

Time-Tested Ideas for Living Better Lives Today!

By Jim Myers

Several time-tested guiding ideas are parts of the foundations upon which Judaism, Christianity and the United States of America are built. They act like lighthouses to keep individuals and human collectives from crashing into unseen dangers. They are recorded in their founding documents which were written by survivors of previous crashes. These documents are the heritages they left to guide future generations to keep them from crashing into the same obstacles as they sailed through the dangerous waters of life. The first two are religious documents -- the *Torah* and *Synoptic Gospels*. The third is a political document -- the *Declaration of Independence*. Very recently, science has produced a fourth document -- a *scientific understanding of what humans are*. We are the only generation in history to have access to all four.

The Torah

The words of the Torah were inscribed on a scroll by Ezra a Jewish Scribe around 450 BCE in Babylon. He lived in Babylon and was the descendant of Judeans who were brought there after being conquered by Babylonians in 586 BCE. Three years after they arrived, Persians conquered the Babylonians. A little over a century later, Ezra began gathered information about his nation's history, laws and culture from fellow Jewish exiles and recorded them in the scroll that is now called the *Torah*. It opens with the story of the guiding idea -- "*all humans are created in the image of God.*" It established the equality and value of all human lives. No matter whom you are or whom you meet, you are equal and value in the eyes of God, but for people to be aware of this they must be taught.

The Synoptic Gospels

Its words were spoken by Jesus, leader of a Jewish sect in 1st century Judea and Galilee. They were preserved orally and passed down by others until they were recorded on scrolls that later became part of the Synoptic Gospels. He was born around 6 BCE, raised in a poor family, and trained by Joseph to be a builder and teacher of the Torah. The Jewish people of that period lived under the constant watch of Roman soldiers. Lines of crosses with dead Jewish people hanging from them were commonly placed along major roads to remind people of the cost of disobeying Roman authorities. The words of Jewish were spoken to Jewish people who worshipped the same God and heard the words of the Torah regularly. Jesus's guiding idea was this -- "*God commanded people to give to Him! The only way a person can give to God is by giving to their neighbor as they give unto themselves!*" The phrase "give to" is translated by the word "love" in many Bibles; for Jesus "giving to" was "love." *Jesus's message was based on the idea of equality and the priority of human life revealed in the Torah* and he the primary instruction he gave his followers was "go make disciples," which means "go and teach this to others."

The Declaration of Independence

On June 11, 1776 CE, the Continental Congress created the *Committee of Five* to develop a formal text of the declaration that will separate the colonists from the rule of the King of Great Britain. **Thomas Jefferson** was placed at the head of the committee, which consisted of

John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston. They were very familiar with the guiding ideas of Ezra and Jesus, as well of those of other ancient and contemporary philosophers. They concluded that the guiding idea of the new nation must be – *one must hold sacred the survival and flourishing of others*. They based their conclusion on the two underlined phrases in the first paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence*:

When in the course of human events I becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Both phrases declare the “equality of humans.” For people who believed in God, the Creator established it by “creating all men in His image.” For others, the *Laws of Nature* established “human equality.”

The colonists decided to deal with the world by presuming it to be populated with fair judges and by making their case to those fair judges. They could presume this because they believed that nature had given all human beings an innate sense of fairness, which, though it perhaps lay dormant sometimes, could nonetheless be activated by spelling out the terms on which fair judgments are made. It could be activated with explanations of principle¹ . . . The fundamental feature of human equality in the argument of the Declaration is, we now realize, this: None can judge better than I whether I am happy; each can judge for himself, just as well as I can for myself, whether he is happy. As judges of our own happiness, we are equals² . . . The Declaration's combination of ideas with process is built on the foundation of a sublime optimism about human potential.³

The Committee of Five wove the two views together through the use of the word “sacred,” which has two meanings, *religious* and *secular*.

1. **religious** -- made holy by association to a god
2. **secular** -- worthy of reverent protection and celebration

For believers, the guiding idea that “all human lives are sacred” came from God. But, for others, they offered a very democratic process for them to come to same conclusion:

But, in those early days of drafting the Declaration, as the word “sacred” acquired a religious hue, the phrase “We hold these truths sacred and undeniable” gave way, as we have seen, to this one: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” This was a profound change.

To say that truths are self-evident is an epistemological claim, or a claim about how we know the things we know. How do we know that these truths are true? Because they are self-evident. Well, what does “self-evident” mean exactly? It does not mean that the instant you hear a proposition, you recognize it as true.

It means rather that if you look into the proposition, if you entertain it and reflect upon it, you will inevitably come to affirm it. All the evidence you need to judge the proposition for yourself is in the proposition itself. That's why a proposition can be called self-evident. And to call these truths self-evident is to invite everyone into the process of judging them. This is a very democratic approach to truth.⁴

In either case, the Council of Five concluded that for the new representative democracy to work “*all or least a majority of Americans must hold sacred the survival and flourishing of others.*” They knew that many did not hold it at that time, but they believed “nature had given all human beings an innate sense of fairness” and even though it was “*lying dormant*” it could be activated by people “*spelling out the terms on which fair judgments are made.*”

Genes, Memes & Better Societies

In the late 20th century a new guide about human equality was discovered. Humans are all genetic creatures. All human bodies are produced by a 3 billion letter DNA code and they are all 99.9% identical. Nature bestows upon every newborn a considerably complex brain that is flexible and subject to change, like a book in which the first draft is written by the genes. No chapters are complete at birth, and some are just rough outlines waiting to be filled in during childhood. But not a single chapter consists of blank pages on which a society can inscribe any conceivable set of words — *be it on sexuality, language, food preferences, or morality.*⁵

A growing body of evidence, though, suggests that humans do have a rudimentary moral sense from the very start of life. Humans are born with a rudimentary moral sense -- the capacity and willingness to judge the actions of others, some sense of justice, and gut responses to altruism and nastiness. You won't find a society where people don't have some notion of *fairness*, don't put some value on *loyalty* and *kindness*, and don't *distinguish between acts of cruelty and innocent mistakes*. Humans are genetically endowed with *compassion* and *empathy* -- *the capacity to put themselves in someone else's shoes and feel their pleasure and pain.*⁶

Science discovered that humans are also social creatures that are dependent on the actions of other people for their very existence and survival from conception to death. From an evolutionary sense, being genetically endowed with compassion and empathy, benefits all humans because it increases the chances of choosing the “best” humans to work with.

But science also discovered that humans are memetic creatures that require memes to survive and thrive. Humans acquire them from members of their society, beginning with their parents/caretakers. This is what turns immature babies into mature civilized adults — *social creatures who can experience empathy, guilt and shame; who can override selfish impulses in the name of higher principles; and who will respond with outrage to unfairness and injustice.*⁷

Every social group has at its core something “sacred” and members of societies learn about it from their “grand narratives,” which identify and reinforce the sacred core of each matrix. Each narrative is designed to orient listeners morally — *to draw their attention to a set of virtues and vices, or good and evil forces — and to impart lessons about what must be done*

*now to protect, recover, or attain the sacred core of the vision.*⁸ Science tells us that humans are born with a rudimentary intuitive sense about whom to trust and love, but who humans collectively distrust and hate comes from societies.

Incorporating These Ideas in Your Life Journey

The Torah, Jesus and the Founding Fathers all taught different versions of the same guiding ideas – *human equality and the sacredness of human all lives*. Each version builds on what came before it. None created perfect individuals and societies, but each contributed to making individuals and societies better. Science provided factual discoveries that support the ideas.

- *Humans are genetically endowed with the capacity to benefit from them.*
- *Humans are memetically equipped to acquire specific memes required to activate them.*
- *Humans require other humans to provide those memes.*

We created the **TOV Center** to educate people about how to benefit from this process and network them with others to transform the ideas into concrete actions that make lives safer, healthier, happier and more fulfilled today. In other words, *we help people discover “the best” of the heritages they have received, learn how to incorporate that into their lives today and create better heritages for their descendants to build even better futures.*

We invite you to join us on this “sacred” journey of creating better lives!

¹ *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* by Danielle Allen © 2014| Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York, NY; p. 142

² *Our Declaration*; p. 187

³ *Our Declaration*; p. 183

⁴ *Our Declaration*; pp. 136-137

⁵ *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt © 2012; Vintage Books, A Division of Random Books, Inc. New York, NY; p. 152.

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html? r=0>

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html? r=0>

⁸ *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion* By Jonathan Haidt © 2012; Vintage Books, A Division of Random Books, Inc. New York, NY; p. 330.