

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE - JEWISH TEXTS

Neither the Biblical or the Rabbinic writings have a word for 'conscience' - this idea comes only in medieval Jewish philosophy.' Hebrew Bible would seem to take a dim view of the concept of 'freedom of conscience,' IF what we mean by that is doing whatever seems good to you.

from Judges 17, Micah and the idols; the false priest

הָאִישׁ מִיכָה לֹו בַיִת אֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ אֵפֹד וְתַרְפִּים וַיְמַלֵּא אֶת־יָד אֶחָד מִבָּנָיו
וַיְהִי־לוֹ לְכֹהֵן: בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה:

5. And the man Micah had a house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.

6. **In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**

And from Judges 21, taking women from Shiloh against their will

20. Therefore they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards;

21. And see, and, behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards, and catch every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.

22. And it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, that we will say to them, Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take a wife for every man in the war; for you did not give to them willingly, else you should now be guilty.

23. And the sons of Benjamin did so, and took their wives, according to their number, of those who danced, whom they caught; and they went and returned to their inheritance, and rebuilt the cities, and lived in them.

24. And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and to his family, and they went out from there every man to his inheritance.

25. **In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**

*A king in these passages represents a secular, not religious, authority - but a good king would certainly support and uphold principles of both Jewish ethics and ritual. Periodically a true prophet or a good leader arises in Israel and all goes well for a generation - then the people backslide into following their own **desires** - but this is NOT 'following their own **consciences**'.*

1. Steven Schwartzchild, 'Conscience' in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flour (NY: Scribner, 1987), pp. 87-89.

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The Torah implies that God's commandments are largely internalised in every Jew, whether by 'nature' or by upbringing, as this passage from Deuteronomy indicates:

יֵאָדָּם כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא־רַחֲקָה הוּא: יב לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשְּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: יג וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לָיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: יד כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מֵאֵד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: ט [שביעי ומפטיר] [רביעי כשהן מחוברין] טו רֵאָה נִתְּתִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמּוֹת וְאֶת־הָרָע: טז אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּדַרְכָּיו וּלְשַׁמֵּר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחַיִּיתָ וּרְבִיתָ וּבִרְכָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה בֹּא־שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

11. For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off.
12. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?
13. Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?
14. But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.
15. See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil;
16. In that I command you this day to love the Eternal One your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Eternal One your God shall bless you in the land which you are entering to possess.

However, in the midrashic writings (see [Arguing with God](#), Latymer) an anonymous rabbi suggests that both the prophets Daniel and Jeremiah refused to call God 'mighty' (as the phrase appears in our traditional prayers) because they both saw too much suffering. The integrity of their prayers in their circumstances demanded the omission. The 'proof-text' brought for this is Daniel 9:4 (cf traditional prayer, note difference in stock phrasing.)

4. And I prayed to the Eternal One my God, and made my confession, and said, Eternal One, the great [mighty] and awesome God, keeping the covenant and mercy to those who love him, and to those who keep his commandments;

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם, אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב. הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא....