

“Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And, above all, remember to build a life as if it were a work of art.”

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Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel  
Final Interview with Carl Stern, 1972

Quoted in "Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel" (1996)

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# The Jewish Mission to Heal the World

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In our final class, we'll ask the question: "Does Judaism have an essential teaching?" as we explore key concepts like tzedakah (righteous giving), tzelem Elohim (the image of God), and tikkun olam (healing the world).

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# Where Are You Going?

To the best of my knowledge, a Jew is:

At this time, what I find most attractive or compelling about Judaism:

At this time, what I find most troubling or confusing about Judaism:

My next step will be:

# Does Judaism Have an Essential Teaching?

## Rabbis Share their Inspiration

### Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

American Jewish University, Los Angeles, CA

**“You must not remain indifferent.”** (Deuteronomy 22:3)

This has been my favorite verse in the Torah for as long as I can remember. And I do remember, as a college student 30 years ago, the first time I picked up the Bible to read it on my own — the same semester that I met my wife, Elana, and God (I was clearly in the mood for love!). Reading Scripture on my own, in English, hit me with a force beyond description. I was thrilled by the drama and the pageantry, elevated by the wisdom, challenged by the vision of a just, compassionate, and righteous society — a vision yet to be implemented.

Then I read these staccato words in the middle of a paragraph that speaks of our obligation to restore lost items to our fellow (the Torah terms him your “brother“!), how we are to inconvenience ourselves to return lost property or clothing or livestock, we are then instructed *lo tukhal le-hitalem*, you must not remain indifferent. If you were looking for a three-word summation of the entire Torah, that would be it.

I have tried throughout my rabbinic work, as a husband and father and friend, not to allow myself to be indifferent. When I saw the exclusion and marginalization of GLBTQ people, I didn't let myself remain quiet. When I fathered a boy who struggles with autism, I didn't let myself remain quiet. I am no saint, but that charge of Torah was a goad that would not let me hide (another way to translate the verse: “You may not hide“). Rashi comments that we may not hide our eyes as though we didn't see the other's suffering.

These powerful, uncompromising, stern words call me to be who I am supposed to be. Whether tired or not, worn down or not, I can no longer hide. I must not remain indifferent.

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### Rabbi Patricia Fenton

American Jewish University, Los Angeles, CA

**“The world is built through kindness.”** (Psalm 89:3)

My revered and beloved teacher, Rabbi Dr. David Lieber, of blessed memory, used to say that the whole purpose of Torah is to increase kindness in the world.

## Rabbi Michael Siegel

Anshe Emet, Chicago, IL

**“God said to Abraham: Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”** (Genesis 12:1)

Judaism begins with the relationship between God and Abraham. These words form an invitation to the descendants of Abraham to walk with God in every generation. This begins when we are willing to act and think differently than those around us. It begins when we are willing to set our watch to covenantal time. Abraham was asked to act in order to be so, too, are we.

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## Rabbi Mark Borovitz

Beit Teshuvah, Los Angeles, CA

**“One who saves a single soul, it is as if they saved an entire world.”** (Sanhedrin 37a)

This points out the importance of each Soul/Person. We all matter and all of us are significant and worthy. Our job is to live our significance and worth out-loud without fear and help others do the same.

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## Rabbi David Wolpe

Sinai Temple, Los Angeles, CA

**“Guard your soul carefully.”** (Deuteronomy 4:9)

The greatest gift is that we are in God's image. Our lives are the chronicle of how we relate to one another and shepherd our own Divine spark.

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## Rabbi Denise Eger

Congregation Kol Ami, West Hollywood, CA

**“What does God require of you? Only to do justice, love compassion, and walk humbly with your God.”** (Micah 6:8)

The Prophet Micah gives us a threefold challenge: To take responsibility through the mitzvot that we do, to create a world filled with justice. To do so not as zealots, but with humility and compassion. And to walk with God in partnership, as Abraham once did, with an outlook of lovingkindness and commitment to the service of God and humankind. It is through this statement that I try to actualize *tikkun olam* (healing the world), balancing love, humility, and the need to take bold action for the sake of justice.

## Rabbi Steve Wernick

Beth Tzedec, Toronto, CA

### “Will not the Judge of all the Earth do justice?!” (Genesis 18:25)

With these words, Abraham confronts God over the destruction of Sodom. What I love about it is that, not only does Abraham have the nerve to challenge God's righteousness, but that God seems to expect it. There is an expectation of struggling to bring justice into the world, even when it is God who seems to be acting unjust. To be Yisrael is truly to wrestle with God and humanity, and to prevail.

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## Rabbi Noa Kushner

The Kitchen, San Francisco, CA

### An angel of Adonai appeared to Moses in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight. Why doesn't the bush burn up?” (Exodus 3:2-3)

In this verse, during one of the darkest moments in our history, God lights a strange fire and hopes someone will notice. Not only does Moshe stop and pay attention (my father, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, asks: “How long would you need to watch to notice a fire that burns but does not consume?”), Moshe asks a question: “Why? Why doesn't the bush burn up?” In that moment, one person, prompted by God, has demonstrated a capacity to see the reality in front of him and also to question that reality. For “Why are things this way?” is only a small step away from “Does it have to be this way? Might there be another way?” And with that, our story begins.



### **What, for you, is Judaism's most essential teaching?**

# Tzedakah

## Righteous Giving

Unlike the concept of charity, which derives from the Greek word *caritas* and means “kindness,” tzedakah comes from the Hebrew root *tzedek*, meaning “justice.” Giving to those in need is not simply a nice thing to do, it is the demand of justice and our Jewish obligation.

### Deuteronomy 15:7-11

If there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that Adonai your God is giving you, do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he lacks. Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return Adonai your God will bless you in all your endeavors. For there will never cease to be needy ones among you.”

### Mishneh Torah, Laws of Tzedaka

**7:1** It is a positive commandment to give tzedakah to the poor, according to what is appropriate for the poor person if this is within the financial capacity of the donor, as Deuteronomy 15:8 states: “You must open your hand to him.”

**7:2** Anyone who sees a poor person asking and turns his eyes away from him and does not give him tzedakah transgresses a negative commandment as Deuteronomy 15:7 states: “Do not harden your heart or close your hand against your brother, the poor person.”

**7:3** We are commanded to give a poor person according to what he lacks. If he lacks clothes, we should clothe him. If he lacks household utensils, we should purchase them for him. If he is unmarried, we should help him marry. And for an unmarried woman, we should find a husband for her. You are commanded to fill his lack, but you are not obligated to enrich him.

**7:5** When a poor person comes and asks for his needs to be met and the giver does not have the financial capacity, he should give him according to his financial capacity. How much? The most desirable way of performing the mitzvah is to give one-fifth of one's financial resources. Giving one-tenth is an ordinary measure. Giving less than that reflects stinginess. Even a poor person who lives from tzedakah is obligated to give tzedakah to another person.

**7:6** When a poor person whose identity is unknown says: “I am hungry, provide me with food,” we do not investigate whether he is a deceiver. Instead, we provide him with food immediately. If he was unclothed and he said: “Clothe me,” we investigate.

**7:7** We provide tzedakah for the non-Jewish poor together with the poor of the Jewish people as an expression of the ways of peace.

**7:10** When a person does not want to give tzedakah or desires to give less than what is appropriate for him, the court should compel him and give him stripes for rebellious conduct until he gives the amount it was estimated that he should give.



# Tzelem Elohim

## The Image of God

One of the fundamental principles of Jewish theology is that all human beings are created B'tzelem Elohim (In the Image of God) and therefore possess an inalienable dignity and worth.

### Genesis 1:26-7

God said: “Let us make the human being in our Image, after our likeness. They shall rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the things that live on Earth.” And God created the human being in God’s Image, in the Image of God was he created, male and female were they created.

### Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5

Therefore, Adam was created alone in the world, in order to teach you that whoever destroys a single life, the Torah considers it as though he destroyed the entire world. And whoever saves a single life, the Torah considers it as though he saved the entire world.

And it is also for the sake of peace among people, so that no one can say to their fellow ‘My father was greater than your father.’

And, finally, in order to display the greatness of the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One — since when a person stamps many coins with a single mold, they are all alike. But when the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Holy Blessed One, fashioned all human beings with the mold with which the first person was formed, not one of them is like any other.

Therefore, each and every human being is obligated to say: “For my sake the world was created.”

### Questions:

- **What does it mean to be made in the “Image of God?”**
- **What does this text teach about the value of human life?**
- **What does this text teach about the equality of human life?**
- **What does this text teach about the uniqueness of human life?**
- **What does it mean that “Every human being is obligated to say: ‘For my sake the world was created?’”**

# Tikkun Olam

## Healing the World

Many believe that Judaism's essential mission is to be God's partners in healing the brokenness in the world. Through actions big and small, ritual and ethical, we can all take part in making this a more peaceful, compassionate, holy planet.

### Leviticus 19:2, 14-18

You shall be holy for I, Adonai your God, am holy. You shall not insult the deaf. Nor shall you put a stumbling block before the blind. You shall not render an unjust decision. Do not be partial to the poor nor show deference to the rich. Judge your neighbor fairly. Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am Adonai.

### Mishnah, Peah 1:1

These are the deeds for which there is no prescribed measure: Leaving crops at the corner of the fields for the poor; offering first fruits as a gift at the Temple; bringing special offerings to the Temple on the three Festivals; doing deeds of lovingkindness; and studying Torah.

### Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a

These are the deeds that yield immediate fruit and will continue to yield fruit in time to come: Honoring parents; doing deeds of lovingkindness; attending the house of study punctually, morning and evening; providing hospitality; visiting the sick; helping the needy bride; attending the dead; delving into the meaning of prayer; making peace between one person and another, and between husband and wife. And, the study of Torah is the most basic of them all.

# Heal: 10 Ways to Help Repair the World

## ■ Give tzedakah

Our Tradition teaches us to donate at least 10% of our income to support worthy causes — in your own community, in your country, in Israel, and around the world.

## ■ Donate goods

When cleaning your pantry for Passover, donate. When buying new clothes for Rosh Ha-Shana, donate. Dedicate one night of Hanukkah to giving rather than getting. There is always opportunity to share what we have with those who need it most.

## ■ Educate yourself on issues

You cannot fix the world's problems if you are too distracted or too busy to learn what they are. Read broadly. Listen to speakers. Watch a documentary. Get informed and make up your own mind about how to help.

## ■ Care for the Earth

The Bible commands us not to waste our precious resources (*bal tashkit*). That applies to turning off the lights when we leave the room, recycling, driving fuel-efficient cars (or better yet — walking or biking), and generally being responsible stewards of the planet.

## ■ Consume responsibly

Make sure your enjoyment does not come from the expense of others. Purchase and use products from businesses where moral practices are employed.

## ■ Give time, not just money

For many of us, writing a check is easy — making time to get involved is the true sacrifice. In order to truly make a difference, you have to actually show up.

## ■ Actively seek peace

We are taught to be “Students of Aaron — loving peace and pursuing peace, loving others and helping to draw them close.” That sounds like a pretty good job description for being a Jew.

## ■ Refrain from gossip

Are we using our God-given power of speech to build community, express love, and empower others, or are we using it to tear down and humiliate? Practice *shmirat lashon*, guarding the tongue, and make this a more caring world.

## ■ Advocate for an important cause

The Talmud states that “silence is like assent.” When we don't lift up our voices on behalf of those who are suffering, our silence condones their continued oppression.

## ■ Organize your community

We are more powerful together than we are apart. Bring people in your community together around issues of concern for all and work together to make the world a better place.

# Closing Blessing

Talmud, Brakhot 17a

May you encounter the world in your lifetime,  
may you inherit the world-to-come, and  
may your hopes be sustained through the generations.

May your mind understand many things.  
May your mouth speak with wisdom, and  
may your tongue offer joyful praise.

May your eyes see clearly what is before you,  
and may they be enlightened with the light of Torah.

May your face shine with the radiance of the heavens.

May your lips utter learned words,  
and may your heart yearn for justice.

And may your feet fly swiftly  
to hear the words of the Ancient of Days.

# Final Reflection



**What has the experience of taking this class meant to you? What will you take away?  
What will you do now?**