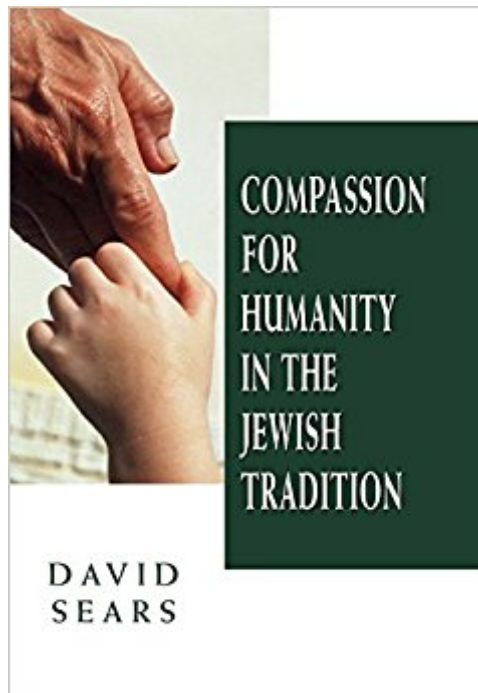




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Compassion For Humanity In The Jewish Tradition



Synopsis

For many Jews and non-Jews, the Torah, the Talmud and other rabbinic writings have long been interpreted as saying that the Jews alone are God's chosen people. According to Sears, *The Path of the Baal Shem Tov*, such readings have led to a struggle among Jews between assimilation—losing their particular Jewish identity—and withdrawal—preserving their particular Jewish identity and surviving as a people. Sears contends that this struggle between particularism and universalism is often misguided, for he argues that the particularism of Judaism engenders a "model of spirituality and moral refinement that will inspire the rest of the world to turn to God of its own accord." In order to demonstrate the depth from which Judaism speaks in a universalistic voice, Sears collects a wide range of sources from a number of periods in Jewish history. In the section on "Judaism and Non-Jews," the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Yochanan, "Whoever speaks wisdom, although he is a non-Jew, is a sage," urges respect for the wisdom of other traditions. In the section on "The Chosen People," two Midrash passages demonstrate the idea of Israel as spiritual model: "God gave the Torah to the Jewish people so that all nations might benefit by it"; "Just as the [sacrifice of the dove] atones for transgression, Israel atones for the nations of the world." Finally, in a section on "Messianic Vision," Sears argues that Jewish writings state that it is the Messiah's primary task to return the "entire world" to God and God's teachings. Sears's extensive sourcebook is a rich collection of primary writings on the role of compassion in the Jewish tradition. (Sept.)

—Publisher's Weekly

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Customer Reviews

For many Jews and non-Jews, the Torah, the Talmud and other rabbinic writings have long been interpreted as saying that the Jews alone are God's chosen people. According to Sears (The Path of the Baal Shem Tov), such readings have led to a struggle among Jews between assimilation--losing their particular Jewish identity--and withdrawal--preserving their particular Jewish identity and surviving as a people. Sears contends that this struggle between particularism and universalism is often misguided, for he argues that the particularism of Judaism engenders a "model of spirituality and moral refinement that will inspire the rest of the world to turn to God of its own accord." In order to demonstrate the depth from which Judaism speaks in a universalistic voice, Sears collects a wide range of sources from a number of periods in Jewish history. In the section on "Judaism and Non-Jews," the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Yochanan, "Whoever speaks wisdom, although he is a non-Jew, is a sage," urges respect for the wisdom of other traditions. In the section on "The Chosen People," two Midrash passages demonstrate the idea of Israel as spiritual model: "God gave the Torah to the Jewish people so that all nations might benefit by it"; "Just as the [sacrifice of the dove] atones for transgression, Israel atones for the nations of the world." Finally, in a section on "Messianic Vision," Sears argues that Jewish writings state that it is the Messiah's primary task to return the "entire world" to God and God's teachings. Sears's extensive sourcebook is a rich collection of primary writings on the role of compassion in the Jewish tradition. Copyright 1998 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

It's ok - a decent and fast read if you'd like to learn the more kind "parsha".

I knew what this book was about, before getting it, only because I saw it mentioned in response to the exclusivist aspects of Jews as the Chosen People of God. However, the unsuspecting reader may erroneously think that this is a book about Jewish philanthropy, and related topics. It is not. This work is an impressive collection of positive Jewish statements about gentiles. For instance, righteous non-Jews deserve a place in the World to Come (SANHREDRIN 105a). (p. 131). Maharal of Prague (1512-1609) taught that he shared the blessings that he got from God with all humankind. (p. 126). According to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi, God's promise, to wipe away the tears from all faces, includes the faces of non-Jews as well as Jews. (p. 156). This book also features Jewish concepts of the Messiah and of the Messianic age, especially its universalism. For instance, it interprets Isaiah 53 as describing the antecedent sufferings of the Jewish people, and interprets Isaiah 11 in a purely allegorical manner. Thus, according to this interpretation, the lion and the lamb dwelling together refer to Israel's warlike neighbors, and Israel, living in peace. (p.

153). SOURCES OF INFORMATION A small portion of this book consists of the universalist verses in the Old Testament and the Talmud. As an example of Talmudic citations, Sears (p. 31) quotes BERAKOT 17a, which speaks of Jews living in peace with gentiles as well as non-Jews. He also (p. 29) quotes GITTIN 61a, which commands Jews to provide for the non-Jewish poor as well as the Jewish poor, to visit non-Jews as well as Jews when they are sick, and to attend the funerals of non-Jews as well as Jews, *for these are the ways of peace.* However, the unmentioned preceding verse, in GITTIN 61a, as written in the online Babylonian Talmud (Soncino version), says *to avoid ill feeling*. In addition, the portion quoted by Sears ends with *in the interests of peace*, instead of *for these are the ways of peace.* What, if anything, does all this mean? Sears does not say. Most of this book consists of quotes and citations from 50 Jewish universalist-oriented thinkers, all of whom had lived many centuries after the Talmud had been written down, and quite a few of whom had lived in fairly recent times. Author David Sears includes biographical paragraphs of these Jewish thinkers. (pp. 199-218). Perhaps one shortcoming of this book is that it does not put the development of Jewish universalism in historical context. For this reason, I have done so, for the benefit of the reader. I have taken the 50 Jewish thinkers, and apportioned them by date of birth. Of these, 13 were born between 1000 and 1300 AD or CE. None were born between 1300 or 1400, and 2 were born between 1400 and 1500. The remainder were born in modern times. Of these, 9 were born between 1500 and 1700. The remainder were born during and after the Enlightenment. Of these, 10 were born between 1700 and 1800, 14 were born between 1800 and 1900, and 2 were born after 1900. (The latter, and total of 50, does not include quoted contemporaries, such as R. Ahron Soloveitchik and Menachem M. Schneerson.)

JEWS SHOULD NOT DEFRAUD GENTILES Author David Sears devotes an entire chapter (pp. 41-on) in rebuttal to the claim that Judaism allows Jews to cheat, or steal from, gentiles. For example, he quotes from Rabbi Moshe Rikvah (1595-1761), who had lived in Wilno (Vilnius) during the Cossack revolts, and then was forced to move to Amsterdam. (p. 213). Rikvah said that, (quote) *we write this for future generations: I have seen many people become wealthy by causing non-Jews to err in business in order to gain profit thereby. However, they did not remain successful, in the end, all their wealth was confiscated by the government, and their descendants were left without an inheritance.* (unquote). (p. 43).

WHY ISRAEL IS CALLED ADAM Here are some excerpts, from the author, on this subject, (quote) I have always found it difficult to understand the statement of our Sages that whenever the Torah uses the term ADAM (man), it refers only to Israel (YEVAMOS 61a) The Talmud also teaches that non-Jews possess the Divine image (AVOS 3:14) The medieval Talmudic scholars of France

(BAALEI TOSEFOS) in their glosses on the Talmudic passage cited above point out that the collective singular HA-ADAM (man), with the definite article, does include non-Jews. If non-Jews are not designated by the term ADAM, why should the definite article make a difference? (unquote). (pp. 131-132). The justification for the conflation of Jews with ADAM is summarized by Sears, with the items in parentheses and brackets done by the author, (quote) From this point of view, it would be inappropriate to call all people ADAM. Adam was so named because he was formed of the earth (Hebrew: ADAMAH), whereas the rest of his descendants were born of flesh and blood. [That is, he was formed directly by God; the rest of mankind was formed through natural procreation.] Israel alone deserves to be called by this name---not because of greater honor, but because, like Adam, all that happened to them, as well as their spiritual perfection, was the doing of the Holy One, blessed is He, Himself, and not primarily the result of their own endeavor. (unquote). (p. 135). In addition, (quote) HA-ADAM (with the definite article) refers to all mankind; for we are all rational beings who possess the Divine image, Jews and non-Jews alike. (unquote). (p. 136).

One of the main reasons the world faces so many crises today is that the ways of society are generally contrary to fundamental Torah values. Even many people who are committed to Judaism often stress ritual observance but fail to place sufficient emphasis on Judaism's powerful universal concerns. In his very well researched, organized, and written book, *Compassion for Humanity in the Jewish Tradition*, David Sears takes a major step to correct this situation. The book is a compilation of translations from classic texts of Jewish thought, from Scripture through the Talmud and up to contemporary rabbinic leaders, on Judaism's teachings on how Jews should relate to other people. The book also includes a number of essays that serve as general overviews and prefaces to the translations, discussing and analyzing the source material. Among the themes that the quotations superbly amplify are: the Jewish mandates to be a "light unto the nations" and to work for tikkun olam (the healing, repair, and perfecting of the world); the mitzvot to pursue justice and righteousness and to emulate God in His attribute of compassion; the implications of such mitzvot as "love thy neighbor as thyself", "be kind to the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt", and "seek peace and pursue it"; Jewish business ethics; treatment of converts; how the ultimate goal of Jewish particularism is to benefit all of humanity and all of creation; and the ramifications of the Jewish "Messianic Vision." David's background in both secular and Jewish areas gives him unique qualifications to write this trend setting book on Jewish obligations to humanity. His initial education was in the liberal arts and in the fine arts and music, and for a time he taught at the college level. Later, he studied at several Chassidic yeshivas. He has written several books on

Chassidic leaders and teachings, including *The Path of the Baal Shem Tov: Early Chassidic Teachings and Customs* (Jason Aronson, 1997) as well as several books for Jewish young people, including *Tales From Reb Nachman* (Artscroll/Mesorah, 1987). He has illustrated a number of books, including *The Artscroll Youth Haggadah* (Artscroll/Mesorah, 1987), as well as over 20 "kosher comic books". He has also made substantial contributions to various phases of Jewish music, has had exhibits of his paintings and photography, and has contributed a wide variety of articles to Jewish publications. I hope that this book will be widely read in the Jewish community (and in other communities), because it has the potential to have a major impact on the future of both Judaism and our imperiled planet. Since this review is for a vegetarian publication, I will indicate one example of a quote from the book that can be tremendously helpful in efforts to put the treatment of animals on the Jewish agenda: Love of all creatures is also love of God, for whoever loves the One (God) loves all the works that He has made. When one loves God, it is impossible not to love His creatures. The opposite is also true. If one hates the creatures, it is impossible to love God Who created them. (Maharal of Prague, *Nesivos Olam, Ahavas haRe'i*, 1) If aware of such a teaching, how could committed Jews square it with the cruel treatment of over 9 billion animals annually on factory farms prior to their slaughter for a diet that also has such negative health and environmental effects. Of course the fact that over 70% of the grain produced in the U. S. and 40% produced worldwide is fed to animals destined for slaughter while an estimated 20 million people worldwide die every year from hunger and its effects is also sharply at variance with many of the quotations in the book. What God must think of the widespread mistreatment of animals today is indicated in another of the book's quotes: This may be likened to an expert goldsmith who fashions a vessel with great skill, but when he displays his work, one of the people begins to mock and scorn it. How angry that goldsmith would be; for by disparaging his handiwork, one disparages his wisdom. Similarly, it is evil in the sight of the Holy One, blessed be He, if any of His creatures is despised. (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, Chapter 2). The very thorough and sensitive job that David Sears has done in this book makes it imperative that he obtain the financial means to complete another work in progress: a companion volume on "Compassion for Animals in the Jewish Tradition." For David has the background, wisdom, sensitivity, compassion, and commitment to animal rights to effectively challenge Jews to apply Jewish teachings on animals. As a Breslav Chassid, his commitment to Jewish law and tradition cannot be challenged. No one could claim that he is just one more animal rights advocate who doesn't care about Judaism and religion, in general, and is not concerned about human problems. Also, his knowledge of Hebrew and Kabbalistic, Chassidic, and other Jewish sources enables him to find teachings that are not commonly known. His authentic and

powerful quotations would be a respectful but powerful challenge to the Jewish community that it would not be able to easily ignore.

Dovid Sears' Compassion for Humanity in the Jewish Tradition is an extremely important book. I cannot recommend more highly this work as an accessible, inspiring collection of citations showing the deep roots of universal tolerance and love of peace in the Torah and the writings of the Sages, and as expressed by contemporary rabbinical authorities. If better-known, this work could go a long way towards helping many alienated and disaffected Jews reevaluate the stereotype that classical Judaism is a parochial, chauvinistic, xenophobic system of belief and practice. Anyone searching for Torah Judaism's message of peace for humanity should start here.

The source material selections and commentaries in this excellent book are infused with compassion and are especially important and inspiring at this time. These are teachings that can be of benefit for the entire world, if we but open our eyes and ears and hearts. Rabbi David Sears has done an extraordinary job!

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