

Jewish Business Ethics
PHL 131
American Jewish University Campus in Israel
Young Judeaea Year Course

Introduction

Shakespeare's Shylock is a caricature of how the Medieval Christian World viewed the Jewish businessman. When Shylock meets Signior Antonia for the first time, Shylock confides with the audience:

"I hate him for he is a Christian,
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis (free) and brings down
The rate of usance (interest) here with us in Venice."
The Merchant of Venice Act 1 Scene 3

This anti-Semitic caricature of Shylock depicts the Jewish businessman as someone who will go to all lengths in order to make a profit. He delights in charging high interest and will even demand "a pound in flesh" in order to call in a debt. If Shylock's approach to business is an example of how **not** to be an ethical Jewish business person, how should a Jew conduct him/herself in business today? Is it possible to be successful in business whilst remaining within the laws of Jewish ethics? Do ancient Jewish texts have any relevance in business world of 2010?

Through analysis of original Jewish sources, along with other more modern media, this course aims to begin to tackle these questions and many more. The course will involve much discussion and debate in which students should come to each class ready to participate.

Course Goals

- To provide students with a broad understanding of what original Jewish texts say about how people should conduct themselves in business.
- To demonstrate how ancient Jewish concepts can be related and made relevant to modern issues of business ethics.
- To develop the student's critical thinking skills.
- To develop the student's listening and debating skills.

Course Assessments

1. Midterm: Students will be required to write a research paper analyzing a modern business situation in relation to Jewish business ethics. The paper should be around 1,000 words long and demonstrate an ability to relate ancient Jewish principles to modern life. (30%)
2. Final exam: An in-class final exam will ask students to answer a number of short essay questions that will test their broad knowledge of all texts covered over the semester and their ability to apply ancient concepts to modern situations. (40%)
3. Ongoing reading assignments and quizzes. (10%)
4. Classroom participation. (10%)
5. Attendance and punctuality. (10%)

Sessions

1. **Introduction: Law or ethics? Are good ethics a duty or a suggestion?**

Sources:

- Peter Singer; The life you can save: How to end world poverty.
- Traditional Jewish sources on Tzedaka

2. **'Thou shalt not steal' - Was God talking about downloads?**

Sources:

- Asher Meir; Ethics and Intellectual property rights

3. **Buying ethically – where have my sneakers come from? The ethics of Globalization.**

Sources:

- Ira Rifkin; Jews and Globalisation

4. **The Perfect Job for a nice Jewish boy?**

Sources:

- Hershey, H. Freidman; Ideal Occupations – The Talmudic Perspective
- Traditional sources on Torah study

5. **Lies and deception, Advertising and Spin**

Sources:

- Hershey Friedman; The Prohibition against Deception in Today's World
- Jeremy Benstein; Advertising and the Tenth Commandment

6. **The Ethical Boss - how to treat employees?**

Sources:

- Meir Tamari, Wages and Labor, from With All Your Possessions, Jewish Ethics and Economic Life

7. **Setting fair prices – is the free market moral?**

- Meir Tamari, Competition Prices and Profits, from With All Your Possessions, Jewish Ethics and Economic Life

8. **Lending money the Jewish way**

- Joseph Stern; Ribis: A Halachic Anthology
- Torah.org; The Halachot of Lending

9. **Jewish ethics and the environment**

- Saul Berman; Jewish Environmental Values: The Dynamic Tension Between Nature and Human Needs
- American Jewish World Service; Jewish Roots in Environmental Justice

10. **Conclusion and final**

Bibliography

Dosick, W; The Business Bible; (New York, Morrow, 1993)

Tamari, M; With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life; (New York, The Free Press; 1987)

Tamari, M; In the Market Place; (New York, Feldheim Publishers; 1991)

Levine, A; Economics and Jewish Law: Halakhic Perspectives; (New York, Ktav Publishing; 1987)

Useful Websites

On One Foot (American Jewish World Service)

<http://www.on1foot.org/>

Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life

<http://www.coejl.org>

Darchei Noam

http://www.darchenoam.org/ethics/business/bus_home.htm