

# THE JEWISH SENSIBILITIES

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"I like to think of myself as a good Jew." American Jews say this often. Typically they are not describing their observance of Jewish ritual practices or their respect, in principle, for Jewish law. If their desire were to communicate those expressions of religiosity, they would more likely say, "I am religious," "I am *frum*," or "I am *shomer Shabbat*."

I believe that when American Jews speak of being good Jews, they are referencing a largely unarticulated code of behaviors which they try to follow and which they use to judge both themselves and others. The code is certainly supported by traditional Jewish practices, texts and regula, but it is not necessarily synonymous with them. The code certainly plays a role in the lives of religiously observant American Jews of various denominations and levels of commitment. It is operative, as well, in the lives of many American Jews who actively or passively eschew Jewish law and practice but still claim with pride and certainty that their Jewish heritage or Jewish identity infuses them with moral characteristics and obligations; a world view that they have inherited and encountered—in both life and literature—which shapes how they see themselves, how they understand themselves as moral agents in the world, and how they interact with others.

I call that code “The Jewish Sensibilities.” The sensibilities are Jewish ways of understanding what it means to be a human being. They affect how one thinks, acts and feels. They guide and orient one’s actions and choices. And just as they shape and refine one’s own behavior, they serve as benchmarks as one evaluates the behavior of others and, in the case of parents and teachers, as they erect an informal curriculum for character development.

The sensibilities form a set of intuited guidelines. If pressed, an individual may not be able to articulate what those guidelines are, or how they came to know, master or cherish them. They may not be able to name the texts, ceremonies, events, memories, institutions, practices, objects, relationships or experiences that facilitated their transmission. This is not surprising. When people are asked if they know how to be a member of their gender, family, school, place of work, community, or even citizen of their country they will surely say they do—but they may be unable to explain what it is they know and how it is they came to know it. They just know, and know they know. So it is with cultural practices that are deeply imbedded. Conscious knowledge is not the benchmark of having cultural intelligence. Moreover, as I have observed, and this may well be surprising—it is *not* the precondition for effective cultural transmission from one generation to another.

Not that there aren’t good pedagogic and ethical reasons to make the code of sensibilities conscious and articulate; that is, to name and explain them. Knowing the sensibilities can help someone—such as a doctor or bioethicist—seeking to understand American Jews better and to anticipate how they will lead their lives and make decisions. Knowing them can help Jews themselves better understand why they behave as they do, how they might choose to behave when the path is not obvious, and how to select a more ideal way of behaving when there are complicated options. From a pedagogic perspective, knowing the sensibilities can help Jews who are parents, teachers and community leaders to articulate clearer answers to those two ever-beguiling questions, “Why be Jewish?” and “What are Jewish values?”

My observations, while ethnographic, are based neither on systematic fieldwork nor on comprehensive interviews. They are personal impressions based upon a lifetime of being an American Jew, living and researching among Jews in America of different orientations and backgrounds, in a range of communities, both urban and rural. As a journalist and as an anthropologist, I observe American Jews—secular and religious—in a wide range of situations, asking them to reflect upon the choices they make. I trust, by now, that I have a good eye. Because my expertise rests primarily upon lived experience in America, I shall refrain from making claims about the code of sensibilities held by Jews living elsewhere in the world. Indeed, I have observed that there are major overlaps between the sensibilities of American Jews and those of Israeli, French, British and South African Jews, but there are significant variations as well, which only inhabitants of those places, or entrenched scholars, are in position to name.

I began to develop the concept of a code of sensibilities when I was asked, some ten years ago, by bioethicists, physicians, chaplains, and medical students to present “the Jewish perspective” on healthcare issues such as making end-of-life decisions, choosing whether or not to pursue treatment, and using new reproductive technologies. Those who consulted with me expected I would share the relevant Jewish laws bearing on these problematic or novel situations. Whether or not they knew the term, they wanted to hear the *halakhot*, the ancient rules determining what is permitted and forbidden to Jews, and the responsa literature, the ongoing written chronicles of rabbinic interpretation of ancient textual perspectives. I did my best to explain that Jews do not, in fact, open up the Bible or Talmud and expect to find a set of clear-cut laws that they can follow. Moreover, I would explain, Jews do not have a single human authority, like a pope or chief rabbi, to whom they all turn for instruction, interpretation, clarification and guidance. I would offer:

*Halakha* does not mean “law,” but “the way to go.” *Halakha*, not inscribed in a single book of law, is derived by generations of Jewish scholars and teachers who have consulted sacred texts and lived practices of the past in order to align human behavior with their understanding of Divine will.

When confronted with novel or complicated situations, a rabbi, in discourse with other scholars and teachers, will interpret past understandings in light of contemporary situations and apply them to the particular lives and particular situations of individuals.

I would provide examples—demonstrating, for instance, how sacred texts have been variously interpreted through the ages, leading to the conclusion, upheld by most rabbis, that in cases in which a mother's life is endangered, abortion is not only permissible but advised.

"What are the other laws?" they wanted to know, hoping I was on my way to providing the list of Jewish policies they had wanted in the first place. At this point, I would insist that knowing laws would only help them to understand what—according to certain experts in rabbinics or Jewish ethics—law-abiding religiously observant Jews *should* ideally believe or how they *should* ideally behave. Even if every Orthodox Jew did hold those beliefs and practiced them, the healthcare professionals would only know about a small percentage of the American Jewish population.

If knowing *halakha* is insufficiently predictive, how are ethicists and doctors to discern what might be in the hearts and minds of those Jewish families who huddle outside intensive care units as they struggle to, say, make complex end-of-life decisions for a loved one? Are ethicists and doctors to conclude that those Jews who do not lead lives governed totally or even partially by *halakha* lack distinctive, Jewish ways of thinking about how to act in the world? Are they to conclude that most of the choices Jews make concerning healthcare—or work, or family, or community—are made without reference to Judaism?

Not at all. I believe that most American Jews—those who identify with the various denominations as well as those who define themselves as secular or non-practicing—*do* indeed have a distinctive set of principles that guide them, whether or not they are aware of it. Moreover, they transmit this awareness and sense of obligation to their children. Even when American Jews act against *halakha*, by intention or by ignorance, there are still, deep-seated Jewish sensibilities guiding their behavior. These sensibilities are the guidelines I present to healthcare professionals, and I encourage they turn to them so they might better understand American Jews.

I would eventually discover, in my work consulting with American Jewish communities and communal leaders, that the sensibilities could also be of use in addressing a broad range of issues, including making decisions about adopting new rituals and practices, education and outreach. In fact (since the first time I wrote about the sensibilities in the Journal *Shma* in December 2003) I am told they are currently being used in such settings for teaching and discussion.<sup>1</sup>

I have selected a group of sensibilities as being most central, predictive, and characteristic. They are ethical precepts, values, principles, and ways of being human that draw upon Jewish sacred texts, Jewish ritual practices and communal customs, as well as upon the vast narrative of Jewish history; that is, Jewish experiences. The sensibilities are made available through watching and listening to people modeling behaviors; through meals, songs and adages; through the stories of people's lives that are narrated as being exemplary or cautionary; through texts that are venerated—both sacred and secular. Despite the helter-skelter, non-systematic nature of their transmission, and despite the fact that they are not usually made available through writing or a formal set of initiatory activities, their transmission from one generation to another seems unusually effective.

If being guided by the sensibilities gives one a sense of ones being good, then violating them—or witnessing them be violated—can cause personal or social distress. I would therefore suggest that for many American Jews, these sensibilities have acquired some of the felt impact of law.

Two major Jewish thinkers influence my own understanding of Jewish sensibilities. First, there is the work of Max Kadushin, who

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<sup>1</sup> In presenting the sensibilities to various communities, I have been especially struck by some responses, which I have yet evaluated to my satisfaction. "These are American values," they say, or "Judeo-Christian ethics" and not descriptions of anything uniquely Jewish. For some, their being coterminous is a good thing: you can live out Jewish sensibilities and simultaneously be an upstanding American; you can have ethnic distinction without losing membership in the larger culture. For others, the code comes as a disappointment, for it does not reveal a depiction of being a human being that seems distinctively Jewish *enough*.

articulated what he called Jewish “value concepts.” Kadushin’s four central core value concepts (God’s love, God’s justice, Torah and Israel) contain within them sub-concepts and even sub-sub-concepts:

God’s justice [includes] the sub-concepts of chastisements, Merit of the Fathers, Merit of the Children, and “measure for measure.” Torah the sub-concepts of the Study of Torah, Mizwot, Good Deeds, and ethical Derek Erez, the latter also having its own sub-concepts in charity and Deeds of Loving kindness and in such ethical matters as humility, honesty, reverence and the like.<sup>2</sup>

Second are the teachings and writing of my teacher Rabbi “Yitz” Greenberg, who was my mentor at CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, who speaks of broad “continuum concepts”<sup>3</sup> which include such terms as *Tikkun Olam* (perfecting the world), *Tzelem Elokim* (being in the Image of God: this includes having infinite value, equality and uniqueness), *Covenant, the Triumph of Life*, and *Clal Yisrael*.

What differentiates my list of sensibilities from Kadushin’s value concepts and from Greenberg’s continuum concepts is that the sensibilities are categories that emerge primarily from the real lives of a diverse population of Jews, characterizing how Jews self-describe and live out their ideals, rather than as prescriptions imposed by sacred texts.<sup>4</sup> (Granted: in the formulation of their conceptual structures, both Kadushin

<sup>2</sup>*The Rabbinic Mind* by Max Kadushin (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952; Second edition. New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1965), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>*Living in the Image of God* by Irving Greenberg and Shalom Freedman (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998), p. 284.

<sup>4</sup>Two Jewish Chaplains, Rabbis Bonita Taylor and David Zucker, have formulated a list related to mine, a presentation of twelve “key points about Judaism and Jewish thought,” intended to aid those training Jewish hospital chaplains and working with Jewish patients. “Nearly Everything We Wish Our Non-Jewish Supervisors Had Known About Us as Jewish Supervisees”, published in *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Winter 2002, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 327-338, is based on six years of canvassing in order to discern ways in which mainstream Jewish thinking diverges from Protestant thinking, which is the orientation of most CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) programs, even when they call themselves “Interfaith” programs. For example, the authors note in their key point #7 “Vicarious Suffering/Atonement are not part of mainstream Jewish thinking” and that Jews do not “seek salvation through the intervention of others who suffer for them” (p. 334).

and Greenberg have been highly attentive to folk or communal practices.) Thus, the authority of the sensibilities comes from their capacity to orient people's lives, and not the way they "crystallize" (as Kadushin would say) Jewish law.

Below, I describe those sensibilities I have selected as being highly operative in the lives of American Jews; there is no significance to the order in which they are presented. I could reasonably have been included other significant sensibilities, and I imagine that at a later date, I will continue to make revisions and additions to the list. In most instances, I have chosen labels that correspond to concepts available in biblical or rabbinic literature (In doing so, my intention is to reflect rootedness in both written tradition and oral traditions, but not necessarily a definitive or authentic source of legitimation.) I then outline some of the general dimensions or characteristics of each sensibility. Following that, I suggest how knowledge of the sensibilities might be applied. I provide two illustrations of how the sensibility might be played out in a novel situation that requires some immediate response or reasonable prediction of a response. Drawing on my own areas of interest, the first illustration addresses the area of healthcare. In particular, I indicate how the sensibilities might orient Jews as they make decisions borne out of unprecedented medical technologies.

The second illustration will address issues of novel ritual practice. I focus on ways that individuals and groups maintain their connection to the Jewish past while forging a Judaism that speaks to the lives and ideals of contemporary people. Based on responses to the earlier publication of my preliminary work on Jewish sensibilities in the journal *Sh'ma* (December 2003), I have been told that readers with different skills and experiences can readily imagine pertinent applications of their own: this has been done by community rabbis, trainers of Jewish communal workers, day school educators, educators of Jewish adults, and parents. I encourage readers to work out applications of the sensibilities of their own, but also to challenge, tailor, or improve upon both my choices of the primary sensibilities and my definitions.

## The Sensibilities

*1. Making distinctions: Havdalah (a reference to the central creative act of Genesis-making divisions, as well as to the ceremony marking the distinction between holy time and regular time)*

*Definition:*

It is important to draw distinctions. Those distinctions can be of a temporal nature, such as making the distinction between special times and every day times; appropriate and inappropriate moments; or auspicious or inauspicious times. Hence, we take calendars seriously by honoring vacation time, family time, and anniversaries of birth, marriage and death. While we acknowledge the blessings of everyday and mundane moments, we understand that special occasions have holy dimensions, which demand particular recognition.

The distinctions can concern relationships. We distinguish those persons to whom one has special responsibilities and commitments, and acknowledge that, for instance, a parent's relationship to a child is differently defined from a child's relationship to a parent. We may distinguish responsibilities we have to family, from those we have to Jews, from those we have to all people. We distinguish between those who can meet their own needs and those who are dependent upon us. For better and for worse, we distinguish between those who are part of our community or "tribe" and those who are outsiders.

The distinctions can be spatial. What goes on inside the house and outside the house might be kept separate. Inside the home feels safer than outside. We are attentive to people whose home spaces are like ours, and are drawn to the similarities. Israel and historical and current Diasporas may be distinguished as inside space, as opposed to all other places.

The distinctions can concern the proper ordering of priorities. We might expect to be chided if we work to feed the poor but fail to see to it that our own families or we ourselves eat properly. We might expect to be praised if we reduce our workload and salary in order to take care of a family member, raise children, or address our health.



Because distinction making is important, we pay attention to ceremonies marking distinctions. For example, marriage ceremonies are weighty, as they designate a major distinction in one's social situation. We would hesitate to elope or have a very small wedding with few witnesses. Graduation ceremonies are important too, going beyond the communal respect for learning. A graduation matters because it marks ones being changed by learning, and ones moving from one stage of life to another. Funeral attendance is not discretionary. We appear, not just out of respect, but for our own sake: to have the visceral experience of marking the distinction between life and death, so as to more fully acknowledge and address a loss.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* Because it is so important to be present at ceremonies that mark distinction, we often hear often of terminally ill people who defy medical wisdom and succeed in surviving long enough to witness a child's marriage, a birth of a child or grandchild, or the arrival of an important holiday. Thus, while we might not encourage an individual to choose a risky or painful treatment in order increase the possibility of living to see an important ceremony, we might not discourage it either.

*Ritual:* The sensibility of distinctions can help us understand why so many American Jews, religious and secular, (as many as 90%, by some accounts) attend a traditional Passover seder or improvise and create a seder of their own. The seder makes multiple distinctions salient. It distinguishes how Jews and non-Jews celebrate history. The seder one goes to distinguishes one's family and friends from all other peoples who claim one's allegiances. The timing of the seder, in Spring, marks a seasonal distinction. The content of the seder itself emphasizes the distinction between slavery and freedom. Of course, on this night that is different from all other nights, the foods are distinctive, separate from those of year-round.

## ***2. Giving honor: Kavod (drawn from its source in the Ten Commandments, "Honor your mother and father")***

### *Definition:*

The sensibility of honor concerns both our own behavior as well as our behavior towards others. We ourselves want to live honorably, both out of self-respect and out of our desire for approbation. We are aware that we do not live in a social vacuum and that our actions have consequences. To receive approbation and to avoid humiliation, we aspire to act in ways that will bring credit to ourselves, to our families and to the communities we belong to. We want to be worthy of honor after we have passed on and our deeds and choices are remembered. While we may show humility by formally deflecting the honor others show us, we are likely, ultimately, to receive their honor graciously.

We are aware that others flourish with respect, just as we do. We know that parents, teachers, the elderly and guests all deserve more demonstrable expressions of honoring behaviors. Showing honor is a primary way in which we express love; showing honor is generally reciprocal. We also understand that we can only honor people in the way in which they wish to be honored.

### *Illustrations:*

*Health care:* When we make choices about how an elderly member of the family will be cared for, we are aware that people in our community judges our decisions. Did we honor elderly parents by caring for them at home? Did we honor parents by providing them with the best medical technology could provide, or did we honor them by steering them away from invasive practices that they might find too painful or demeaning? When we make medical choices, we are aware that the honor we might receive from our family and community for what we have chosen to do or not do is contingent upon the honor our decisions have shown to others.

*Ritual:* The bar and bat mitzvah candle lighting ceremony, invented by developed by clever kosher caterers in the 1950's, has become such a well-accepted part of the celebrations of many families that it is often

referred to as “the traditional candle lighting ceremony.” Granted: it is mawkish in sentiment and is often drenched in the music of popular culture. Still, the ceremony allows families to give public honor to those people who have played a significant role in the life of their child. In important ways, it parallels and democratizes the process of choosing family members to receive *aliyot*, Torah honors, in the bar or bat mitzvah Torah service. Because women, in some synagogue settings, can neither bestow nor receive Torah honors, the candle lighting ceremony allows for women to participate in an “honor-economy.”

***3. Turning: Teshuvah (drawn from Deuteronomy 31:1: Those who have been spiritually cursed and physically exiled still have the capacity to return to God, and to be embraced with forgiveness)***

*Definition:*

We believe it is possible to reflect upon our lives, turn them around, and both receive and experience forgiveness. We think of ourselves as works-in-progress, and we believe improvement—following introspection—is always possible. We give both others and ourselves opportunities to start off with a blank slate and to change. We do not feel that things we have done in the past which we are ashamed of now will define us forever, nor do we feel we are innately bad: in this respect, the notion of “original sin” feels quite unfamiliar.

We take pleasure in opportunities for renewal, be they spiritual, physical, or relational. We know that improvement requires more than a wish: it requires a concrete plan, a program one can join.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* We might be attracted to an alternative or complementary healing modality that “feels Jewish,” despite its origins, setting or membership. A case in point: Alcoholics Anonymous groups hold that one can change one’s ways and it is never too late to make amends with the people one has hurt and disappointed along the way. Because of AA’s

emphasis on telling stories of turning, starting over again, and reconciliation, many Jews feel comfortable in AA meetings, saying they feel “very Jewish,” even when the meetings are held in church basements.

*Ritual:* Until recently, the mikvah (ritual bath) was used primarily for immersions before marriage, after menstruation, before conversion and before a holiday. Now that more liberal communities are building their own ritual baths, they are being used to mark a range of life passages. Many are choosing to use immersion in water to signal a range of personal turnings. Some are body centered: reaching menopause, recovering from rape or abuse, recovering from a disease, or giving up smoking. Some focus on relationships, such as marking one’s divorce. Others focus on changes in personal identity, such as becoming a rabbi.

***4. Exhibiting human dignity; being in the image of God: Tzelem Elokim (source in Genesis; the earthlings, Adam and Eve are made in God’s image)***

*Definition:*

We are aware that dignity is possible only when one is free and able to care for oneself. We know education enhances one’s self-respect and ability to live with dignity. We might care about appearances, knowing that dressing appropriately enhances one’s self-respect and dignifies others. We are likely to engage in political, charitable, and volunteer activities (such as mentoring the underprivileged, working for civil rights, or building housing for the homeless) that increase the dignity of others.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* Because we privilege the well-being of living, sentient human beings over beings-in-progress, we tend to care more about human beings suffering from terrible disease that might be cured by stem-cell research than about non-sentient cells in the early days of their development outside the womb. We tend to favor research on pre-embryos if that research promises the possibility of cure in the future, even if the cure is remote and the future is distant. Many find it unconscionable

to enact legislation that prevents or retards research that could lead to the cure of fatal disease. Particularly as we make the end-of-life decisions, we are sensitive to making choices that will preserve a person's dignity. That is, we know that there are real limits to how much pain and suffering a person should have to endure. We are aware that while one may be technically alive, a life lacking in dignity is not a real life; in such cases, we may entertain practices that might not prologue life.

*Ritual:* In daily life, we engage in a good many activities that indicate our commitment to increasing the dignity of our lives, such as dieting, reducing our consumption of problematic foods, beginning an exercise regime, taking classes, or preparing for a new career. It is not surprising, then, that adult bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies (in which individuals or a class of adults who did not have the opportunity as youngsters to study Hebrew, Bible, and synagogue skills, now prepare for a public ceremony marking their commitment and accomplishments) become popular. Such ceremonies mark one's autonomous desire to increase self-dignity by becoming a more informed, enfranchised participant in synagogue life.

### ***5. Saving a life: Pikuach nefesh***

#### *Definition:*

We believe that "as long as you've got your health," you have reason to celebrate. It is not surprising that when we toast, it is "To life!" that we raise our cup. Health is the number one blessing. We do not take recoveries for granted: they always feel miraculous. We understand life is fragile and precious and hesitate to take physical risks that could endanger our lives. We are quick to comment on the foolhardy behaviors of "daredevils".

We will go to extremes to save a life. We believe in doctors, hospitals and science. We do not skimp when it comes to regular health care and will do whatever is necessary to have the best care available. Because we cannot stop short in securing treatment, we seek the advice of specialists and secure second and third opinions.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* We tend to favor and support most genetic and medical innovations that promise and increase of life: more years, more health, more vitality, lives that are more meaningful and productive. We're apt to favor innovations that will allow the barren to bear children, the infertile to reproduce more easily, and for parents to give birth to healthy children.

*Ritual:* This has not happened yet in a widespread and organized way, but I anticipate eventually Jewish communities will hold days when adults come together to register as bone marrow donors and organ donors; already there are synagogue mitzvah days when the Jewish community comes to donate blood. I anticipate as well that Jewish hospital chaplains will develop bedside religious ceremonies which ritualize a family's choice to donate the organs of a family member who is brain-dead so that others may live, and which solemnize the harvesting of their organs as a preamble to a funeral.

**6. *Being a really good person: "Be a mensch; a ben adam"***

*Definition:*

We aspire to be people who act with compassion, fairness and sensitivity toward others. We value being attentive, empathetic, just, discreet, and making sacrifices in interpersonal relationships. We try to be good friends and neighbors, especially in times of need. A really good person's broad reserve of compassion extends toward all Jews, wherever they live, and toward all people, particularly the vulnerable. We see it fit to remind others of their obligation to act appropriately in moral situations; in doing so, we remind ourselves as well.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* Jews tend to decide autonomously (that is, without family pressure or the urging of doctors or clergy) to donate organs, such as kidneys, to their next-of-kin provided that doing so will save a life. Agreeing to donate feels like the right thing to do (provided the act of

generosity toward one member of the family does not threaten one's obligations to be present to others).

*Ritual:* Even when Jews are not quite comfortable (for whatever reasons) with the idea of commitment ceremonies between gay or lesbian couples, their capacity for empathy tends to lead them to attend such ceremonies when invited by members of their social circle and to hope for the couple's success.

### ***7. Keeping the peace: Shalom Bayit***

*Definition:*

Certain decisions or gestures are made or avoided in order to keep the peace, settle differences, keep a family together, and create harmony instead of divisiveness. This includes knowing when to speak to assure harmony and when to hold one's tongue. Airing a group's difference aloud is sometimes a route to peacekeeping, but just as often, it is the suppression of differences.

*Illustrations:*

*Healthcare:* In an end-of-life context, we might choose to wait for all the siblings in a family to gather, especially any who have been estranged, before any major decisions are made.

*Ritual:* While we might prefer our children not to intermarry (outside the faith, or even outside one's social comfort zone) we are apt to welcome the partners our children bring into the family for the sake of holding the family together.

### ***8. Repairing the world: Tikkun olam***

*Definition:*

We hold that each person should find ways to make the world a better and more just place. This stance of compassionate engagement occurs in simple individual ways as well as on larger platforms. We use any

resources we have to make a difference. Engaging in world repair, we may feel as if we are “doing a mitzvah,” doing something that we are divinely ordained and privileged to do even though it is our choice. Doing good works justifies our having been put on this earth. If we have been fortunate, we feel responsible to “give back.”

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* Making any healthcare decisions, we are cognizant of their impact on the broader population. Thus, when considering the costs of extending the life of individuals with terminal illnesses, we calculate the impact of such decisions on other people who are ill.

*Ritual:* Miriam’s cup has found a regular place at the table because it expresses the sensibility of “repairing the world.” In part, this practice has become readily adapted because of the capacious nature of the Haggadah, which had long accumulated new songs, teachings and additional cups of wine. Simply put, many feel that the cup acknowledges the many generations of women who had no place at the seder table and only a venue behind the scenes in the kitchen. The cup demonstrates that women now have an honored place at the table: it makes amends for the past, and sets an agenda for the future of increased women’s presence and participation in ritual in general.

**9. *Maintaining hope: Yesh tikvah Definition:***

We try to hang on to hope and resist despair. In romance, we believe we will meet our *besht*, our intended one. We dream expansively and even set off on uncertain journeys with because we feel promise lies just over the horizon. At the same time, we accept that some things seem fated not to be. When a door closes, we face reality and move on to open doors, new possibilities.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* We will make many tries to conceive using the newest reproductive technologies—holding onto even a glimmer of hope—until we acknowledge that the facts are telling us it is time to choose other options.



In the face of health problems that currently have no cure, we do not stop working for and hoping that a breakthrough will come along.

*Ritual:* Much as we might believe one's *bashert* is out there waiting to be found, we know fate sometimes needs to be nudged into being. Thus, it is not surprising that Jewish computer dating and other strategies for introducing singles to each other (such as speed dating) have been rapidly embraced.

### ***10. Memory of one's ancestors: Z'chut avot***

*Definition:*

We feel connected to the people who came before us. We draw insight and wisdom from the experiences of our ancestors and seek to honor them with our actions. And we expect the same of our children. Thus, we honor our ancestors by transmitting the sensibilities that characterized their ideals and actions onto the next generation. Realizing we can never repay our parents directly for all they have done for us, we reciprocate indirectly through our attention to our own children.

*Illustrations:*

*Health care:* If a parent is not able to make healthcare decisions on his or her behalf, we intensify our bonds to them as we take great pains to make a decision that is in keeping with what they might have wanted for themselves. Anticipating this may happen, we encourage our elders and other family members to clarify their health directives in writing.

*Ritual:* Those congregations that now include the matriarchs in the Amidah have had success in making this major (and quite contested) change because, in part, we so value recognizing and naming the people (including the women) from whom we come.

## **In Conclusion: Moving from the Sensibilities to Particular Situations**

I see three pragmatic reasons (though I imagine there are others) for Jews, whatever their orientation, religious or secular, to refer to these sensibilities. First, paying attention to the sensibilities can help one formulate a decision that is in keeping with one's Jewish "compass" in healthcare situations, particularly novel ones that leave us without familiar responses. These might include deciding how to use unprecedented medical technologies in reproduction, in finding cures, and in making end-of-life decisions. Sometimes, I should note, changes or improvements in technology may cause a different sensibility to come into play. For example, consider the changes in Jewish attitudes towards organ transplantation. When organ transplants were still more experimental in nature, and thus, more dangerous and less predictably effective, Jews hesitated to give and receive organs, because they were oriented by the sensibility of "Dignity." At that time, they might have been particularly aware that harvesting an organ required both the mutilation of a corpse and potential pain and suffering for the recipient, without assurance that the recipient would even recover. There was concern that the dignity of both the dead and living might be compromised. (Curiously or not, many Jews, observant or not, would cite a folk belief, the desire to keep one's body whole for the sake of resurrection, to justify resisting organ donation.) In the last decade, as organ transplantations have become safer, more reliable, and even more routine, the sensibility of "Saving a Life" comes more predictably into play. More Jews now tend to look at organ donation as a familiar and usually safe procedure that saves lives. They will consequently designate themselves as organ donors on their driving licenses and health directives and, if asked, would probably agree to donate the organs of a loved one who is brain-dead. They would hope that others would do the same should they be in a position to need a donor organ.

Second, knowing the sensibilities can help one determine if a novel Jewish ritual practice or synagogue policy one has witnessed or is shaping oneself is consistent with Jewish self-understandings. This would be the

case even if the new practice diverges from familiar practices or from *halakha*. An example concerns the question many liberal congregations are wrestling with: is it appropriate to give Torah honors to non-Jews, particularly when they are the parents of a bar or bat mitzvah child? The sensibility that is operative in this situation is “keeping the peace.” Despite what Jewish law may have to say about the inappropriateness of giving Torah honors to non-Jews, liberal congregations are finding creative ways to include the non-Jewish family members in order to make the family celebration as harmonious as possible and to minimize slighting in a public setting and on what should be a joyous occasion that brings people together and celebrates community.

Third, consulting the sensibilities helps one understand how one’s Jewishness defines or contributes to the way one lives when the influence isn’t at first obvious. An example would be attitudes toward premarital sex. According to *halakha*, as understood by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, sexual relations between an unmarried man and woman are forbidden. This *halakhic* proscription is ignored by most Conservative Jews and by some Orthodox. One should not conclude, however, that Jews who fail to heed *halakha* concerning premarital sex, bring no Jewish consciousness whatsoever to this part of their lives. Two sensibilities in particular govern thinking and action concerning premarital relations. First, “Saving a life”: The majority of Jews involved in romantic relationships feel duty-bound to take precautions for safe sex both for themselves and their partners. Second, “Distinctions”: Many Jews tend to honor both themselves and their partners by maintaining monogamy during the duration of a relationship that has become intimate. While the relationship may not be sanctified by marriage, it is sanctified informally by a level of commitment and fidelity.

From these examples, one can see that drawing upon the ten sensibilities and relating them to a situation at hand requires creative thinking, the ability to juggle. That is, a sensibility that mattered more at one time, or to one generation might give way to a different sensibility that now takes precedence. Sometimes multiple sensibilities are at play, and they may be competing for the strength of influence. At the core, however, is the weightiness of the sensibilities. What Kadushin has written about his value concepts could well be applied to the sensibilities: "They are primary factors in the experience of significance."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism* by Max Kadushin (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, 2001), p. 25.