

THE FOLLOWING PAGES outline ten Jewish sensibilities grounded in Jewish ethics and values that offer an innovative system for understanding how Judaism defines our lives. Are these sensibilities durable? How will they be transmitted? Can they be framed — like halakhah — as a communal norm? Will they hold Jews close enough to Judaism or do they represent a quasi-religious set of behaviors that are neither legal prescriptions nor ethical teachings? Do these sensibilities suggest that Judaism is acculturating so profoundly that it is adopting an American value system and calling it Jewish?

Inside Sensibilities

Vanessa L. Ochs:
Ten Jewish Sensibilities 1

Jeffrey A. Spitzer:
Ennobling Ignorance 4

Jonathan Schofer:
In the Image of God 5

Karen L. Wood:
Christian and Jewish Sensibilities 6

Dov Lere:
Sensibilities and Halakhah 7

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer:
Rooting Universal Sensibilities 8

Barry W. Holtz:
What's Worth Learning 9

Meredith Woocher:
Teaching More than the Source 10

David Rosenn:
21st Century Judaism 12

Erica Brown:
Book review 13

Discussion Guide 14

Elie Kaunfer:
NiSh'ma 15

David A. Teutsch:
Sh'ma Ethics 16

Ten Jewish Sensibilities

Vanessa L. Ochs

I'VE HEARD IT SAID, "I'm not really religious but I like to think of myself as a good Jew." This line references an unarticulated code that many Jewish Americans try to follow — even judge themselves by — a code that overlaps but is not synonymous with the requirements of Jewish law or traditional practice.

I call that code "The Ten Jewish Sensibilities." These are particularly Jewish ways of thinking about what it means to be human, ways that guide and orient a person's actions and choices. Knowing the code can help us anticipate how we'll lead our lives and make decisions.

These ten sensibilities have become evident to me in my careers as a journalist and an anthropologist. Initially, I developed this list of sensibilities as a response to queries by bioethicists, physicians, chaplains, and medical students, all wanting to hear "the Jewish perspective" on issues such as making end-of-life decisions, choosing whether or not to pursue treatment, debating the ethics of stem-cell experimentation, or using various new reproductive technologies. I was generally expected to present the relevant Jewish laws bearing on these novel situations. When seeking to understand Jews, people tend to seek insight from those who anchor their responses to halakhah, those rules determining what is permitted and forbidden and what is expected of an individual or community. To satisfy the expectations of such groups, I'd share some of the relevant laws while also insisting that halakhah describes only what law-abiding religiously observant Jews should believe or do. But even if you

know halakhah, you will not know what Jews — Orthodox or otherwise — actually believe or how they act and feel in situations both familiar and novel.

If knowing halakhah is insufficient, how can ethicists and doctors assess what is in the hearts and minds of many Jewish families who huddle outside intensive care units struggling with questions such as how and if a loved one's life should be continued by artificial means? Does this mean that Jews whose behaviors and outlook are not governed by total or even partial acceptance of halakhah lack distinctive ways of thinking about how to act in the world? Does it mean that most of the choices Jews make in the workplace, in family life, and in the context of healthcare are made without reference to Judaism?

Not at all: I believe that most Conservative Jews, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Jews, and the vast majority of non-practicing secular Jews do have a well-defined set of principles that guide them, whether or not they are aware of it. Even when Jews act against halakhah, ignoring it intentionally or unintentionally, there are still, as I calculate, ten essential Jewish sensibilities guiding their behavior.

These are the guidelines I give to the ethical and medical professionals, and I suggest they use them to better understand American Jews. In my work with Jewish communal leaders, I discovered that the sensibilities could also be of use to Jewish communities thinking about ritual practices (in particular, ritual innovation) and ways to engage the spiritually disenfranchised.

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The ten sensibilities I have selected as being most central, predictive, and characteristic are ethical precepts, values, principles, and ways of being that are drawn from Jewish sacred texts, from Jewish ritual practices and communal customs, and from the vast narrative of Jewish history. They are passed on in a helter-skelter fashion: through watching and listening to people modeling behaviors; through meals, songs, and adages; through the stories of people's lives that are narrated because they are exemplary or cautionary; and through texts that are venerated — both sacred and secular. Since acting against these sensibilities can be experienced as a quasi-violation that causes personal or social distress,

These sensibilities help us understand how our Jewishness defines or contributes to the way we live.

I would say that, for many American Jews, these sensibilities even have some of the felt impact of law.

My understanding of Jewish sensibilities is influenced by two major Jewish thinkers, Max Kadushin and "Yitz" Greenberg. What differentiates my list of sensibilities from Kadushin's value concepts and Greenberg's continuum concepts is that I see the sensibilities as categories that emerge primarily from the real lives of a diverse population of Jews, characterizing how Jews self-describe and live out their ideals, rather than as prescriptions imposed by sacred texts.

The Sensibilities

1) Making Distinctions: *Havdalah*

Making distinctions matters to us. They may be temporal — such as making a distinction between special times and everyday times. We take calendars seriously: we honor vacation time, family time, and birthdays. While we celebrate the blessings of everyday life, we understand that special occasions have a holy dimension that we mark. Some distinctions are personal and create new situations, like marriage ceremonies or graduations.

2) Honor: *Kavod*

We are aware that we do not live in a social vacuum and that our actions have

consequences. We want to be respected. Thus, we aspire to act in ways that will bring honor to ourselves, to our families, and to the communities we belong to. We want to be worthy of honor after we have passed on and our deeds and choices are remembered.

3) Turning: *Teshuvah*

We believe it is possible to reflect upon one's life, turn it around, and experience forgiveness from others while also feeling a sense of renewal for ourselves. We are works-in-progress, and self-improvement is always possible. We give ourselves and others opportunities to change.

4) Dignity; Being in the Image of God: *Tzelem Elokim*

We seek ways to conduct ourselves and to treat others with the greatest of respect in order to preserve our own dignity and the dignity of each individual and to prevent humiliation. We are aware that dignity is possible only when one is free and self-sustaining. We care about education because having knowledge enhances one's self-respect and ability to live in a dignified manner. We might care about appearances, knowing that dressing appropriately enhances one's self-respect and honors others. We are likely to engage in political, charitable, and volunteer activities (such as mentoring the underprivileged, working for civil rights, or building housing for the homeless) that increase the dignity of others.

5) Saving a Life: *Pikuach Nefesh*

We believe that as long as one is healthy there is reason to celebrate. We toast, "*L'Chaim!*" "To life!" We do not take health, the number one blessing, for granted, and we feel the miraculous nature of every recovery. We understand that life is fragile and go to extremes to save a life.

6) Being a Really Good Person: *"Be a Mensch"*

We aspire to be a *mensch*, someone who acts with compassion toward others. In ourselves and in others, we value the human qualities of being attentive, empathetic, and discrete, and of making sacrifices when necessary. We try to be good friends and neighbors. A *mensch's* broad

reserve of compassion extends toward all Jews, wherever they live, and toward all people, particularly the vulnerable.

7) Keeping the Peace: *Shalom Bayit*

Certain decisions or gestures are made not only because they are appropriate but also because they serve to keep the peace, settle differences, keep a family together, and create harmony instead of divisiveness.

8) Repairing the World: *Tikkun Olam*

We hold that each person should find ways to make the world a better and more just place. This stance of compassionate engagement occurs in simple individual ways as well as on larger platforms. We use our money and talents to make a difference. Engaging in world repair, we may feel as if we are “doing a mitzvah,” doing something that we are divinely ordained to do even though it is our choice. We feel that doing good works justifies our having been put on this earth. If we have been fortunate, we feel responsible to “give back.”

9) Maintaining Hope: *Yesh Tikvah*

We try to hang on to hope and resist despair. In romance, we believe we will meet our *beshtet*, our intended one. We dream expansively and even set off on uncertain journeys with feelings of promise on the horizon. At the same time, we accept that some things seem fated not to be. When a door closes, we face reality and move on to new possibilities.

10) Memory of One’s Ancestors:

Z’chut Avot

We feel connected to the people who came before us. We draw insight and wisdom from the experiences of our ancestors and seek to honor them with our actions. And we expect the same of our children. Thus, we honor our ancestors by transmitting the sensibilities that characterized their ideas and actions onto the next generation.

REGARDLESS OF ORIENTATION, these sensibilities can help Jews formulate decisions in keeping with one’s Jewish “compass” in at least three particular areas: health care, ritual practice, and personal moral choice. For example, these sensibilities may help when facing decisions borne out of unprecedented medical technologies. At one time, harvesting an organ required both the mutilation of

a body and potential pain and suffering of the recipient, without assurance that the recipient would even recover. There was concern that the “dignity” of both the dead and the living might be compromised. But, in the past decade, as organ transplantations have become safer, more reliable, and even more routine, the sensibility of “Saving a Life” comes more predictably into play. More Jews now look at organ donation as familiar procedures that save lives. They will consequently designate themselves as organ donors on their driver’s licenses and health directives and, if asked, would probably agree to donate the organs of a loved one who is brain-dead.

The sensibilities help to determine if novel Jewish ritual practices or synagogue policies are consistent with Jewish understanding. For example, the practice among some Reform Jews to give Torah honors to non-Jews, particularly when they are the parents of a bar or bat mitzvah child, calls into play the sensibility of “Keeping the Peace.” Despite what Jewish law says about the inappropriateness of giving Torah honors to non-Jews, some liberal congregations are finding creative ways to include non-Jewish family members to make family and communal celebrations as harmonious as possible.

These sensibilities help us understand how our Jewishness defines or contributes to the way we live. For example, according to halakhah, sexual relations between an unmarried man and woman are forbidden. Yet Jews who do not heed halakhah concerning premarital sex still bring Jewish consciousness to sexuality. Two sensibilities in particular govern premarital relations. First, “Saving a Life”: the majority of Jews involved in romantic relationships feel duty-bound to take precautions for safe-sex both for themselves and their partners. Second, “Distinctions”: many Jews tend to honor both themselves and their partners by maintaining monogamy in relationships.

Drawing upon the ten sensibilities and relating them to a situation at hand requires creative thinking and the ability to juggle. That is, a sensibility that mattered more at one time or to one generation might give way to a different sensibility that now takes precedence. Sometimes multiple sensibilities are at play, and they may compete for the strength of influence. At the core, however, is the weightiness of the sensibilities, what Kadushin calls the “primary factors in the experience of significance.”

Vanessa L. Ochs is the Ida and Nathan Kolodiz Director of Jewish Studies and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. Her most recent book is The Jewish Dream Book (written with Elizabeth Ochs). A longer version of this essay, along with additional responses, will be posted in the Spring 2004 on <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals.tr>.