

# Religion and the narrative of biological science

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There exists much ethical controversy brought about by advances in biology and medicine and the relationship to religion. In a new essay in *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, Laurie Zoloth takes an approach to medical ethics that draws upon Jewish texts, traditions, and philosophy to show how acting to change the world is indicative of this faith tradition.

Genetic explanations for how the natural world functions and why humans behave as we do can challenge what has historically been the moral province of religion: the questions of befallenness, suffering, healing. A question to be explored then is whether genetic enhancement of human capabilities, in addition to in their use in curing disease, is also a legitimate goal for biomedical science and technology.

Like other faith traditions, Jewish discernment of the moral choices we make as we face advances in genetic and medical research is based not only in a contemporary assessment of their social use, but of their meaning in relationship to particular religious traditions, texts, and law. Judaism has a long tradition of narratives, many of which are found within the Hebrew Bible and the tradition of commentary collectively called halacha, or rabbinic law. In the case of new technology, Jewish ethics is a complex, reasoned argument about how such Biblical texts and historical judgments are brought to bear on a particular case at hand.

Healing is mandated and saving a life is a priority over other ritual commandments or community costumes in the Jewish tradition. Since

Jewish ethical reasoning privileges the responsibility to save life above all other responsibilities, actions that save lives are prompted by this account. This has provided a justified context for virtually all experimental therapy, including genetic research.

Thus the sum of Jewish argument has been to positively encourage genetic research and intervention if it can improve the human condition. Using technology to alter the human body has long been an accepted part of Jewish tradition, from the use of spectacles to artificial hips, and thus genetic enhancement for the same end would seem not impermissible within the Jewish tradition. In fact, the demands of halachah call on Jews to make changes to the body and some, such as circumcision, an obligation. Intricate narratives about “tikkun olam” or the duty to repair a world understood as broken frame the response to medicine in a general sense. .

Source: Wiley

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