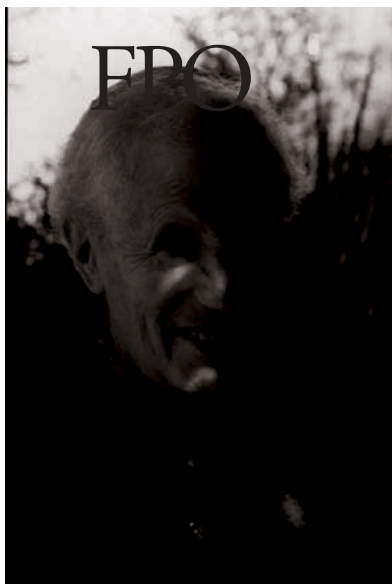


Interview

Dr. Jacob Milgrom



(Picture by Jo Milgrom)

What is the Torah for Judaism yesterday and today? Professor Jacob Milgrom, rabbi and specialist in the book of Leviticus, discusses the meaning and the purpose of the ancient laws.

Dr. Jacob Milgrom is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (1965-1993), and past chair and founder of its Jewish Studies Program (1973-1977; 1985-1987). He served as Director of the University of California Overseas Study Program at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem (1969-1971) and as Visiting Professor of Bible at the Virginia Union University, the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

He is a Guggenheim Fellow, Senior Fellow at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, Fulbright Fellow, Fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research, and Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Dr. Milgrom was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and served in the active rabbinate many years.

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*Dr. Milgrom is the author of many books which include *Studies in Levitical Terminology* (1970), *Guilt and Conscience* (1976), *Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, vol. 1 (Anchor Bible)*, and over 200 articles in scientific journals and encyclopedias.*

S *habbat Shalom*: What is *Torah*? Is it the same as what we call law? A lot of people equate the two words, but is the biblical use of the term *Torah* the same as what we call law?

Milgrom: Paradoxically I would have to answer both yes and no. *Torah* is law, but not law the way we conceive it today because *Torah* (divine instruction), coming from a root which means "to shoot," comprises rules coming from God involving behavior towards one's fellow and responsibility to God. Let me exemplify by two such laws, the two which were chosen by Jesus as the most important laws in the Hebrew Bible, namely, love your God with all your heart, soul, and might; and love your neighbor as yourself. Now can anyone con-

ceive that these laws would ever enter into the statutory regulations of any government? Yet these are laws, again from the biblical definition of the law, namely, commands coming from God. Now here on this issue, too, one perhaps ought to dig a little deeper and try to understand the use of love in both of these laws. Love obviously cannot be commanded. What does it mean to love your God and to love your neighbor? And here, too, one has to understand the biblical root of love (*'ahav*): it doesn't really convey only an emotion or attitude; the word also signifies deeds. This is especially true in Deuteronomy, which speaks of covenantal love: the alien is to be loved—how?—by providing him with food and shelter, and God is loved by observing His commandments. This same use of love is found in another culture, in the suzerainty treaties of Mesopotamia, for example. You have the expression “you will love Ashurbanipal as yourselves.” A subject nation is told to exercise that kind of relationship with the mighty Assyrian king involving friendship and responsibilities that come with that friendship. And this is, of course, a love that can be commanded. Now also it's interesting to see that this is well understood by both Christianity and Judaism. Both Rabbi Hillel and Jesus, his contemporary, understood it that way because they took that commandment of “love your neighbor as yourself” in the following fashion. Rabbi Hillel took it negatively and he said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others.” Jesus took it positively, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Now the key verb in both statements is the word “do.” So you see that love must be translated into deeds. Well, again obviously this kind of law would never be legislated in any society at all. So

when you use the term law referring to the *Torah*, yes it involves attitudes, but attitudes that are again transformed into concrete deeds, and these deeds involve a matter of ethical responsibility to one's fellow and compliant responsibility towards God.

Shabbat Shalom: Now in light of that wider understanding of the term *Torah*, how much of the Bible is *Torah* or is informed by *Torah*? We usually think of *Torah* as the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, but I've heard some people describe the other two sections of the Hebrew Bible as *Torah* as well, so that we have *Torah, Torah, Torah*, so to speak. Is this really true? Can we view the entire Bible as *Torah* or is it appropriate to view the five books of Moses more specifically as *Torah*?

Milgrom: I think I'd have to answer that question positively since we might regard the laws found outside of the Pentateuch—say the commands of God through the mouths of prophets—only to be extensions of that which already is com-

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manded in the Pentateuch, except they are refined in some way. A good example, of course, would be the matter of ethics. The prophets are those who said,

ethics are the goal of the laws and unless obedience to the laws leads to more ethical behavior, then the entire purpose of the law is undermined. But the prophets' laws are in the Pentateuch. So you have only, if you will, an embellishment and a refinement of whatever exists in the Pentateuch in the rest of Hebrew Scripture.

Shabbat Shalom: Even the latest portions of Hebrew Scripture are still ancient literature. How relevant and authoritative is the *Torah* for a modern Jew?

Milgrom: Well, here you have perhaps the most important basis for different denominations among the Jewish people. Precisely how much of the *Torah* is relevant and mandatory? The Orthodox would regard every command in the *Torah* as mandatory and the other extreme, the Reform, would regard the ethical commandments as primary and the ritual commandments as secondary. And if the latter are irrelevant, they can be discarded. Therefore, the range of obedience to the various laws of the *Torah* is a criterion for distinguishing one denomination from the other. The Orthodox would say, to use their expression, there's no distinction between the severer commandments and the lighter ones. There are variations of that as one goes to the Conservative and then the Reconstructionist and the Reform movements in Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom: So the question, Are there some aspects of the *Torah* which are more relevant today than others, would be answered differently by each of the various Jewish groups.

Milgrom: That's correct.

Shabbat Shalom: Are there parts of the *Torah* which have

lost their relevance, not only in terms of observance, but in terms of what a modern person can learn that is of spiritual value? In other words, for example, laws pertaining to the services of the temple are obso-

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lete in the sense that they are no longer practiced. Do these laws have any continuing value, not in terms of practice today, but in terms of what we can learn spiritually about God or about His relationship with His people?

Milgrom: The distinction you make is quite accurate. First, not all the laws are relevant. The Orthodox have counted up all the laws in the *Torah*, as refined and supplemented by the rabbis, and they come up with the figure that there are 613 commandments. Now most of them are actually not applicable today, for example, as you have indicated, those involving the sacrificial service in the temple and many of the purity rules. The reason is that the purity rules are only of significance in contact with the temple and the sacrifices. Without the latter, they are not, however, applicable in our own time. But still I would maintain, as you mention, that these laws must be studied because it's precisely these laws that contain at their basis essential ethical positions. That, as you probably know, is

one of the postulates motivating my study of the *Torah*: that is, the ritual law contains, ensconces, the value system of the priestly teachers, and these values must be ferreted out from the ritual law even if the rituals themselves are not observed.

Shabbat Shalom: More than any other modern person I think you have demonstrated precisely that point—the continuing value of these rituals even though they are no longer observed. So we're very grateful to you for that contribution. Now what kind or level of obedience to the *Torah* is possible, even if a person wants to keep the *Torah* perfectly in everything the way he or she believes God would want him or her to do it? Is it possible for a human being in an imperfect world to have the willpower to keep the *Torah*?

Milgrom: An answer to that question which I find very significant was given by the late Rabbi Schneerson, the head of the largest Hasidic, which means very Orthodox, sect. As you probably know from the

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press, he was posthumously given the Medal of Congress. In meeting with someone who was not Orthodox, he might begin the conversation by saying, "You know, you and I have basic beliefs in common. We both believe in the observance of the *Torah*, except you are perhaps lower down on the ladder than I am. We both are commanded,

but we cannot possibly observe the entire *Torah*. We must keep on adding another rung, another rung, another rung." In his point of view, all Jews have this common goal to observe the *Torah*. Eventually if everyone takes

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it one step at a time, one law at a time, they'll all end up in the same place. However, nonorthodox Jews claim that some laws are obsolete.

Shabbat Shalom: So, how do we know what God really expects of us? Does He expect us to keep all the laws or does He expect us to simply do our best?

Milgrom: Well, the latter would be the answer. We do our best. This is something basic to Judaism which also has its roots in the *Torah*. Mainly, God doesn't expect perfection—that's no longer possible, at least since man was evicted from the Garden. All God wants us to do is to improve. But the key thing

is that we have to keep on trying. Here, too, one has to keep in mind that the laws involve doing, not just feeling. The emphasis is given in the *Torah* that one has to actually carry out these commandments and not just have a very good intention towards fulfilling them. Failure is not a sin. Even though one fails to carry out a specific law, one is not to despair, but to keep trying. To use Rabbi Schneerson's analogy, move up the ladder one step at a time.

Shabbat Shalom: So do you think that this has relevance within a covenant context? That is to say, the important thing for God is that we have the kind of attitude toward Him which would yield obedience.

In Judaism, God judges the human being not on his thought, but on his behavior.

Milgrom: Yes. In Judaism, God judges the human being not on his thought, but on his behavior. The result of that is one of the most remarkable statements attributed to the rabbis—this you find in the Midrash—on the verse in Jeremiah where God says “they have abandoned me and have not kept my *Torah*.” The rabbis then comment that God really is saying, “Would that they abandon me but keep my *Torah*.” This statement is quite bold, but behind it is something which is very true of Judaism. The thing that counts is not whether one believes in God; but that one acts as if he did believe.

Shabbat Shalom: We've been talking thus far about Jewish observance of *Torah*, but in the

***Torah* are there laws which are applicable to non-Jews as well?**

Milgrom: From the point of view of the *Torah*, the only laws incumbent upon all humanity are the Noahide laws, found in Genesis 9. And these laws are reduced to one commandment, the prohibition against murder. That prohibition naturally would have to entail also setting up the apparatus in order to observe that law, which means setting up courts of justice and so on. But there is a second law, the flip side of the prohibition against murder, which is ignored: one is also prohibited against murdering an animal for food unless its blood is drained. Blood is the essence of life, and it must be restored to its creator, God. As you probably know, the early Christians for three centuries observed this until that law was abolished by the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. Now what you have there in the second law is clearly a statement that if one treats an animal's life just willfully, wantonly, and takes it at will without this special safeguard, then his act is equivalent to murder. And that law, as you know, is developed in the rest of the *Torah* as well.

Shabbat Shalom: It's also echoed in Acts 15, where the Jerusalem Council established that as a requirement for Gentile Christians, not just Jewish Christians.

Law is often regarded by modern people in a negative light and they often equate law with legalism in the context of religion. How can people who value *Torah*, whether they are Jewish or Christian, answer the charge that they are legalistic?

Milgrom: Well, I think, you and I have been doing it. The fact is that the so-called legalism of the *Torah* involves ethics, and

even ritual, as we discussed, embodies ethics, in terms of the relationship to one's fellow human being. Can you imagine coming up to a homeless person who can be found squatting in the shopping mall of every neighborhood, and telling that person, “You know, I feel great love for you” instead of actually contributing a good sized coin to his welfare as you pass him by? One needs to fulfill the law through action. If this is legalism—I'm guilty of it and so is the *Torah*.

Shabbat Shalom: How has *Torah* made a difference in your life and family?

According to the rabbis, a person should be able to recite 100 prescribed blessings per day. In other words, each person has a hundred reasons each day to be thankful to God.

Milgrom: In personal terms, the *Torah* is the anchor. It gives stability to our life because its laws involve rituals *and* ethics. Both are combined and pervade the daily life and elevate it. According to the rabbis, a person should be able to recite 100 prescribed blessings per day. In other words, each person has a hundred reasons each day to be thankful to God. So if that's the case regardless of material or physical circumstances, then life can't be all that bad.

This interview was conducted by Roy E. Gane, Ph.D., assistant professor of Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern languages, Andrews University.