

The Torah and ethical norms are meant to work together and not be in conflict. It can be incredibly challenging when we feel they are at odds. We have all experienced this at some point: Sometimes, what we believe God wants from us seems to clash with what a decent person should do. The Torah often presents its principles and assumptions differently from contemporary ethical discussions. The question arises whether these two should remain separate or if they should be integrated somehow. Should the Torah be kept separate from a more general human discourse on what is right? Or are they meant to be unified, even if bridging the apparent gaps requires a lot of learning and searching?

In this week's reading, the Torah seems to address this question explicitly. In this week's Torah portion, Deuteronomy 4:6 states that by guarding and performing the mitzvot, the nations will see the wisdom and understanding of the Jewish people. This suggests that the mitzvot should be so inherently good and attractive that outsiders will appreciate and admire them.

Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner (Hungary, 19th-20th c.) argues that the Torah not only forbids and requires certain things explicitly but also implies principles that extend beyond its explicit commands. For example, even though the Torah might not explicitly say, "Don't eat a sandwich that has fallen into the gutter and is covered with polluted slime," doing so would be considered revolting and unacceptable by any reasonable person. According to R. Glasner, if an action is widely viewed as abominable and revolting by enlightened people, then it should be considered a basic prohibition even if the Torah does not explicitly mention it. He believes that the Torah builds on the human condition, and human norms and ethics should be incorporated into its expectations for all people, including Jews.

R. Glasner finds support for his view in the Torah's self-description as a blueprint for life that is supposed to make the Jewish people stand out in a positive way. If a person's interpretation of the Torah would lead to deep disgust from civilized individuals, then that interpretation goes against the Torah's intended story about itself. The Torah, for R. Glasner, does not support actions that others around us would consider wrong.

According to R. Glasner, we should strive to understand the Torah's message about itself as something that is great and wise in the eyes of all nations. Ultimately, we must live lives that address the unified question: What does God want from us, as Jews and as human beings?