



GUEST EDITORIAL

Practical wisdom for management from the Jewish tradition

Wisdom from
the Jewish
tradition

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this issue is to provide an overview of the special issue on practical wisdom for management from the Jewish traditions.

Design/methodology/approach – The guest editorial introduces the papers in this special issue, focusing in practical wisdom for management from the Jewish traditions.

Findings – The question on the relationship between the Jewish tradition and practical wisdom for management is answered in two different ways: first, providing a particular Jewish answer to managerial problems and second, presenting how Judaism can be a field of reflection learning for managerial praxis at both organizational and individual level.

Originality/value – The paper shows that the special issue offers insights into the value of practical wisdom of the Jewish traditions, from two particular points of view, as a guide for action and as an ethical approach to management.

Keywords Judaism, Leadership, Management, Management theory, Practical wisdom, Jewish

Paper type General review

“Jewish education is character education” (Fox, 2003, p. 262).

“For things that we have to learn to do, we learn by doing them” (Aristotle, 1934).

Globalization has demonstrated to entail many opportunities that may also turn into risks. For instance, global decision makers sometimes experience the complexity of

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multiple and diverse traditions – interacting with each other in one global market – as overwhelming and difficult. Hidden underlying elements are particular values, spiritualities and philosophical approaches.

Grasping the inherent wisdom of different traditions and translating them into day-to-day business practice becomes a crucial challenge, here; it should be archived without losing one's own identity or becoming trapped in moral relativism. Rather a leadership style which embraces the contribution of foreign traditions without shedding the own roots is the adequate expression of practical wisdom in times of globalization.

The first volume in this series of *JMD* special issues focussed on the different approaches to practical wisdom within the Christian tradition, the second highlighted the Chinese classical traditions.

The topic of this special issue is Practical wisdom for management from the Jewish tradition. The eight papers gathered under that heading represent a small selection of the presentations for the respective conference organized by EABIS – The Academy of Business in Society in cooperation with Yale University, Mandel Foundation – Israel and the Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in July 2011.

In particular, this special issue raises some theoretical puzzles which need to be addressed beforehand.

1. Jewish wisdom – guide for action or a teaching method?

At first sight, this issue's topic is worded in line with the other conferences and *JMD* special issues of our series: one should be able to infer from the practical wisdom of Judaism the decisions, actions and behaviors congruous with a good practice of management.

Another approach, however, which is suggested by the Jewish texts themselves, offers advice on how to best “practice the practice”; more generally, it aims to teaching practical knowledge within management development. Such an approach can be found as early as in the Aristotelian doctrine, which entered the Jewish tradition with the Jewish rationalist movement and in particular with Maimonides, the movement's most eminent thinker[1]. Aristotle's words in the epigraph summarize this approach well. It is particularly important in Judaism, a tradition that in many respects presents itself as an extended corpus meant to answer the question of how one can learn to do something consistently and conscientiously.

This question alone justifies the topic of this special issue, for in a different context, it can be asked about the corpus of management itself. The following passage by Maimonides echoes the logic of Aristotle's words quoted above:

How shall a man train himself in these dispositions, so that they become ingrained? Let him practice again and again the actions prompted by those dispositions which are the mean between the extremes, and repeat them continually till they become easy and no longer irksome to him, and so the corresponding dispositions will become a fixed part of this character (Maimonides quoted by Twersky, 1972, p. 53).

This passage deals with the notion of *hergel* (routine or habit), by which one learns to do something thanks to an unvarying, routine and meticulous practice, so that this specific practice does not prevent creativity but rather promotes it. The *hergel* applies in particular to the acquisition of a practical skill and this

notion is of course quite significant for our topic since it is relevant in the following two areas:

- (1) the management sciences – indeed, they are often defined as a theory of practice and are first and foremost meant to be applied and put in practice; and
- (2) the ethics of management – for it is embodied in action and not in theory.

Thus, two seemingly irreconcilable approaches in addressing this special issue's topic have been identified. The first one attempts to provide a "Jewish answer" to management problems and dilemmas. The second views Judaism as one of the teaching methods that best suit the fields – like management – in which practice plays a large part.

The papers of this special issue repeatedly bring up, in various ways, the divide between these two approaches, while presenting themselves as a whole trying to unite them.

Each paper belongs to one of three groups. The first group includes three papers that study how references drawn from Jewish sources can feed an organizational reflection process and aid individuals to best meet organizational challenges:

- Granit Almog-Bareket (Mandel Foundation – Israel) and Pierre Kletz (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and Mandel Foundation – Israel) "Jethro's understanding of administration and the convergence of inter-organizational goals".
- Avi Kay (Jerusalem College of Technology) "Pursuing justice: workplace relations in the eyes of Jewish tradition".
- André Habisch (Catholic University of Eichstätt – Ingolstadt) "The broken tables of stone: a Decalogue approach to corporate compliance practice."

The second group also includes three papers. The latter do not examine social or organizational issues in the light of Jewish sources but rather analyze the practical impact of concepts found in Jewish texts:

- Hervé Colas (Reims management School) and Aziza Languécir (Bordeaux Management School) "The banning of images: questions arising in the field of management".
- Bernard Kahane (Paris Est University), "Tikkum Olam: how a Jewish ethos drives innovation." Analyzing the notion of *Tikkun olam* (healing or restoring the world).
- Isaac Mostovicz (Janus Thinking Ltd.) and Nada Kakabadse (Northampton Business School) "He has told you, O man, what is good!" Deepen into the concepts of "doing justice", "loving kindness" and "walking humbly."

The third group includes two papers centered on leadership:

- Shlomo Ben-Hur (IMD Business School) and Karsten Jonsen (IMD Business School) "Ethical leadership: lessons from Moses" outlines a model of leadership based on the characteristics of Moses.
- Eli Gottlieb (Mandel Leadership Institute) "Mosaic leadership: charisma and bureaucracy in Exodus 18" examines the important practical implications of this approach for management.

Out of the eight papers that make up this relatively small special issue, two of them focus on Moses as a leadership figure; one could find this objectionable. On the contrary, that one figure be naturally studied twice in connection with the topic of leadership is quite remarkable (did not Freud pave the way with his *Moses and Monotheism?*). Moreover, in the defense of this special issue, we should highlight the fact that these two papers belong to two very different disciplines: if Ben-Hur and Jonsen address the topic from the point of view of the management sciences, Eli Gottlieb writes as a psychologist and as expert in education sciences.

2. The status of ethics

Philosophy is traditionally divided in various branches: logic and physics are concerned with truth; aesthetics deals with beauty; ethics looks for the Good, etc. The question of whether Truth, Morality, Beauty and Justice are one constitutes a philosophical question in itself; replying in the affirmative would evidence a hypothesis hastily formed. Jewish wisdom belongs to the field of ethics and is therefore a system that strives for the Good, while management has to do with Truth and is first of all an object of study. Management education must teach what is true: in order to succeed, an organization has to define a coherent marketing approach; it should know how to write a business plan; it needs to develop an adequate supply chain; and so forth. All of this is neatly summarized in the notion of good practice, so dear to business administration. Over time, the idea of one best way has been gradually discarded, but it would be absurd to maintain that in management, everything is possible, that all techniques, all procedures and all processes are of equal value. Obviously, some are more efficient while others are less adequate.

Conversely, ethics is concerned with the Good, where Truth has no place. Even the worse dictators would not dispute that ethics could produce unquestionable statements similar to physical laws – like the one by which an object, attracted by the Earth's gravitation, increases its velocity by 9.81 m/s^2 and falls on the ground – or to management laws – such as the affirmation that direct costs differ from overheads. Proposing Jewish wisdom as a reference – like any other religious or philosophical reference – for management is risky. Would organizations be better managed if their managers resorted to Judaism? Answering “yes” would be apologetic or fanatic and would confuse Truth with the Good.

Now, if we are aware of this dichotomy, why do we strive to bring Judaism and management together? We have two good reasons for it. To begin with, just like any other educational corpus, management education must enable the individual to learn about different ways of thinking and of tackling problems. Judaism can boast unique intellectual gymnastics (as the Talmudic texts show it) and a rigor (thanks to Maimonides' rationalism) that together provide excellent methods to teach intellectual accuracy to trainee managers. Second, Judaism is a value system similar to Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. Therefore, if it cannot solve technical problems, it is apt to pass moral judgments on behaviors recommended by the practice of management. This special issue includes several papers (Habisch; Colas and Laguecir; Almog-Bareket and Kletz) that show how Judaism, as a moral system, could have contributed to the prevention of the stock market crash in 2009 (Mostovicz and Kakabadse). Other papers show that Judaism would unmask some types of work relations simply as exploitation of man by man (Avi Kay). This last element is without a doubt common to any religious tradition applied to management.

3. An interdisciplinary approach

This special issue presents an interdisciplinary approach. The papers often refer to various theoretical fields in which the authors write. They include experts in management and business administration as well as education, psychology or the arts. Some of these contributors are based in academia while others are practitioners, experts and consultants.

It could be objected that no specialists of Jewish texts and Judaism are included. We take responsibility for it. Indeed, this issue aims to attract the attention of managers and practitioners without turning them into experts in Judaism, into Talmudists or Kabbalists. In the same vein, some authors examine management in the light of an ethical reflection based on Jewish wisdom, but they are not rabbis, *poskim* (legal scholars in Jewish law) or *dayanim* (judges who sit in a religious court).

We should add that we did not give in to intellectual compromise: this issue's reviewers do include researchers in management as well as religious figures and professors in Judaism. Moreover, referring to Jewish philosophy is completely legitimate since the management sciences can be seen both as a practical field and as a cross-roads of social sciences, philosophy, religion and economics. Many researchers in management sciences operate as mediators. They borrow concepts elaborated elsewhere in order to apply them in their own field. They are both opportunistic and open-minded. They often do not hesitate to get hold of appealing ideas to turn them into management. Considering this approach, referring to Judaism is legitimate.

4. Conclusion

Studies on the contributions of Christian or Muslim wisdom to management exist; one that deals with Jewish wisdom and management displays specific characteristics. Indeed, one powerful trend in Judaism has to do with the exercise of free will. This trend was notably developed in the twentieth century by Leibowitz, who summed it up remarkably in one of the last interviews he gave before he passed away:

Question: What is the source of your values?

Leibowitz: Myself.

Question: Isn't the Torah a source of values?

Leibowitz: Well, whether I accept the Torah or not is up to me! (L'Arche, 1994)

For this orthodox Jew, the Torah is not an absolute truth that imposes itself on the individual. Judaism rather presents itself as a philosophy that does not pretend to impose itself for transcendental reasons. The individual must choose to accept its values. This gives full meaning to Jewish wisdom as a reference for business administration and management education. The professionals in an organization have to ask themselves whether it is helpful to explicitly refer to Judaism in order to determine an organizational behavior. This encourages them to ask questions, thus contributing to the maturity of their behavior in the organization. It also prevents them from thinking that the behavior they adopt is "the only acceptable one." On the contrary, referring to Judaism prompts professionals to realize that behaviors in organizations are not absolutely right; it makes them realize that these behaviors may be relative and that choosing a behavior known for being relative bears an absolute truth. Amado-Lévy-Valensi (1968, p. 16) of the Bar-Ilan University summarized this well: "Between the negation of meaning and the recognition of meaning lies the voluntary establishment of meaning."

Note

1. Some scholars analyzed the influence of Aristotle in Maimonides in depth, e.g. I. Twersky: "Maimonides's views on basic problems of religious philosophy are not very different from those of his predecessors (e.g. Saadyah Gaon or Bahya ibn Pakuda, Abraham ibn Ezra or Abraham ibn Daud) whom he sometimes criticizes or else simply ignores. All medieval religious philosophers shared basic principles, had common characteristics, and agreed on fundamental conceptions of metaphysics, physics and ethics – in other words, God, the universe and man. The main difference lies in his form of argumentation and methods of demonstration, in a more rigorously scientific approach based on what were considered to be unimpeachable Aristotelian doctrines. For he was convinced that the "works of Aristotle are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences" and that "Aristotle's intellect represents the extreme of human intellect".

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