4:18–19, 7:18–23; Mt. 11:2–6)—at a time of tyranny and occupation. As others throughout Jewish history had done, Jesus warned his community of the consequences of corruption, injustice, and God's judgment in this life and the next.

Jesus himself had been a refugee (Mt. 2:13–15), with no regular income during his public ministry. He sent his disciples out with very little to sustain their work, relying on God for their well-being. Jesus emphasized that God had no care for one's worldly claims or accomplishments but, rather, it was the state of their heart and faith that would determine their fate in the afterlife. He also taught that those who imitated God by loving and caring for the neediest would be rewarded by God: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me" (Mt. 25:34–36, NRSV).

In Islam

Islam teaches that God endowed humanity with a good, purposeful nature and with a deep inner awareness of God. At this most basic level, humankind has an innate ability naturally and independently to perceive what is right, good, and ethical. Muslims understand their faith as *din al-fitrah* (natural religiousness), which at its purest level is in a state of instinctual and natural surrender to God (Qur'an 30:30). By heeding this deeply seated calling of conscience, humankind pursues the highest good for self and others, thereby fulfilling the purpose of creation in service and worship of God (51:56).

To help live authentically and consistently with our true natures and to remind humanity of the consequences of our actions, Muslims believe humanity has been given divine guidance through the Qur'an, as revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is understood as a "mercy" to humankind, enjoining Muslims to use their gifts and act on their innate sense of decency in service and obedience to God through the creation of a just and peaceful society (6:157, 165; 21:107).

The Qur'an promotes positive bonds between people because of their common moral responsibility toward one another. When the Prophet Muhammad was asked, "Who among men is most favored by God?" he replied, "A man who does the most good to people."⁷ Chief among these are deep ethical commitments to equality and justice and social obligations to the poorest and least powerful in the community.

In terms of creating a just society, as God revealed Godself to the Jewish and Christian communities in times of extreme oppression, Islamic tradition holds that God's revelation to Muslims came in a time of oppression from ignorance, corruption, and the internecine violence that was tearing apart the fabric of Arabian tribes. This time of *al-jahiliyya* (ignorance) was ended with God's revelation of the Qur'an through the Prophet Muhammad, whose leadership ultimately united the disparate, warring tribes of Arabia into a unified Muslim community (*ummah*). An important surah says: "We sent you no Messenger [prophet] save with the tongue of his peo-

⁷Imam Daraqutni, *Kitab al-Tatabbu'* (d. 995 C.E.).

ple, that he might make all clear to them” (14:4).⁸ In practical terms this means that God sent the Qur’ān to Muhammad in Arabic, as he sent the Torah in Hebrew and the Gospels in Aramaic and Greek.

The core beliefs in liberty, equality, comradeship, and social justice—the “Abrahamic ethics”—are foundational religious values that carry significant social and political implications. Beliefs rooted in human dignity and freedom of conscience influence social values as to how society is structured. Some of the social values that emerge from these fundamental principles in Islam include those emphasizing *Ta’aruf* (knowing one another), *Ta’awun* (cooperation, mutual assistance, in transactions), and *Takamul* (complementarity and completion).

The Qur’ān makes clear that justice itself is a command from God (5:8, 16:90), enjoining believers to that which is just and kind (16:90), as well as forbidding that which is unjust (60:8, 72:15). The primacy of justice among Islamic values is demonstrated by God’s command to pursue it above all other considerations: “O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves, your parents, and your relatives, or whether it is against the rich or the poor, for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do” (4:135).

In the case of radical egalitarianism, the Prophet said in his final sermon, “All mankind is from Adam and Eve; an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white, except by piety and good action.”⁹

With regard to the dignity of women, the most radical social reforms advanced by Islam regarded their status. Women were given unprecedented rights and position in the Muslim community, where they emerged in all aspects of community life—including fighting alongside men in battle. The principle of strict individual moral accountability to God gave an equal status to women as believers (or unbelievers). Numerous verses go to great lengths to support the principle of gender equality in the sight of God.

⁸All Qur’ānic references herein are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’ān* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1989).

⁹Sahih Al-Bukhari (d. 870 C.E.).

Among the advances in women's dignity are punishments for those accusing or defaming women (a false accusation of adultery was one of eight mortal sins) and added protections for women insofar as their rights and status were concerned. In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were buried alive, and women were considered property with no independent status or rightful claims. In this sense, the independence and equality in legal and religious rights and duties accorded to women in Medina were considered revolutionary. So radical were these reforms—deeply controversial during the Prophet's time—that the progress of gender equality suffered from severe, consecutive backlashes and a prolonged rollback in rights after his death. This helps explain, but not at all justify, the primitive male chauvinism in the hyper-patriarchal societies of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, for example.

On pluralism and diversity, the Qur'ān states: "Had God willed, He would have made you into one community; but [it was His will] to test you in what He gave you. So compete with each other in doing good works. To God you are all returning, and He will inform you about how you differed" (5:48). The Qur'ān and the Hadiths confer legitimacy to and demonstrate a strong respect for the Jewish and Christian communities living within and alongside the Muslim community. The Qur'ān states: "Those who believe (in the Qur'ān), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians . . . and (all) who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (2:62).

Islam offers "People of the Book" a broad scope of religious freedoms, protections, and minority-group rights within Muslim communities as a religious, moral duty. In one Hadith recorded by Abu Daud, the Prophet warned, "Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment."¹⁰

With regard to caring for the poor, as Jesus declared that "Blessed are the poor," the Prophet said, "Poverty is my pride." The Prophet informed his followers that "He who helps his fellow-creature in the hour of need, and he who helps the oppressed, him will God help in the Day of Travail." When

¹⁰*Sunan Abu Dawud.*

asked which actions were the most excellent in the eyes of God, Prophet Muhammed replied: “To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured. Feed the hungry and visit the sick, and free the captive, if he be unjustly confined. Assist any person oppressed, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.”¹¹

As for widows and orphans, the Prophet was deeply concerned for the welfare of the poor and the powerless in his community, urging Muslims to be especially mindful that the treatment of widows and orphans be both just and kind. Having been orphaned at the age of six, in a highly tribal social context, the Prophet spent considerable time and attention on the issue of justice and proper care for orphans. Mentioning orphans twenty-three times in twenty-two chapters, the Qur’ān instructs Muslims to “stand firm for justice to orphans. There is not a good deed which you do, but God is well-acquainted therewith” (4:127). Other chapters warn against unjust dealings with orphans in their care (4:2–8, 36; 6:152; 17:34; 89:17; 107:2), reminding Muslims to “treat not the orphan with harshness” (93:9) and threatening those who deal with them unjustly with “blazing fire” (4:10).

Considering forgiveness and humility, the Prophet was once asked, as Jesus was, about the limits of forgiveness: “O Apostle of God! How many times are we to forgive our servant’s faults?’ He was silent. Again the questioner asked, and [the Prophet] Muhammad gave no answer. But when the man asked a third time, he said, ‘Forgive your servants seventy times a day.’”¹²

Two of the most oft-repeated qualities of God are being merciful and compassionate—the opening statements of each of the chapters of the Qur’ān. Given the frequency of mention of these qualities of God, Muslims who are mindful of God seek to incorporate them into their own lives. As in Christianity, sincere repentance is key to God’s forgiveness: “those who do ill-deeds and afterward repent and believe—lo! For them, afterward, Allah is Forgiving, merciful” (7:153). The Prophet once remarked that “A sincere

¹¹All quoted from *Sayings of the Prophet* (Arlington, VA: The Wisdom Fund, 1995); see <http://www.twf.org/Sayings.html>.

¹²Ibid.

repentant of faults is like him who hath committed none. God loves those who repent.”¹³

In conclusion, the path of Abraham provides a means not only of ennobling the soul but also of bringing believers into harmony with one another and into proximity to God: “And who better in faith than the one who willingly surrenders his being to God, and is a doer of good, and follows the way of Abraham the rightly oriented? For God took Abraham as a friend” (4:125).

¹³Ibid.