



# Beyond Right

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These are the things you are to do: speak truth to each other, and render true and peaceful judgment in your courts.

—*Zechariah 8:16*

It is not surprising to find the Jewish bookshelf stocked with tomes on the laws of Shabbat observance or Jewish dietary requirements. By contrast, many are astonished to discover the attention Jewish law devotes to disputes between neighbors, ethical dilemmas involving the workplace, and a vast corpus of civil legislation.

Each legal system reflects the values to which its formulators adhere. This is profoundly true of Jewish law, which views its mandate—beyond protecting individual rights and maintaining social order—as shaping a righteous society.

Jewish civil law is not simply a system historically developed by Jews, but an inherently *Jewish* institution that reflects and promotes a set of values that is uniquely Jewish—and historically remarkable and revolutionary. Study of Jewish civil law clarifies the meaning of core Jewish values, for it is the station at which ideals convert into concrete practice, in the form of instruction and guidance for daily life and its myriad experiences.

To this end, the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI) is pleased to present *Beyond Right*, a groundbreaking course that pursues six primary Jewish values from their conception in Hebrew Scripture through their development in the teachings of our ancient sages, and on through subsequent generations of classic works of Jewish philosophy and mysticism. Then, following an in-depth slice of Talmudic study, these values come alive in the practical application of Jewish civil legislation, translating abstract principles into detailed guidance on common real-life scenarios.

We are confident that this study will clarify the uniqueness of several of Judaism's values and generate an appreciation for Jewish law as a uniquely Jewish system that Jews should approach for guidance and clarity when faced with professional or personal dilemmas.

# Lesson Topics

## ■ SESSION ONE

### Beyond Good Neighbors

What is the purpose of law? Is the goal of law merely to protect individual rights and maintain social order, or should the legal system aspire to guide people to do the right thing and shape a righteous society?

This lesson explores the Jewish value of going beyond one's "rights" in order to do the right thing by others. We learn that Jewish law aims to shape a righteous society, and to this end it forbids spiteful conduct and legally compels us to do the right thing and accommodate each other when this comes at no personal expense. This principle is applied to neighborly disputes about fences, parking in someone else's driveway, and unauthorized Wi-Fi use.

## ■ SESSION TWO

### Beyond Restitution

What does true repentance entail? Does repentance have any role to play in the legal system, or should it be considered a strictly personal matter?

This lesson begins by establishing that Jewish repentance—known as *teshuvah*—is always available to everyone, and defines what this process entails. We learn that overcoming struggles is the very purpose of our creation and brings us to greater heights than what was available to us previously.

Jewish values teach that every offender deserves the opportunity to do *teshuvah* and that we have an obligation to help facilitate it. Jewish law expresses this value in a number of surprising enactments introduced into the legal system in order to encourage and facilitate *teshuvah*. Under these enactments, thieves are sometimes allowed to substitute monetary compensation for the stolen item, and the victims of career criminals that come forward to make amends are counseled to not accept compensation.

## ■ SESSION THREE

# Beyond Taking Offense

We all feel some degree of responsibility toward others, but how far does this responsibility extend? Is other people's personal conduct any of my business?

In this lesson we learn that Judaism has a very broad definition of mutual responsibility, because it believes we all have a shared purpose in this world and share a spiritual soul. As a result, Jewish law considers it a crime to remain silent about a mortal danger to others and also mandates that we extend every effort necessary to protect others from monetary loss. The Jewish value of mutual responsibility also calls on us to care for our fellow's personal spiritual well-being by guiding him or her away from transgression and toward mitzvah observance.

## ■ SESSION FOUR

# Beyond Personal Freedom

What does it really mean to be free? Is a life of religious observance compatible with personal freedom?

This lesson teaches that the Jewish definition of freedom is living the life we were created to live, a life of devotion to G-d as our one true Master. To achieve this, humans must be free of enslavement to human masters, and this is why Judaism was always—and continues to be—ahead of its time in prohibiting slavery and imprisonment for the purpose of repaying debts. Jewish law is also wary of the compromised freedom of employees and, to this end, goes further than other modern legal systems in protecting the right of employees to quit mid-contract without penalty.

## ■ SESSION FIVE

# Beyond Lawful Ownership

Is ownership a legal status, or an ontological reality? Not just an abstract philosophical matter, the answer to this question impacts practical ownership questions: Can I ever take someone

else's possessions under the assumption that they won't mind? How far does the requirement to return lost items extend?

This lesson teaches that ownership is an ontological reality that reflects a spiritual relationship between a person and their possessions. As a result, Jewish law forbids us from taking other people's property under an assumption of permission and obligates us to return lost items, regardless of how much time has passed since the loss. The Jewish concept of ownership also informs our attitude to ownership as a responsibility, not just a privilege.

## ■ SESSION SIX

### **Beyond Presumption of Innocence**

Are there any human biases we should actively cultivate? Is human nature essentially good, or negative?

In this lesson we learn about the Jewish value of judging others with a favorable bias, in the same light we judge ourselves. This positive bias is based on the Jewish teachings that human beings are positive by nature and naturally inclined to do the right thing.

As a result, in addition to a presumption of innocence, Jewish law also affords people a presumption of *righteousness*. This principle is applied in a range of areas, from kosher slaughter to suspicion of theft and unethical business conduct. Jewish law teaches us to not judge people based on statistics or beliefs about the broader public—but rather, to assess them with a favorable eye based on their individual merit.