



4 Jewish Values to Draw from the Movie Encanto

The Disney blockbuster Encanto, which has captivated people of all ages, has the potential to prompt meaningful discussions with our grandchildren. Below we draw four universal values from the movie and connect them to Jewish values.

1. Dignity of all human beings (Jewish value of **B'tzelem Elohim** — in the image of God)
2. Power of empathy to enrich relationships (Jewish value of **Chesed** — kindness and compassion)
3. Responsibility to care for family (Jewish value of **Mishpachah** — family)
4. Value of maintaining cultural traditions during traumatic times (Jewish value of **Masoret** — traditions)

B'tzelem Elohim (in the image of God)

At the heart of Jewish ethics is the belief that all human beings are made in the image of God. This core value affects the way we live our lives in two ways: (1) If all humans are made in the image of God, then everyone deserves respect, regardless of their race, religion, gender, economic status, individual talents, or abilities. (2) Understanding that we are made in the image of God can strengthen our self-esteem and make us less likely to measure our self-worth by comparing ourselves to others.



Jewish wisdom is filled with stories that teach this core value. One of the best-known tales depicts Moses standing at the burning bush. God commands him to go to Pharaoh, but Moses, who suffers from a speech impediment, feels unworthy for the task. "Please O God," he cries, "I am slow of speech and slow of tongue...make someone else Your agent." God rebukes Moses, asking, "Who gives humans speech? Who makes them deaf or blind?"

In that moment, Moses realizes that God is the source of all human attributes, even those considered negative. This realization helps him understand that his disability doesn't define him, and he leaves on his mission filled with renewed confidence and healthy self-esteem.

Chesed (kindness and compassion)

Caring for the needy is a cornerstone of Judaism. In fact, the Talmud says it is the defining characteristic of Jews: *"If someone is compassionate to others, you can be sure they are a descendent of Abraham [and Sarah]."*

The rabbis learned the obligation to be kind from two commandments in the Torah. The first, *"Love your neighbor as yourself,"* is well-known, but the second command, *"You shall walk after Adonai your God,"* is less familiar and its meaning is less obvious. Biblical commentators interpreted the command to walk after God to mean that people should follow the ethical traits of God; for example, *"as God is compassionate, so you be compassionate; as God is gracious, so you be gracious, as God is righteous, so you be righteous."*



One vignette from the Torah especially captures the emphasis Judaism places on deeds of loving kindness. We read in Genesis that while Abraham was sitting outside his tent in the heat of the day, he spied a group of strangers approaching him. Abraham ran to greet them. *"My lords," he said, "if it please you, do not go past your servant. Let a little water be brought and bathe your feet and recline under this tree. And let me get you a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves."* Together, Abraham and Sarah care for their visitors and become models of *chesed* to their descendants.

Mishpachah (family)

Jewish law says children must respect their parents: *"You shall honor your father and mother."* Similarly, Jewish wisdom teaches that parents must not only provide for their children's physical needs, i.e., feed, clothe, house them, and teach them a trade (some say also to swim), but parents must also nourish their children's spiritual needs — *"You shall teach them [these mitzvot–commandments.] to your children."*

To truly understand the importance of family life in the Jewish tradition, let's look beyond rules and regulations.



The importance of a united family, where members are bound to each other with supreme love and devotion, emerges within the narrative of the Jewish journey from slavery to freedom. After the seventh plague, when Pharaoh seemingly relents to let the Jewish people go and worship God, he asks Moses, *"Who are the ones to go?"* Without hesitation, Moses responds that entire families must go; *"We will all go, young and old; we will go with our sons and daughters..."* But Pharaoh understands that strong family bonds will weaken his control and undermine his authority. He rejects the request and ultimately faces the horrors of the tenth and final plague—death of the firstborn.

Judaism's redemption story begins with an emphasis on the united family. The Torah explicitly says that *each family* is commanded to sacrifice a lamb for the ritual meal and to *eat it together* in their homes.

To this day, Jewish families gather around the Seder table to recall the exodus from slavery and the march to freedom. At Passover, and throughout the year, Jews aspire to transform their homes from a simple brick and mortar dwelling to a *mikdash m'at*, a miniature sanctuary, grounded in love, respect, and caring for everyone who lives there. A dwelling worthy of God's presence.

Masoret (Traditions)

Family traditions and religious rituals are tools to make one's home a *mikdash m'at*, a miniature sanctuary. With blessings and behaviors that have been passed down from generation to generation—*l'dor vador*—Jews sanctify not only those special moments in life, such as births, deaths, and marriages, but also everyday moments, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and waking. Anchored by a chain of tradition that has been reflected upon and refined continuously for 2,000 years, Jewish families throughout history withstood periodic waves of oppression and lived meaningful lives.

One legend from Jewish literature best exemplifies the natural process of change as the tradition passes from one generation to the next. The story is that when Moses received the law from God on Mount Sinai, he asked the Almighty why certain Hebrew letters were adorned with delicate, calligraphic crowns. God explained that in the distant future, a great rabbi named Akiba would derive meaning from the crowns and apply that knowledge to his generation.



Moses pleaded with God for a glimpse of this wise Sage, and God agreed. “Walk backward,” God commanded. Moses found himself sitting in the eighth row of benches in Rabbi Akiba’s academy. Try as he might, Moses could not understand a word of Rabbi Akiba’s lesson. Confused and feeling faint, Moses stood up to leave just as a student asked Akiba how he reached his conclusion from the text they were studying. Rabbi Akiba answered: “Moses received this law at Mount Sinai and passed it on to succeeding generations.”

*Photograph of old and young man courtesy of Unsplash
All other photographs by Stephanie Fink*

