

Ten Jewish Misquotes

Many popular quotes from the Jewish tradition are occasionally mangled, incomplete, out of context or mistranslated.

-[Quotes must also be attributed: “He who reports a saying in the name of its author brings deliverance to the world.” [Megillah 15a, Chullin 104b].

-Talmudic style: Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y, who was quoting Rabbi Z...]

1. Why does the sword come into the world?

The quote: The sword comes into the world because of justice delayed and justice denied

The problem: Incomplete

The full quote (Pirkei Avot 5:8): The sword comes into the world because of justice delayed and justice denied, and because of those who interpret the Torah in a manner different from halachah.

חָרַב בָּאָה לְעוֹלָם — עַל עֲנֵוֵי הַדִּין, וְעַל עֲוֹת הַדִּין,
וְעַל הַמּוֹרִים בַּתּוֹרָה שְׁלֵא כְהִלְכָה;

Justice is defined by what the Sages consider so, not any other way. That was the point of the author. Incomplete quote popular in secular or non-Orthodox circles, with their emphasis on social action.

2. Observing Shabbat

The quote: Ki eshmera Shabbat, El yishmereni (Song by Abraham ibn Ezra (1093-1 168, southern Iberia).

The problem: Possible mistranslation: “If I keep Shabbat, God keeps me”. (Non-Orthodox prayerbooks)

The most likely meaning: “Because I keep Shabbat, God keeps me”. (Orthodox prayerbooks).

-Non-Orthodox may feel uncomfortable saying ‘Because’ if they don’t fully keep Shabbat.

-Actually, 7 meanings to ‘Ki’ (Rashi says 4): Because, when, if, rather, that, perhaps (or lest), and a question.

-But most common is 'because'. 'If' is usually 'im'. (Siddur Hadash says 'as' – a novel mistranslation.)

3. Planting trees and the Messiah

The quote: “If you are planting a tree and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, finish planting the tree”

The problem: Incomplete

The full quote (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 31b): Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught: “If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, stay and finish the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.”

The incomplete quote makes it look like the Messiah is unimportant, that it is an obsolete concept.

4. The golden rule

The quote: [Hillel said to a candidate for conversion]: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary."

The problem: Incomplete

The full quote (Talmud, Shabbat 31a): [Hillel said to a candidate for conversion]: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and study it."

The details are not irrelevant. They are part and parcel of Judaism. They need to be studied and abided by. “The devil is in the details.” Can’t live by one-liners alone.

5. Job’s faith

The quote: Yea, though he slay me, still will I trust in him

The problem: Incomplete

The full quote (Job 13:15). Yea, though he slay me, still will I trust in him; but I will argue my case before him

הוּ יִקְטְלֵנִי, לֹא (לוֹ) אֶיחַל; אֶדְרֹכֶי, אֶל-פְּנֵי אֹכֵיחַ.

Jewish way: Argue with God, call God to account, shake fist at God (Tevye) – not merely floormat worship. 'Israel' means 'he who struggles with God'.

Example: Rabbi Levi Yitzhaq of Berdichev, the great Hasidic sage, stood before his congregation on Rosh Hashana and said: "Master of the Universe, You commanded us not to write on holy days, except to save a life. You are also bound by Your law. Therefore, you may not inscribe us in the Book of Death on this day. You may only inscribe us in the Book of Life".

6. Man does not live by bread alone

The quote: Man does not live by bread alone

The problem: Incomplete and attributed to Christian Bible

The full quote (Deut. 8:3). Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.

לֹא עַל-הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יַחְיֶה הָאָדָם

Flippant meaning: You need a little peanut butter and jelly on it

Usual meaning: Food is not enough for a healthy life; man also has spiritual needs.

The overlooked part: Not ANY spiritual food is good. Only what God says. (613 commandments for Jews, 7 Noahide laws for Gentiles). Alternative is death.

- Man lives by whatever God tells him to live by: Bread, kosher food, Torah, etc.
- Need to say prayers before and after food is eaten

7. How much is pi?

The quote (1Kings 7:23): And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from brim to brim; it was round ... and a line of thirty cubits measured the circle around it.

The problem: False conclusion that Bible says $\pi = 3$ (30/10). Bible inerrantists say π is 3, and scientists say this proves the whole Bible is just superstitious nonsense.

Resolution: Tanach rounded figures. If the sea was, say, 9.55 cubits from brim to brim, you get the correct value of π . Tanach would have rounded that 9.55 to 10. (It does not say 10.00 or 10.0, it says 10.)

8. Were Haman's ten sons hanged?

The quote: (Esther 9:13-14). Then said Esther, If it please the king, ... let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. And the king commanded it so to be done... and they hanged Haman's ten sons.

The problem: Taken out of context and leads to the false conclusion that Haman's 10 sons (babes in arms for all we know) were killed on account of their father's actions.

Resolution: Haman's 10 sons had already died in battle fighting the Jews. Esther just wanted to have their bodies hung.

Esther 9:5. ...the Jews struck all their enemies with the stroke of the sword... and did what they would to those who hated them...

Esther 9:10. The ten sons of Haman..., the enemy of the Jews, slew they; but on the plunder they did not lay their hand.

9. Your enemy and you

The quote: Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles

The problem: Incomplete and slightly misleading on intent

The full quote (Proverbs 24:17-18). Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from [your enemy].

[Also, Pirkei Avot 4:19: Shmuel HaKatan used to say,..."]

שְׁמוּאֵל הַקָּטָן אָמַר: „בְּנִפְל אוֹיְבֶךָ אֶל תִּשְׂמַח, וּבְכַשְׁלוֹ
אֶל יָגַל לִבֶּךָ. כִּי יִרְאֶה יְהוָה וְרַע בְּעֵינָיו, וְהָשִׁיב מֵעַלְיוֹ אָפוֹ.”

Motivation is not empathy with enemy, but fear that God will start sympathizing with him on account of his misfortune. Close to popular wag: “Never kick a man when he is down: He may get up.”

Full quote makes more sense: Why shouldn't you rejoice when your enemy falls, after he tried so hard to harm you?

10. Sin'at chinam vs Torah

The quote: The second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred

The problem: Incomplete

The full quote (Talmud, Yoma 9b): Why was the first Temple destroyed?...

Because of three things that prevailed there: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder...

But why was the second Temple destroyed, seeing that in its time they were occupying themselves with Torah, observance of mitzvot, and the practice of charity? Because hatred without cause [sin'at chinam] prevailed.

The misinterpretation is believing that the senseless hatred was the civil war – the political differences in whether to have an uprising, how to conduct it, with Zealots killing those who opposed the uprising and destroying food stores so people would be forced to fight, etc. All hatred is bad, self-destructive and counterproductive, but not all hatred is “senseless”.

But it's religious hatred that is meant. That is what's “senseless”. There is an implied link between excessive observance and senseless hatred.

“Caring too much” leads to hating those who differ on the most minor point of observance. It's not just less religious vs more religious, it's very observant vs very observant. That is what is ‘senseless’. Two Talmud passages bolster that point:

- Talmud, Yevamot 62b. It was said that R. Akiba had twelve thousand pairs of disciples... and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect.
- When Sanhedrin met at Yavneh in 90 CE, 20 years after Temple destroyed, they said: Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai may reach opposite conclusions on halacha, but they are both right in their derivations (“Ellu v'ellu divrei Elohim hayyim” – These and these are the words of the living God). For practical reasons we have to pick one or the other, so we'll pick Hillel, because his disciples are kind and humble, and always present Shammai's views before theirs.

Talmud, Eruvin 13b: R. Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, both asserting, 'The halachah is in agreement with our views'. Then a heavenly voice (bath kol) announced, 'These and these are the words of the living God, but the halachah follows Beth Hillel'. Since, however, 'both are the words of the living God' what was it that entitled Beth Hillel to have the halachah fixed in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Beth Shammai before theirs...

This teaches you that the Holy One, blessed be He, raises up him who humbles himself, and humbles him who exalts himself; that greatness flees from him who seeks greatness, but greatness follows him who flees from greatness

Background

Religious factions:

- Pharisees (Oral law, rabbis, and differences between schools)
- Sadducees (no Oral law, aristocracy)
- Essenes (monastic sect)
- Christians, followers of other Messiah pretenders; Gnostics
- Hellenized/Romanized seculars

Political factions:

- Against an uprising (and traitors, collaborators)
- For an uprising (Zealots [kana-im], 3 feuding factions)