


# The conceptualisation of morality in Judaism

**Author:**Gavin Michal<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Gavin Michal,  
baalshem@global.co.za

**Dates:**

Received: 05 Apr. 2023  
Accepted: 11 Aug. 2023  
Published: 23 Jan. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Michal, G., 2024, 'The conceptualisation of morality in Judaism', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a2863.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2863>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article dealt with the irony that confronts any investigation into the conceptualisation of morality in Judaism: much of contemporary scholarship promotes the Strong Dependence Theory where God is considered the prime source of morality – yet an empirical analysis of classical rabbinic literature indicates a leaning more towards the Weak Dependence Theory which considers human beings the source for morality. Somehow, scholarship seems to overlook this textual evidence. On the other hand, that same contemporary scholarship has no problem in accepting absolute and complete human autonomy in the area of Jewish religious law or Halacha. This study questioned why humans are comfortably accepted as the primary determinants of religious law but not of morality – and argued for a return to the original Weak Dependence Theory to maintain moral efficacy. It included an examination of an extreme historical test case for rabbinic morality concerning how the rabbinic world dealt internally with the moral implications of major rabbis who had fled the Holocaust.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** While this literature study was conducted from an orthodox rabbinic perspective, it adopted a descriptive and evaluative methodology based on academic, rabbinic and historical sources.

**Keywords:** morality; Strong and Weak Dependence Theories; Divine Command Morality; rabbinic leadership during the Holocaust; theodicy; Jewish ritual law (Halacha).

## Introduction

It must be noted, at the outset, that it is difficult to speak about any idea within Judaism as representing *the* authoritative view of that religion. This is because the system is extremely nuanced with views ranging across a vast theological spectrum and divergent *Weltanschauungen*. At best one can only survey all the interpretations and texts to try and determine some mean, or direction of thought. This is particularly the case with conceptualising morality in Judaism.

## Aim and objectives

The aim of this article is to demonstrate through empirical (textual) evidence that although the *Strong Dependence Theory* (or *Divine Command Morality [DCM]* – where morality is conceptualised as deriving from God's command) is overwhelmingly adduced as the basis of Jewish morality, the classical rabbinic sources reveal the opposite.

The objectives are, firstly, to provide textual evidence contrasting the perceived origins of Jewish morality with the actual primary sources themselves, thereby demonstrating that the roots of Jewish morality are in fact conceptualised as deriving from the *Weak Dependence Theory* (Lichtenstein 1975:63; Sagi & Statman 1995:39). Secondly, to examine an extreme test case of Jewish morality as perceived by both the opponents and supporters of leading rabbis who fled the Holocaust. Those who were left behind, claimed the fleeing was a moral offence to God (Hershkowitz 2009:119), adducing *the Strong Dependence Theory*. Thirdly and finally, to argue, counterintuitively, for a return to the primary rabbinic texts for a conceptualisation of morality based on the *Weak Dependence Theory*; thus, promoting a natural and human constituent to morality allowing for a more universal and less parochial approach than that professed to be provided by God and slanted by particular religions or sects.

## The sources of morality: *Strong and Weak Dependence Theories*

The search for the source of morality in Judaism is laden with irony because, generally speaking, both religious and secular contemporary Jewish scholarship unambiguously claim adherence to

**Note:** Special Collection: Morality in history.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

the *Strong Dependence Theory* where God is considered the prime source of morality. Yet an empirical study of the rabbinic texts belies such a notion.

Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman point to the surprising anomaly that while Christianity (Idziak 1989) and Islam (according to the Al-Ash'ari school) (Frank 1983) both subscribe to the *Strong Dependence Theory* – where morality is said to originate with God – the same may not be said of Judaism which, based on rabbinic texts, has 'hardly any echoes of support for this thesis' (Sagi & Statman 1995:39).

Instead, foundational rabbinic sources point to an autonomous and independent existence of morality very much defined by humans. These rabbinic texts support the *Weak Dependence Theory* although its adherents often maintain that God adopts such autonomous human morality as a model for Judaism.

*Strong Dependence Theories* are extremely rare in Judaism. Sagi and Statman boldly claim that there is only *one* source for it, as we shall see below. Nevertheless, most contemporary Jewish scholarship persists in maintaining that God, not humans, is considered by Judaism to be the only source of all morality.

Isadore Twersky exemplifies this common and characteristic view of *Strong Dependence Theory* as follows:

Autonomous morality ... is a human creation ... This view has no parallel in Judaism. Judaism admits only a heteronomous-theonomic approach, which views the Creator as the source of morality. (Twersky 1991:238 n. 237)

Another typical example of *Strong Dependence Theory* is David Bleich who similarly claims that: 'morality is the product of the halakhic (i.e. the Jewish ritual and legal – G.M.) system which itself is the embodiment of divine revelation' (Bleich 2006:114).

Juxtapose these two statements against the view of Aharon Lichtenstein who disagrees with this popular approach and instead promotes a *Weak Dependence Theory*: 'At most, the rabbis rejected natural law, not natural morality' (Lichtenstein 1975:64). According to this contemporary minority view as espoused by Lichtenstein, the rabbis embraced a 'natural', or human source for morality, thus subscribing to the *Weak Dependence Theory*.

The first two statements are representative of current scholarship and also attest to the common religious argument used across the board by many religions that 'without G-d, everything is allowed', and that intrinsically, morality is contingent upon a divine source. This makes the research and findings by Sagi and Statman – that most rabbinic texts subscribe to the *Weak Dependence Theory* – all the more compelling because it seems to go against the grain of the popular, more 'religious' and 'appealing' view which supports the *Strong Dependence Theory*.

Again, standing apart from the general trend of modern Jewish scholarship is the abovementioned view of

Lichtenstein who lends support to the *Weak Dependence Theory*: 'The fact remains that the existence of natural morality is clearly assumed in much that is quite central to our tradition' (Lichtenstein 1975:63).

Sagi and Statman take this even further by demonstrating that the *Weak Dependence Theory* is borne out, not only by *much* but by the *vast majority* of classical rabbinic texts.

The risk of over-reliance on the *Strong Dependence Theory* is well – if not cynically – depicted by Henry Mencken (n.d.n.p.) who noted that: 'Morality is doing right, no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told, no matter what is right'.

It must be pointed out, however, that in Judaism, the *Weak Dependence Theory* does not deprive God of any input. It claims that although morality is defined in human terms, it still relies on God or religion to authorise it:

In weak dependence theories, an act can be considered a moral obligation even if not ordained by God – although, without religion, actualizing it may not be possible. (Sagi & Statman 1995:41)

In my estimation, by emphasising the *Weak Dependence Theory*, one side-steps Mencken's fear of religion prescribing acts that are not considered right, because by embracing the *Weak Dependence Theory*, morality remains balanced, as it were, somewhere between heaven and earth. And, if I understand this concept correctly, the classical rabbinic conceptualisation of morality is that even by accepting the *Weak Dependence Theory*, the good in humans still becomes ordained as 'divine'. Yet, contemporary Jewish scholarship seems to negate this notion with their support for the *Strong Dependence Theory* instead.

## Strong Dependence Theory

Sagi and Statman significantly maintain that there is *only one* rabbinic source that exclusively and conclusively promotes the model of the *Strong Dependence Theory* (Sagi & Statman 1995:50). This is to be found in the relatively recent writings of the Chassidic leader R. Klonymus Shapira produced in Warsaw during the Holocaust, who claims (contra Idziak [1989] and Frank [1983]) that only non-Jews promote the *Weak Dependence Theory*:

The nations of the world, even the best of them, think that the truth is a thing in itself, and that God commanded truth because the truth is intrinsically true. They therefore accept the rational commandments ... such as that we should not steal, rob, and so forth ...

Not so Israel, who say 'You God are truth' ... and all the truth found in the world is there only because God wished it and commanded it ... Stealing is forbidden because the God of truth has commanded it ... And when God commanded the opposite, that hefker beit-din hefker [*i.e.*, that the court has the power of expropriation] then this becomes true and a person's wealth can be confiscated. When God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, it was true to sacrifice him and, had God not said later

'neither do anything to him', it would have been true to slaughter him. (Shapira 1960:68; see also 172)

Here Shapira leaves no room whatsoever for the autonomy of morality simply being reinforced by revelation as the *Weak Dependence Theory* suggests. This source is suggested by Sagi and Statman to be the *singular* example within the non-contemporary rabbinic writings (i.e. excluding the contemporary views of Twersky and Bleich), of the more radical *Strong Dependence Theory* approach.

Another (more classical) rabbinic text which may also serve as an exception, could be the *Mishna in Avot* 3:17 which states R. Eliezer ben Azariah's view that: 'without Torah, there is no *derech erez* (morality), and without *derech erez*, there is no Torah'. The corollary in the latter part of the dictum, however, seems to soften the first part of the statement.

Of particular interest is Shapira's interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac where Søren Kierkegaard (1983), as well as Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1992), understand the narrative as a prime example of the conflict between religion and morality, known as theodicy. For Shapira and his *Strong Dependence Theory* approach, there is no longer a conflict. Whatever God decrees is moral, and truth and justice have no independent existence.

Yet, as if to emphasise the *uniqueness* of this 'singular' source, in Shapira's other writings, he seems to go back to the usual rabbinic approach of the *Weak Dependence Theory* where morality has an independent existence and he acknowledges that God follows human moral norms and does not just formulate morality by whim or decree. This complicated picture of Shapira underscores even further the *exceptionality* of the *Strong Dependence Theory* within Jewish thought.

Yet the *Strong Dependence Theory* somehow still became the dominant theological position portrayed by contemporary Jewish scholarship despite most foundational rabbinic sources which point rather to the *Weak Dependence Theory*. We shall now turn to six such sources.

## Weak Dependence Theory

### 1. The Talmud records:

Rabbi Yochanan (180–279 CE) said: Even if the Torah had not been given, we would [*nonetheless*] have learned modesty from the cat, [*which covers its waste*] and that stealing [*is objectionable*] from the ant [*which does not take grain from another ant*] and forbidden relations from the dove [*which is faithful to its partner*].... (b. *Eruvin* 100b)

### 2. The Midrash records:

*Derech erez* (morality) preceded the Torah (*Vayikra Rabbah*, 9:3 [*Tzav*]).

On this, Lichtenstein (1975:63) comments: 'In context, the primary reference is to chronological priority'. Accordingly, human morality had to have chronologically pre-existed

revelation, indicating its independent status which is not contingent upon God.

Centuries later and a cultural divide apart, a similar point is made by the 17th-century Platonist Benjamin Whichcote quoting the Hebrew Bible. Lichtenstein paraphrases Whichcote:

[O]ne cannot ask 'Shall, then, the judge of the whole earth not do justice?' (Gn. 18:25) unless one assumes the existence of an unlegislated justice to which, as it were, God Himself is bound. (Lichtenstein 1975:63)

3. **Rav Saadia Gaon** (882–942) suggests that the category of Jewish rational commandments (as opposed to the commandments that are beyond understanding) do not require origins in revelation at Sinai. Yet, revelation is still necessary for humans to grasp the concrete significance of such commandments (Saadia 1948, 3:3).

Saadia Gaon was such a great promoter of the *Weak Dependence Theory* that he writes that he was not prepared to engage in conversation with one who subscribed to the *Strong Dependence Theory*, who:

... [W]as therefore compelled to take refuge in the theory that the disapproval of lying and the approval of truth were not prompted by reason but were the result of commandments and prohibitions of Scripture, and the same was true for the rejection of murder, adultery and stealing. (Saadia 1948:3:8)

Saadia Gaon probably saw such 'moralists', who relied solely on their perception of the word of God, to be dangerous people as their morality was predicated on a system of belief that was supernatural, non-transparent and subject to interpretation.

4. **Yehuda haLevi** (c.1075–1141) similarly rejects the *Strong Dependence Theory* as he argues that morality must have clearly preceded Sinai 'in character and time', as human society cannot function without some form of ethics. He writes:

... [E]ven a gang of robbers could not but accept the rule of justice among themselves. (Halevi 1964:2:48)

5. **Maimonides** (1138–1204), the father of Jewish rationalism, also rejects the *Strong Dependence Theory* and writes that only *Halacha* or *ritual and civil law* needs provenance in Sinai, since:

... [W]ere it not for the Torah, [*those who did not observe ritual law – G.M.*] would not be wicked at all. (Maimonides 1966:Ch. 6)

*Moral law*, however, does not require origins in Sinai because in the domain of morality, Maimonides adopts a 'thesis of autonomy' (Sagi & Statman 1995:53).

6. **R. Nachman of Breslov** (1772–1810), a *Chassidic* mystic, declares that God does not decree good nor bad:

The following is an important principle: From the Most High comes neither good nor bad. Only a simple [*as yet undefined*] light. However, according to the vessel [*or person*] that receives the light, so is that [*undefined*] light shaped [*and formed*] in it [*or him or her*]. (Paraphrase of Likkutei Moharan 31:9)

All these six sources promote and describe a *Weak Dependence Theory* approach.

It is surprising, then, that most contemporary Jewish scholars do not seem to consider the *Weak Dependence Theory* as falling within the rubric of Jewish theology when important rabbinic texts from across the rationalist and mystical spectrum show an almost unanimous adherence to it.

There is, furthermore, an argument from logic that can be adduced to support the *Weak Dependence Theory*:

It makes no sense to say with Abaye, that ‘the whole of the Torah ... is for the purpose of promoting peace’ (b. *Gittin* 59b), unless the ethical value of peace can be taken for granted. (Lichtenstein 1975:64)

## The vexing conundrum

All this points to a particularly vexing conundrum: human autonomy indeed plays a constant and pivotal role in determining so much of *Halacha* (Jewish ritual and civil law) in both the *Talmud* and the *Shulchan Aruch* (Codes of law). Yet, no objection is raised by the same contemporary Jewish scholars to the principle that human autonomy determines *Halacha*.

There is a unanimous acceptance that *Halacha* is decided largely by a *Weak Dependence Theory* approach, in the day-to-day technical process of determining and adjudicating Jewish law. Anyone, even vaguely familiar with the *Halachic* process would know the degree of autonomy the *Posek* or *Halachic* decisor has when determining the final outcome of the law. There is no magic, no ritual, and no prayer involved in the process whatsoever. The rabbinic decisor has absolute autonomy (obviously within the framework of precedents and texts) to rule one way or the other. Human discretion is applied and rabbinic legal sources are cited, as opposed to reliance even upon verses from the Torah. The *Halachic* process is guided by human reason and is autonomous. The *Talmud*, basing itself on Deuteronomy 30:12 declares that the *Halachic* process is ‘Not in heaven’ but squarely within the domain of humans on earth (b. *Bava Metzia* 59b).

To emphasise the degree of autonomy human beings exert in the domain of *Halacha*, R. Yehuda Loew (1520–1609), known as the Maharal of Prague, writes about a Jewish judge in *Halachic* matters:

Even if his insight and wisdom mislead him, he is still beloved by God ... when he rules as demanded by his reason. The judge has nothing but what his eyes see, and he is better than one, who, when ruling, follows a text without understanding its reasons and who walks like the blind. (Loew 1970, 1:69)

The question begs: Why is it perfectly reasonable to accept the extreme autonomy of the *Halachic* process yet reject the autonomy of the moral process? This, particularly in light of the primary sources we have demonstrated above. Yet despite the tenor of the texts, for some reason, contemporary

scholars, while happy to accept the autonomy of *Halacha*, feel disinclined to ascribe human autonomy to morality.

## A reconciliatory approach

Although in theory, Lichtenstein (an exception among modern scholars) acknowledges the *Weak Dependence Theory* in determining morality, he seems unhappy to leave it there:

[T]he issue is not whether the tradition accords a non-halachic ethic some theoretical standing by acknowledging its universal validity and provenance. Rather, it is whether now ... [that the] ‘Torah has been given and Halakha innovated’ [b. *Shabbat* 135b – G.M.] that standing is of any practical significance to us; whether, for the contemporary Jew, an ethic independent of Halakha can be at all legitimate and relevant at an operative level. (Lichtenstein 1975:65)

Put in non-rabbinic parlance and a different genre, Lichtenstein’s approach may perhaps be compared to that of Brevard Childs (1922–2007) and his canonical approach to biblical interpretation. Childs acknowledges the academic methodology of historical criticism but takes the moment of official canonisation as the starting point of his inquiry. According to Childs: ‘the “final form”... of the canon as a whole has priority over any of its antecedent forms’ (Kessler 2013:57–58).

Lichtenstein seems to be saying the same thing about morality. We do not need to consult earlier sources and ‘reinvent’ or ‘redefine’ a morality that already exists in a well-established and ‘canonised’ religion. This observation by Lichtenstein may explain why so much of contemporary Jewish scholarship (intentionally or otherwise) tends to negate the classical texts dealing with morality, adopting instead a *de facto* position of the *Strong Dependence Theory* linking everything back to Godly sanction, Sinai and the ‘canonisation’ of the Law. This is generally referred to as ‘Sinai’ but it may be more accurate to refer to the *Talmudic* period (10 CE–500 CE) or even more specifically the era of final canonisation of the *Code of Law*, known as the *Shulchan Aruch*, by R. Yosef Karo (1488–1575).

This idea is emphasised by Maimonides who, although a promoter of the *Weak Dependence Theory* as noted earlier, points to Sinai as the ‘practical’ originator of all Jewish law and morality. For example, he writes that we do not circumcise because of the tradition that historically Abraham circumcised – rather we do so because we were thus commanded at Sinai (Maimonides’ Commentary on the *Mishna*, *Chullin* 7:6). This way, everything in Judaism is viewed retroactively through the lens of Sinai.

## Is Sinai enough?

This ‘canonical approach’ linking everything to Sinai, does theoretically reconcile the conundrum between the *autonomy* of morality and the *authority* of God and Sinai. The preferred rabbinic perspective is always reconciliatory, particularly in the literary and exegetical senses. But is this reliance on Sinai sufficient for something as fundamental as morality in a real,



complicated and divided society? Is there not, perhaps, a danger in framing morality solely as a religious prescription – because when it becomes a sacred duty of a pious group, it may lose its sense of universal humanitarianism?

This objection was already noted by the *Talmud*:

R. Yochanan said: 'Jerusalem was destroyed only for [the fact] that they adjudicated [cases on the basis of] Torah law. [The Gemara asks:] Should they rather have adjudicated cases on the basis of arbitrary decisions [or of the Magians]? Rather, say ... they did not go beyond the letter of the law'. (b. *Bava Metzia* 30b)

In other words, R. Yochanan maintains that Jerusalem was destroyed specifically because the *letter* of the law was applied at the expense of the *spirit* of the law. The letter of the law cannot shape moral people. Moral people are only produced by the spirit of the law.

Nachmanides (1194–1270) went even a step further by declaring that one can observe every single detail of the Torah yet be nothing but: 'a villain operating within the confines of the Law' (Nachmanides' commentary on Lv 19:2).

This way, even if we choose to reconcile the conundrum of why most contemporary scholars tend to ignore the empirical data that Judaism follows the *Weak Dependence Theory*, and opt instead for the *Strong Dependence Theory* by connecting everything to the final authority of Sinai, still, as R. Soloveitchik is known to have said: 'Halacha is a floor, not a ceiling'.<sup>1</sup>

Sinai and the Law are only starting points and even according to those who see them as the source, they must never be taken as the full flowering of Jewish morality. This is why I argue that it is important to acknowledge the *Weak Dependence Theory* as the basis of all morality.

## An extreme test case for rabbinic morality

Perhaps the most extreme test case for rabbinic morality, involving rabbi versus rabbi, is the question of the rabbis who fled the Holocaust leaving their flock behind. Isaac Hershkowitz (2009:109) explains how, in the years following the war, a 'comprehensive apologetic literature' had been produced by the followers of these rabbis, justifying their leaders' actions.

These rabbis who fled the Holocaust included Aharon Rokeach (1880–1957), who had one of the largest *Chassidic* courts in Europe with tens of thousands of followers, his brother Mordechai who led a *Chassidic* court in Bilgoraj, Poland, as well as the rebbes of Vizhnitz, Munkacs and Satmar, to name but a few.

Anecdotally, in a private communication between myself and a respected scholar in Israel who had researched this matter, he claimed that possibly more than 60% of rabbinic

leadership fled the Holocaust. His family had direct experience of this. He was reluctant, however, to give me permission to quote him because of the immense sensitivity involved. I have no way of verifying or denying this claim, but a significant number of the rabbinic leadership certainly left their people to their fate.

In a fascinating sociological response, as a general rule, the ultra-Orthodox or *Chareidim* refer to these escapes as being a part of 'the rescue miracle'. They view these rescues as an imperative. Spiritual leaders must be saved for the group to survive and to be re-established elsewhere. Other camps within the rabbinic world, however, viewed this as a betrayal and had expected instead to see their leaders stay and lead their people to the bitter end (Hershkowitz 2009:111).

The widow of R. Avraham Halberstam, known as the *Stropkover Rebbe*, Rebbetzin Chaya Halberstam said the following (recorded by a Sonderkommando who subsequently was also killed):

I see the end of Hungarian Jewry. The government had permitted large sections of the Jewish community to flee. The people asked the advice of the *admorim* [*Chassidic leaders*] and they always reassured them. The Belzer Rebbe said that Hungary would only endure anxiety ... And now the bitter hour has come, when the Jews can no longer save themselves ... but they [*the rabbis*], themselves, fled at the last moment to the land of Israel. They saved their own lives but left the people as sheep for slaughter ... In the last moments of my life I set my plea before You. That You pardon them for this great 'חילול השם' [*desecration of God's name* – G.M.].<sup>2</sup>

Hershkowitz brings evidence that far from being grateful for the 'rescue miracle', there was instead an intense intra-rabbinical controversy taking place in Budapest just before the Nazi invasion of Hungary in March 1944, and it concerned the ethics of the imminent departure of many of these rabbis in important leadership positions. The debate was based on *Halachic* and *Talmudic* sources on morality. The research reveals that the rabbinic opposition to the fleeing of the rabbis was far wider and more intense than is usually portrayed (Hershkowitz 2009:113).

In a special edition of the prestigious rabbinical journal *Tel Talpiyot* (which had over 700 Hungarian rabbis as contributors), published on 27 February 1944, an article entitled *Vayhi binso'a haAron* [*When the Tabernacle travels*] dealt with the crisis of the rabbis (who are compared to the Tabernacle) leaving and: 'criticises the escape of the community's spiritual leaders in pungent and acute terms' (Hershkowitz 2009:115).

The article is of unknown authorship but Hershkowitz shows that it is likely to have been by R. Meshulam Zalman Katsburg, or a close associate. This is significant because his father, R. David Tzvi Katsburg, the editor of *Tel Talpiyot*, was severely censured for supporting religious Zionism (the *Mizrachi* movement) and opposing the powerful Hungarian ultra-Orthodox camp.

1. See online source: viewed 26 July 2022, from Torah from Heaven: A Guide to the Four Questions – TheTorah.com.

2. See online source: viewed 27 June 2022, from DUS IZ NIES !! Rare View...: The plea of the Stropkover Rebbitzin shortly before she was murdered by the Nazis.

Without directly mentioning their names, the article condemns the Belzer Rebbe and his brother for neglecting their people and for emigrating to Palestine even though they had been outspoken against the nascent Zionist movement. It mentioned how 'certain rabbis' (alluding to these anti-Zionist rabbis) had used 'certificates' (immigration visas) to British-ruled Palestine and these documents stated that they were 'veteran Zionists'. A policy of selective *Aliyah* (immigration to Palestine) had been in practice during the 1930s.

The article also objected to the very public spectacle of their leaving, including the event of the final sermon of the Belzer Rebbe's brother, R. Mordechai of Bilgoraj who claimed that for years he had dreamed of prostrating himself on the soil of the Holy Land.

Of interest is the moral tenor of the article which cites moral sources against leaders leaving their flock. The imagery of a shepherd abandoning the herd and a captain abandoning the ship is used to full force. Rabbinic sources are used to show how Moses was not permitted to enter the Holy Land because his contemporaries were not permitted to enter either. By leaving the people behind, a leader desecrates the holy concept of leadership.

The author, obviously fully aware of the hyper- veneration of the *Chassidic* followers to their rebbes, contrasts that respect with the rebbes' self-interests and self-centredness:

Why won't they notice the powerful demand that the nation's leaders remain obliged to the public ... Whenever any of our leaders fail to acknowledge this minimal obligation to the Jewish collective, he fails to do his duty ... his duty to the people is at least as great in times of distress as in peacetime ... (cited in Hershkowitz 2009:117–118)

But the author of the article in *Tel Talpiyot* also attacks the public for being naïve and accepting of such behaviour from their leaders:

How long will the innocent and loyal souls among us neither see nor feel, or close their eyes so they won't see and confuse themselves so they can't feel ... who tolerate the offence being done to the Torah[?]. (cited in Hershkowitz 2009:119)

These rabbis who opposed their fleeing colleagues also visualised the origins of morality through the lens of the *Strong Dependence Theory* as they conceptualised morality originating from the Torah which had now been *offended*. Yet people from their own faith, the ultra-Orthodox, using the same Torah, viewed the same events as a 'rescue miracle' that *enhanced* the Torah.

## Conclusion

The *Strong Dependence Theory*, by definition, always reverts and deflects morality to God, Sinai, the Torah or *Halacha*. The *Weak Dependence Theory* sometimes does too but only for *authority*, not *provenance*. The *Strong Dependence Theory* has great religious appeal and is a good example of virtue signalling. The Stropkover Rebbe's widow adopted the

*Strong Dependence Theory* by referring to the fleeing rabbis as a 'desecration of God's name'. And the 1944 rabbinic journal referred to the same as an 'offence to the Torah'. Despite the empirical textual evidence from classical rabbinic sources that morality is autonomous and defined in human terms, ultimately the *conceptualisation* (whether accurately or not) of morality in Judaism is still somehow always reflected back to God and not to humans.

Ironically, by framing morality as originating in God, it can be subject to religious manipulation as we saw with the ultra-Orthodox referring to the fleeing rabbis as the 'rescue miracle', while their communities perished. Because morality based on religion is susceptible to interpretation and exegesis, I argue for a return to the primary rabbinic texts for a conceptualisation of morality in Judaism based on *Weak Dependence Theory*, with a natural and human conceptualisation of morality defined by the 'innocent and loyal souls among us'. The *Weak Dependence Theory* – unlike a conceptualisation of morality rooted in God, faith or religion – is difficult to distort due to its open, moral and ethical transparency. When human beings are accepted as the final (in this case, technically, the *initial*) arbiters of what constitutes morality – as the classical rabbinic texts suggest – then morality may have a *better*, albeit *not perfect*, chance of endurance. This is for the simple reason that it speaks a universal language that many (most?) people understand, and is, therefore, difficult to misrepresent or bestow unevenly.

## Acknowledgements

Research on this article commenced in 2022 when Gavin Michal was completing his Master's Dissertation and invited to present a paper on the Conceptualisation of Morality in Judaism at the ProMores Conference at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion, on 12 September 2022.

## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

G.M. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Bleich, D.J., 2006, 'Survey of recent Halachic literature: Torture and the ticking bomb', *Tradition* issue 39(4), 89–121.
- Frank, R., 1983, 'Moral obligation in classical Muslim theology', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11(2), 204–223.
- Halevi, Y., 1964, *The Kuzari*, transl. H. Hirschfeld, Schocken Books, New York, NY, pp. 1130–1140.
- Hershkowitz, I., 2009, "'This enormous offense to the Torah": New discoveries about the controversy over the escape of the Rabbis from Budapest, 1943–1944', *Yad Vashem Studies* 37(1), 109–136.
- Idziak, J.M., 1989, 'In search for "good positive reasons" for an ethics of divine commands: A catalogue of arguments', *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 6(1), 47–64. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil1989612>
- Kessler, J., 2013, *Old Testament theology: Divine call and human response*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX.
- Kierkegaard, S., [1843] 1983, *Fear and trembling*, transl. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong (eds.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Leibowitz, Y., 1992, *Judaism, human values, and the Jewish State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Lichtenstein, A., 1975, 'Does Jewish tradition recognize an ethic independent of Halakha', in M. Fox (ed.), *Modern Jewish ethics: Theory and practice*, pp. 62–88, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, OH.
- Loew, Y., 1970, *Netivot Olam*, Machon Yad Mordechai, Tel Aviv.
- Maimonides, M., 1966, *Eight chapters*, transl. J. Garfinkel, Arms Press, New York, NY.
- Mencken, H., n.d., *H. L. Mencken quote: Morality is doing what is right, no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told, no matter what is right*, viewed 25 July 2022, from [minimalistquotes.com](http://minimalistquotes.com).
- Saadia, R., 1948, *The book of beliefs and opinions, c. 930*, transl. S. Rosenblatt, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Sagi, A. & Statman, D., 1995, 'Divine command morality and Jewish tradition', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 23(1), 39–67.
- Shapira, K., 1960, *Esh Kodesh* (Hebrew), Va'ad Hasidei Piaseczno, Jerusalem.
- Twersky, I., 1991, *Introduction to the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides* (Hebrew), Magnes Press, Jerusalem.