

## Study Guide 2: The Heart of Judaism

### A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS: VOLUME I, YOU SHALL BE HOLY

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

#### *Getting Started*

Reading Rabbi Telushkin's A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS will challenge you to consider how and why you live an ethical life; discussing what you've read with others will allow you to share these profound considerations.

Conversations about ethics will necessarily get personal as each participant shares examples from his or her life. An open, respectful environment will ensure that you have a lively discussion. Referring back to A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS as much as possible – bringing your discussion from the personal back to the rabbinic commentaries and contemporary stories in the book – will enrich your discussion experience.

We've provided a series of discussion questions on several key passages in A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS to help you focus your discussion. You may decide to move through these questions one by one, or you may decide to skip around a bit and tackle questions as they arise. The questions are here to provide a road map, to help you regain direction if your discussion veers off track, and to help you get where you're going: to a clearer, deeper, and more satisfying understanding of Rabbi Telushkin's remarkable book.

In addition to using the following questions to direct your conversation, we recommend that you begin your meeting by introducing yourself to the other members of your group. Why are you interested in Jewish ethical teachings? What do you hope to get out of your discussion? To be sure that each person gets what he or she wants, we suggest this simple exercise:

- Get yourself something big to write on so everyone can see—a poster-sized paper taped up on the wall, for instance, or a poster board propped up against a chair or table.
- Choose someone, maybe your hostess or discussion leader, to write down a word or phrase for each person's vital discussion issue, something basic to remind you of the big idea.

- Then go around the room and ask each person to contribute one *specific* aspect of the reading that he or she would like to discuss—a particular passage, a question left unanswered, a positive, negative, or neutral observation.
- Each time you notice you've discussed a new point from the list on your board, give the person who chose this topic a chance to expand on her question or observation.
- Ask one member to keep an eye on the clock and call time once you have only fifteen or twenty minutes remaining before the end of the meeting. The discussion-board secretary can then check off each of the topics that you've already hit upon and see if there are any big or burning issues still left unaddressed.

Best wishes for a stupendous discussion experience! Enjoy all the discoveries you will make about yourself, your faith, and your world as you read, study, and talk about A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS.

## 2

### THE HEART OF JUDAISM

- In what is perhaps the Talmud's most famous passage, a non-Jew asks Hillel to "convert me to Judaism on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot." Hillel replies, "What is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah! All the rest is commentary. Now, go and study."

The four components of Hillel's response provide a key to the essence of Judaism. Read pages 10 and 11 and discuss the vital points that Rabbi Telushkin raises.

- When we give advice, are we sure that none of it is self-serving? Can we discern the ethical teachings embedded in many of the ritual laws? Is it possible to act honorably all the time without studying the Torah? As Lyndon Johnson once said, "A president's hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right."

- Starting on page 12, examine #3 – # 7 and discuss why the Ten Words or Commandments focus on belief in God and ethical behavior and say nothing about ritual or circumcision.
- It is said that human beings are unique because they are created “in the image of God.” What does this mean?
- On page 14 #8, Rabbi Telushkin quotes the prophet Micah (6:8): “And what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” How do we practice this in our own lives?
- On pages 18 and 19 #15, Rabbi Telushkin cites Psalm 15:1: “Who will abide in Your tent? Who will dwell in Your holy mountain?” and lists the qualities of those worthy of dwelling with God. How can we use this template to refine the way we live?
- On page 37 #1, Rabbi Telushkin tells us that Judaism regards improving our character as the goal of life. “The Midrash teaches, ‘The Torah’s commandments were not given to mankind for any purpose other than to refine people’ (*Genesis Rabbah* 44:1). The Rabbis did not say that it is one of the purposes of the Torah and its commandments to improve our character, but that this is their sole purpose.” Are we truly becoming more honest, kind, and compassionate as we grow older? Reflect on this and share your observations with each other.

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A CODE OF JEWISH ETHICS

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