



# Jewish Bioethics

Developed by  
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For more information about the IJE Community Hebrew High Schools project and this curriculum development initiative, please visit our website:

[www.brandeis.edu/ije](http://www.brandeis.edu/ije)

## **Institute for Informal Jewish Education**

Brandeis University  
Community Hebrew High Schools Curriculum Development Initiative  
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## Sacred Mind and Body: Jewish Bioethics

TOPIC/SUBJECT AREA: Jewish Bioethics  
 NUMBER OF SESSIONS: 15  
 LENGTH OF EACH SESSION: 50 min.

### SYLLABUS

SESSIONS	MATERIALS	QUESTIONS OF MEANING OR UNDERSTANDING	ASSIGNMENT DUE FOR THIS SESSION
Introduction to the Course	Syllabus	Read through syllabus and explain semester assignments and expectations. Hand out questionnaire of previous knowledge and desired knowledge of this field – If there is still time begin Session #1	
SESSION #1: Introduction to Jewish Bioethics		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is there such a thing as Bioethics?</li> <li>2. What is Bioethics?</li> <li>3. What is Jewish Bioethics?</li> <li>4. Why study bioethics? As a Jew? As a human being?</li> <li>5. Definition of terms:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Autonomy</li> <li>b. Beneficence</li> <li>c. Slippery Slope</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. How does Judaism respond to idea of autonomy? What is <i>bichirah chofshit</i>?</li> </ol>	
SESSION #2: Value of Human Life	Texts about Pikauch Nefesh and the value of human life *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does it mean to be created “<i>B’zelem Elokim</i>”?</li> <li>2. To whom do our bodies belong? Ourselves or God?</li> <li>3. What does Judaism have to say about the value of human life?</li> <li>4. How does the value of human life compare to other values in Judaism?</li> </ol>	HW DUE: Quarter Page Write-up on article “Matters of Method and Belief”
SESSION #3 & 4: Medicine	Texts about Jewish attitude toward use of medicine and doctors *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does Judaism say about using doctors and medicine?</li> <li>2. What should be the place of prayer and spirituality in the healing process vs. use of medicine and doctors?</li> <li>3. Can one ask the question, “What does ‘Judaism’ say about...”? Is there ever one right answer? Is there a Pope in Judaism?</li> <li>4. What are the underlying Jewish principals off of which divergent opinions emerge?</li> </ol>	

SESSION #5: Medicine (continued)	Article about Court Case *	What should be the balance between religious/individual freedoms, even when it can cause harm to others, vs. societal rules and standards?	HW DUE: Quarter Page Write-up on article about Court Case
SESSION #6: Medicine (continued)			
SESSION #7: Genetics		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the issues surrounding genetics? Use to cure disease? Use to beautify, etc?</li> <li>2. Is humanity God's partner in creation? If human beings are God's partners in creation, when does modern science and technology cross over that line? When has the created usurped the role of the creator?</li> <li>3. What will be the impact of genetic manipulation?</li> <li>4. Who has access to genetic therapies (rich vs. poor)?</li> </ol>	HW DUE: Half Page Summary due on Current Events
SESSION #8: Genetics (continued)	Jewish Texts about Genetics *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. According to Judaism what are/should be the limits of our power and control in this world (if there should be limits) over - <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. our bodies</li> <li>ii. other peoples bodies</li> <li>iii. the environment</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	HW DUE: Quarter Page Write-up on article "Building Better Bodies"
SESSION #9: Genetics and Reproduction	Five articles: "The Social Context in Generating Life", "Using Genetic Technologies...", "Using Modern Medical Technologies...", "In Whose Image", and "Genetic Screening..." *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does conversation about genetics interplay with that of reproduction?</li> <li>2. How is genetic technology impacting on today's Jewish world?</li> </ol>	
SESSION #10: Genetics and Reproduction (continued)	Continued from Session #9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Definition of Terms: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. IVF</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	HW DUE: Half Page Summary due on Current Events
SESSION #11: Eugenics	Pictures of race classification and skulls *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Definition of Terms: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Eugenics</li> <li>b. Science of Eugenics</li> <li>c. Positive Eugenics</li> <li>d. Negative Eugenics</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. What is the history of Eugenics?</li> <li>3. How does the issue of Eugenics play out in our day to day lives?</li> <li>4. How does genetic screening impact on discrimination?</li> <li>5. What happens when a society or an individual looks at the genetics of race? Features? Disease? Tendencies? Should there be a distinction between these categories?</li> <li>6. How did Eugenics play a role in the Holocaust</li> <li>7. How do our speech/language and our actions affect the way we perceive and relate to others?</li> </ol>	
SESSION #12: Reproduction	Texts about Jewish perspectives on reproduction *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does Judaism view reproduction?</li> <li>2. How does Judaism's view on reproduction contrast with Christianity's?</li> </ol>	
SESSION #13: Reproduction (continued)	Article: "IVF Fever" *	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is currently going on in Israel regarding reproductive issues?</li> <li>2. What are some of the reasons for Jews in Israel frequenting reproductive technologies?</li> <li>3. What are some of the problems with using reproductive technologies?</li> <li>4. What are some of the Jewish dilemmas/questions that arise when one uses these reproductive technologies?</li> </ol>	HW DUE: Quarter Page Write-up on article "IVF Fever"
SESSION #14: Abortion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Jewish texts about abortion *</li> <li>2. Article: "Abortion in Israel: Terms of Termination" *</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Definition of Terms:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Preformationism</li> <li>b. <i>Rodef</i></li> <li>c. Terms of Termination</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. What are the stages of pregnancy?</li> <li>3. In Jewish law what is a fetus considered to be and when?</li> <li>4. Under what circumstances can one abort a fetus according to Jewish law?</li> </ol>	
SESSION #15: Wrap-up and Case Study	2 Case Studies		

\* These texts are included in the lesson plan, but they are not available in this packet due to copyright issues

## Session 1, Jewish Bioethics

### I. Teacher's Preparation

#### LESSON QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

- Is there such a thing as bioethics?
- What is bioethics?
- What is Jewish bioethics?
- Why study bioethics? As a Jew? As a human being?
- How does Judaism respond to the idea of autonomy? What is *bichirah chofshit*?
- Why do we need guidelines in our lives?

#### SELECTION OF TEXTS:

No texts will be used for this lesson – the blackboard will be used to write down terms and diagrams.

#### BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF STUDENTS:

There need not be any background knowledge or skills on the part of the students and therefore the purpose of this session is to introduce and frame the subject matter. The class will draw on those things that the students already know (both correctly and incorrectly) from other parts of their lives.

## Teacher's Guide

### I. Teacher's Preparation

#### LESSON QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

Since this is the introductory lesson for the course, the questions of meaning that will be addressed will hopefully set up a framework for the students in which they can begin to understand some of the overarching issues within bioethics. Many students may not have ever realized before stepping into this class what bioethics is or why it is important. This needs to be addressed before you can go on to talk about actual issues within bioethics.

#### SELECTION OF TEXTS:

There are no texts used in this session. It is intentionally done in a format of a combination of frontal teaching and drawing answers from the students in order to set up a frame for the semester and getting the students to begin to interact with terminology and questioning.

Concrete texts can draw in the students, but engaging them in conversation will right away draw them into the conversation that will be ongoing through the semester.

**OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOMES:**

It is my hope that through these objectives, the students will begin to understand that definitions, morality, and ethics tend to change with time and place. Therefore what might be considered a disease in one place might not be in another.

Some examples:

1. Malaria was something that extended a person's life in a place where there was sleeping sickness, though in the U.S. today we consider Malaria a disease.
2. Not more than 50 years ago, PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome) was considered a disease.
3. Killing another human being is not always considered murder, rather what society one is in will determine where the line is drawn.

You can choose a different example for the slippery slope diagram rather than the topic of ending life, but it should be something related to bioethics. The students can come up with their own suggestions.

Through discussing reasons for studying bioethics and defining important terms, the students will understand why bioethics is needed. It is a discipline that studies questions that do not necessarily have such simple answers as one might have initially thought.

**OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOMES:****1. What will the students *do*?**

- The students will discuss reasons for the importance of studying bioethics in general and Jewish bioethics in specific
- The students will define the following terms: autonomy, beneficence, *bichira chofshit* (free choice), and slippery slope
- The students will help create a diagram that reflects an example of a slippery slope on the topic of ending life (or another area within bioethics).

**2. The students *will be able to*:**

- Explain what is bioethics/Jewish bioethics.
- State why it is important to learn about bioethics, especially from a Jewish standpoint.
- Define the terms: autonomy, beneficence, *bichira chofshit*, and slippery slope.

**3. The students *will understand*:**

- The importance of discussing bioethical issues.
- That definitions tend to be relative and often have societal/cultural subjectiveness imposed upon them.

**ASSESSMENT/MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:**

1. Evaluate the answers that are given in class. Look at how the definitions change as the conversation continues. The students will be pushed to think beyond standard dictionary definitions.
2. See how the class pieces together the slippery slope diagram at the end of class.

**ASSESSMENT/MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:**

By listening carefully to the students during class, you will be able to recognize whether the students are understanding the ideas of the class.

The students will show that they understand the concepts when we collectively produce a diagram of a slippery slope at the end of the class. This task will demonstrate how clearly they understand the subjectiveness of many bioethical issues and thereby the need for guidelines when addressing such questions.

## II. The Lesson Plan

### A. INTRODUCTION:

1. See Appendix 1A (page 71) for additional information to use in giving an introduction to the topic of bioethics and Jewish bioethics.
2. In introducing Jewish bioethics, I want to show the students how Jewish bioethics is more holistic because it takes into consideration the moral values while also understanding the social context in the decision making process.

### B. MOTIVATION:

In these few minutes, you need to give the motivation for the semester. The students have to understand how pressing bioethical issues are today and how they directly impact upon their lives. This may require more elicitation from you. The students may not answer right away. The tone of voice will be very important. A drawing question that you might ask is: What areas in your life are impacted upon by the study of bioethics?

### C. INTRODUCTION OF TERMINOLOGY:

The example I have used in appendix 1B (page 72) is that of killing. Together with the students, fill in the scale from allowable – not allowable (and all the gradations in between). Anything that the students do not hit upon, you should fill in for them as it is important for them to see all the possibilities as a frame for the rest of the semester.

## II. The Lesson Plan

### A. INTRODUCTION (5 min.):

1. Define Bioethics
2. Define Jewish Bioethics

### B. MOTIVATION (10 min.):

1. Ask the students: Why study bioethics?
2. Clarify the following message at the end:  
Especially in today's world, with the rapid pace of advancing technology, we should pause to think about what it is that we are doing. Rushing ahead without thinking could be disastrous but getting stuck in our tracks could be equally devastating. The study of bioethics helps give us guidelines.

### C. INTRODUCTION OF TERMINOLOGY (30 min.):

1. Go through Appendix 1B (page 72) and define the important terms that will be necessary for this course.
2. Explain the concept of Slippery Slope
3. Go through an example to illustrate the concept of slippery slope. Together with the class, create on the board (or on large paper) a slippery slope scale diagram using that example.

**D. CLOSURE (5 min.):**

1. Summarize the concepts that were discussed in the class.
2. Reiterate that the purpose of studying Jewish bioethics is in order to have guidelines and a framework by which one can be directed in attempting to answer difficult questions.
3. Challenge the students to continue thinking about a person's freedom and control in making decisions and what the consequences can be for choices made.
4. Challenge the students to continue thinking about subjective versus objective definitions.
5. Refer the students back to the idea of the slippery slope and point out the need for standards/guidelines that Judaism offers us as will be shown as we proceed through the course.
6. (OPTIONAL) Assign homework: read "Matters of Method and Belief" and write ¼ page summary of the article.

**D. CLOSURE:**

You should encourage the students to think about what happens in this class even/especially outside of the classroom. Stress that the significance of what they learn in this class is its application to what is happening around them every day in the world.

This class is not about the texts staying on the pages that they read in class but rather about what they do with the information and how they may perceive the world differently when they leave the classroom.

The slippery slope exercise at the end of class is to make sure that the students understood the concepts for today (i.e. – the relativism of definitions and need for guidelines).

**Note:** An alternative method of assessment throughout the semester could be to have students compile a portfolio of current events that relate to the concepts addressed in this class. You can use this portfolio to track each student's development in understanding key concepts and terms in bioethics.

## Introduction to Bioethics

What is Bioethics?

1. Sociology of Bioethics: the science of society, social institutions, and social relationships; *specifically* - the systematic study of the development, structure, interaction, and collective behavior of organized groups of human beings as related to a discipline dealing with the ethical implications of biological research and applications especially in medicine (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 10th Edition).
2. Philosophy of Bioethics: a search for a general understanding of values and reality by chiefly speculative rather than observational means of a discipline dealing with the ethical implications of biological research and applications especially in medicine (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 10th Edition)

What is Jewish Bioethics?

Jewish bioethics is more about the philosophy of bioethics rather than the sociology of bioethics, but the Rabbis still take into consideration of the social context when determining and conveying halachic decisions.

## **Autonomy – personal freedom**

- This has become a major focus in the U.S. since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before this patients/the public (i.e. – not the doctors) played less of a role in the medical decision making process.
- Autonomy today supersedes most other things including beneficence (doing good).
- Autonomy is the idea that every individual should be able to make own decision.
  - What’s the problem with this concept of autonomy? It assumes freedom from coercion yet no one is truly free from social factors or even from fear of death or disease, or because of financial constraints/factors.

## **Beneficence – traditionally most important value in medicine.**

- Hypocrites said, “1<sup>st</sup> do no harm” which is *non-maleficance*. But the concept of autonomy today has taken precedence.
- *How does Judaism respond to the idea of Autonomy?*
  - Introduce the concept of “*Bichirah Chofshit*” – we have the freedom to make our own choices even though God has given us guidance as to the correct path.
- *How does one define disease? Examples of changing definitions:*
  1. Malaria was something that extended a persons life in a place where there was sleeping sickness, though in the U.S. today we consider Malaria a disease.
  2. PMS not more than 50 years ago was considered a disease.
  3. Killing another human being is not always considered murder, rather depending on what society one is in will determine where the line is drawn.