

Between the Stōikos and the Beth Midrash: A Philosophic and Ethical Comparative Analysis of Stoicism and Judaism

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Introduction

Stoicism shares some of Judaism's philosophical and ethical outlook. This was recognized by Flavius Josephus (37 CE-100 CE) in his autobiography as he compared the early Tannaim to Stoics when attempting to explain the Pharisees to a Greco-Roman audience. "So when I had accomplished my desires, I returned back to the city, being now nineteen years old, and began to conduct myself according to the rules of the sect of the Pharisees, which is of kin to the sect of the Stoics, as the Greeks call them."¹

In this paper, "Between the Stōikos² and the Beth Midrash," we examine the philosophic and ethical commonalities and differences between Stoicism and Judaism.³ We explore the interaction between Jews and Stoics and possible reasons for the commonalities. Finally, the study and or adoption of certain Stoic practices is examined for their compatibility with orthodox Judaism.

Stoicism

The practical applications of Stoicism are meant to keep one in a state of serenity⁴ regardless of the circumstances. Its emphasis on interpersonal relations is of particular relevance in a hypersensitive culture. Stoicism has

¹ Flavius Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus in The Works of Flavius Josephus*, William Whiston, Translator, 1737.

² The word "Stoic" comes from the Greek word "stoikos," meaning "of the portico," specifically Stoa Poikile "the Painted Porch," the great hall in Athens (decorated with frescoes depicting the Battle of Marathon) where Zeno taught.

³ Certainly, Judaism and Stoicism have little in common if the focus is on the commandments in the Torah and the polytheist belief system from which Stoicism stems. The emphasis of this paper, however, is on certain philosophic and ethical aspects.

⁴ The terms used for this state are *Apatheia* (freedom from emotion) and/or *Ataraxia* (calmness or peace of mind; emotional tranquility).

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had spurts of popularity in the past 1,500 years and has recently been having a renaissance. Stoicism focuses on self-control, logic, discipline, regulating passions, and being unconcerned about the things that are out of one's control. Stoics taught that humans should live in accordance with nature. That is to say, that humans are blessed with intellect and logic and, therefore, should act in a reasonable way—not based on instinct, anger, fear, or uncontrolled desire or lust. The Stoics are especially known for teaching that “virtue is the only good” for human beings, and that external things—such as health, wealth, and pleasure—are preferred indifferents that are not good or bad in themselves. The opposite of the above blessings are non-preferred indifferents.

Stoicism is one of the most significant schools of Hellenistic philosophy. It began with Zeno of Citium⁵ (336 BCE–263 BCE) in Athens in the early fourth century BCE and thrived for about 600 years. Stoicism is principally a philosophy of personal ethics based on logic.⁶ Stoicism's contribution to mental health may be its greatest influence. Their teachings were eventually used in the 20th century in the development of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Logotherapy, and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). Stoics emphasized the liberating and seemingly obvious—but often ignored—maxim of not worrying about things out of one's control. They taught not to take things at first impression but rather to think that an event or item is not bad in and of itself—just our impressions of that event or thing. “Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things.”⁷ Therefore, one can change the way one thinks about something and have a different view.

Jewish-Stoic Commonalities

Despite the fact that most early Stoic texts have not survived, there is a

⁵ Originally from Citium in Cyprus. According to Diogenes Laertius 7.1. Citium was a Greek city with a Phoenician population.

⁶ It has roots in the teachings of pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus (535 BCE–475 BCE), Socrates (470 BCE–399 BCE), and Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (412 BCE–323 BCE).

⁷ Epictetus, Enchiridion 5, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments. A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter*, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865). 5/1/2019, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>.

consequential amount of Stoic writings,⁸ third-party reports, and fragments that have come down to us. Judaism's enormous library, including the Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc., is vast by comparison. Arrian of Nicomedia (c. 86/89 CE–c. 146/160 CE) wrote the *Enchiridion* or "The Manual to Life" based on the lectures of his teacher Epictetus (50 CE–135 CE). Since the principles represented in the *Enchiridion* are the closest thing to an organized ancient compendium of Stoic principles, emphasis will be placed on its teachings. However, even that compendium is wide ranging, so let's begin with the three basic principles of Stoicism as summarized by modern Stoic scholar Massimo Pigliucci, as being 1) Virtue Is the Highest Good, 2) Living in Accordance with Nature, and 3) the Dichotomy of Control.⁹

Virtue Is the Highest Good. The most important Stoic principle would be familiar to those who study Judaism. Virtue is the highest good and everything else is indifferent. Virtue is the chief good because it is the only thing valuable under all circumstances. One should make proper use of health, wealth, and education in achieving virtue, but they are unnecessary. Nothing is to be traded for virtue. The Stoics categorized four types of virtues: Wisdom, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Wealth, health, beauty, etc. are all preferred indifferents. Poverty and sickness are non-preferred indifferents¹⁰ and irrelevant to a person's self-worth. Every challenge in life is an opportunity for self-improvement.

There is nothing in the above statement that is inconsistent with Judaism; on the contrary, substitute the word "virtue" with "observing *mitzvot*" and the statement sounds like a cornerstone of Judaism if interpreted within the Torah's guidelines.

⁸ These include the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses* based on the teachings of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, Seneca's *Letters and Fragments*, and Musonius Rufus's *Lectures and Fragments*. The *Enchiridion* is the closest resemblance to a Stoic code. Epictetus was able to draw upon the work of his teacher Musonius Rufus (20 CE–100 CE), as well as Seneca the Younger (4 BCE–65 CE), and the early Stoic philosophers Xeno, Cleanethus of Assos (330 BCE–c. 230 BCE), and Chrysippus of Soli (279–206 BCE).

⁹ Massimo Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*, Basic Books, 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Living in Accordance with Nature. Stoics taught that people should live in accordance with nature. That is to say that people are blessed with intellect with logic and therefore should act in a reasonable way—not based on instinct, anger, fear, or uncontrolled desire or lust. People must apply reason in order to live in agreement with nature. They are to use their mental and social abilities. People have the obligation to think before they act. The Torah teaches one to use one’s intellect to realize that it is most logical to serve Hashem and not to go after one’s “hearts and eyes.”¹¹ A practical application of Living in Accordance with Nature would include preparing to go on an airplane flight. One would say to oneself, “I know it will be cramped, the seat in front of me will lean back, the delays will be unpredictable, and there will be long lines for the restroom. My goal is to reach my destination AND at the same time keep my will in accordance with nature and that cannot happen if I get upset and/or angry.”

Another manifestation of Living in Accordance with Nature would be that one should stop one’s own mind from being complicit in helping another insult one. One should rather be as a rock and not respond or dwell on it—maintain *Apathea*. This is similar to what is found in the Talmud concerning one who is insulted and shamed and does not insult others or respond.¹²

Dichotomy of Control. Its best to describe this principal by quoting directly from Epictetus. “There are things that are within our power, and there are things that are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in short, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and whatever are not properly our own affairs. Now the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted, and unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, and alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent, and take what belongs to others for your own; you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own, and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you, you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing

¹¹ Numbers 15:39.

¹² BT *Gittin* 36b.

against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm.”¹³

Epictetus taught that people should not be concerned about things that are beyond their control and accept them calmly, with equanimity. However, individuals are certainly responsible for their own actions, which they can control. Nevertheless, the outcomes of those actions are beyond one’s control. A classic Stoic example would be an archer aiming carefully for a target—but a wind may suddenly come and shuttle the arrow away from the target. Torah-observant Jews must do their *hishtadlut*, put in best efforts, but ultimately success is in the hands of Hashem. Hashem runs the world. *Hakol be-yedei Shamayim butz mi-yirat Shamayim*—“Everything is in Hashem’s hands except fear of Heaven.”¹⁴

All things beyond one’s control are certainly in the control of G-d. Judaism does not share the deist beliefs of Stoicism. Since all things are under the control of Hashem, there is always prayer. Consider the following from BT *Berakhot* 10a when Isaiah informs King Hezekiah that he will die of the malady from which he was suffering. He does not accept it as something “beyond his control.” He has a tradition from his forebear, King David, that prayer can always change an evil decree. As Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Eliezer both said: “Even if a sharp sword rests on a person’s neck, he should not despair of mercy,” as it is stated in the Book of Job: “Though He kill me, I will trust in Him.”¹⁵ Despite having heard the terrible prophecy, immediately “Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed to Hashem.”¹⁶

Stoic, Jewish Beliefs and Aphorisms—Points of Comparison

In addition to the aforementioned basic principles, there are other points of comparison. As noted by Louis Feldman, “Stoic rules and manners for health, the table, and the restroom are similar to those of Judaism as are

¹³ Epictetus, *Enchiridion 1*, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments. A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865). <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>.

¹⁴ BT *Berakhot* 33b and BT *Megillah* 25a.

¹⁵ Job 13:15.

¹⁶ Isaiah 38:2.

the emphasis on the simple life, fortitude, ethos of work, generosity, contrast between theory and practice, good and valuable.”¹⁷

Middot/Manners/Character Traits. Enchiridion 33 details various character traits that are consistent with *middot* taught in Tractate *Avot* and *mussar sefarim*. Admonishments against gluttony, sex outside marriage, arrogance, as well as not responding to provocations, being humble, not placing too much emphasis on physical appearance, and the uselessness of fadism are common to both. “Provide things relating to the body no farther than absolute need requires; as meat, drink, clothing, house, retinue. But cut off everything that looks towards show and luxury. Before marriage, guard yourself with all your ability from unlawful intercourse with women; yet be not uncharitable or severe to those who are led into this, nor frequently boast that you yourself do otherwise”.¹⁸ The Enchiridion advises against flattery and *lashon hara* (Enchiridion 48), revenge (43), and the wisdom of weighing doing an evil deed against its consequences including damaging virtue (34). Epictetus considers conspicuous consumption to be foolish (Enchiridion 39). The value of character as opposed to physical appearance in Proverbs 31:30 finds an echo in Enchiridion 40.

The concept of having the same good behavior in public as well as private “*Liolam yebei adam yirei Shamayim bi-seter u-vi-golui*—A person should always fear heaven in private and in public” in *Tanna D-Vei Eliyahu*, Chapter 21—is analogous to “Begin by prescribing to yourself some character and demeanor, such as you may preserve both alone and in company” found in Enchiridion 33, and “I have done nothing unjust, either in public, or in private life”¹⁹ found in *Discourses*.

¹⁷ Louis Feldman, “*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*” (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 32-33.

¹⁸ Epictetus, Enchiridion 33, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments*. A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>

¹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses* Book 2, Chapter 2: of tranquility, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments*. A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>.

Other commonalities include an admonishment against *devarim beteilim*. “Be for the most part silent, or speak merely what is necessary, and in few words.” “We may, however, enter, though sparingly, into discourse sometimes when occasion calls for it, but not on any of the common subjects, of gladiators, or horse races, or athletic champions, or feasts, the vulgar topics of conversation; but principally not of men, so as either to blame, or praise, or make comparisons. If you are able, then, by your own conversation bring over that of your company to proper subjects; but, if you happen to be taken among strangers, be silent.”²⁰ There is an admonishment against *nivul peh*: “avoid swearing, if possible, altogether; if not, as far as you are able.” Avoid *moshav leitzim*,²¹ avoid public and vulgar entertainments. Finally, the practice of reckoning each deed at the end of the day is common to both.²² Epictetus’s advice was to speak very little and, when speaking, to be careful with what one says; and to choose one’s companions well; and not to associate with those who will harm their character. These maxims mirror several Mishnayot in *Avot*: “Speak little and do much”²³ and the value of a “good” friend and the harm of the inverse.²⁴

Reflect on Three Things and You Will Not Sin. The idea that thinking about the day of death puts things into perspective and prevents sin, is laid out in *Avot* 3:1: “Akavia ben Mahalalel said: Look at three things and you will not come to sin: know where you come from, and where you are going, and before whom you will give an account and stand for judgment.”

This is akin to Enchiridion 21, “Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible, be daily before your eyes, but chiefly death, and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything.”²⁵ In addition, Marcus writes as follows in *Meditations* Book 2.11: “Undertake each action as one aware he may next moment depart out of

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Psalms 1:1.

²² Epictetus, *Discourses* III, 10.

²³ Mishnah *Avot* 1:15.

²⁴ Mishnah *Avot* 1:7 and 2:9 “good” friend in this context is defined as one who is righteous.

²⁵ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 21, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments, A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter*, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865) <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>.

life.”²⁶ Consistent with Rabbi Elazar’s dictum “repent one day before death.”²⁷ The verse in Ecclesiastes 9:8 “At all times let your clothing be clean and do not lack olive oil on your head”²⁸ is interpreted as referring to being free of sin at all times since one never knows when one will die.

Accepting Everything with Equanimity. “And this consists in preserving the divinity within us free from all affronts and injuries, superior to pleasure and pain, doing nothing either inconsiderately, or insincerely and hypocritically; independent of what others may do or not do: embracing cheerfully whatever befalls or is appointed, as coming from him, from whom itself was derived; and, above all, expecting death with calm satisfaction.”²⁹ These words of Marcus reflect the Stoic belief of accepting everything with equanimity; that everything in this world has a purpose and therefore cannot be bad.

The concept of insisting that everything that happens is for the good is recorded in the notion of “*gam zu le-tovah*” (“This, too, is for the good”) or, as Rebbe Akiva expressed it, “*Kol man d-avid Rahmana l-tav avid.*”³⁰ A similar idea is expressed by Epictetus “Demand not that events should happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will go on well” or “wish not that things go well with you – but rather that

²⁶ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, II, 11 trans. Francis Hutcheson and James Moor, edited and with an Introduction by James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2133>>.

²⁷ BT *Shabbat* 153a.

²⁸ Ecclesiastes 9:8.

²⁹ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, II, 17 trans. Francis Hutcheson and James Moor, edited and with an Introduction by James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2133>.

³⁰ BT *Ta’anit* 21a regarding Naḥum Ish Gamzu. Naḥum received the moniker “Gamzu” because his reaction to anything that happened to him was always “*gam zu l-tovah* (this, too, is for the good).” BT *Berakhot* 60b: “Rabbi Akiva was accustomed to saying ‘Everything Hashem does is for the good.’” There is also a reference to this attitude in *Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* (230:5): לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל מה דעביד רהמנא לטב עביד.

you go well with all things”³¹. This is analogous – but not exactly - to the concept of accepting *yisurim bi-abavah*.³²

Accepting whatever happens is a stoic mantra highlighted by Epictetus and Marcus. The wisdom of doing so is expressed in a very early Stoic metaphor first taught by Xeno in the fourth century BCE about a dog tied to a moving cart. Regardless of whether or not the dog decides to follow the cart it must go where the cart goes. The only difference is if it will walk along or if it will be dragged. Cleanthes expressed that same idea as “Fate guides the willing, but drags the unwilling.”³³ The Mishneh on BT Berakhot 54a states that praying concerning what is past is considered a prayer in vain.

Don’t Judge. Don’t judge your friend until you are in his place (*Avot* 2:4). This admonition against judging harshly finds an echo in Enchiridion 45: “For, unless you perfectly understand the principle from which anyone acts, how should you know if he acts ill? Thus you will not run the hazard of assenting to any appearances but such as you fully comprehend.”³⁴

There Is Nothing New under the Sun. Marcus wrote “that, whatever now happens, has happened, and will happen; and the like now happens everywhere”³⁵ seems “copied” from the words of King Solomon: “There is nothing new under the sun.”³⁶

Where Jewish and Stoic Beliefs Are in Conflict

As noted earlier, Judaism and Stoicism certainly have little in common if the focus is on the commandments in the Torah. In addition, despite the

³¹ Epictetus, Enchiridion 8. Echoes of this maxim are found in the Latin phrase “*amor fati*” or “love fate” – popularized by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

³² *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* (222:3):

³³ As quoted in Seneca, Epistles, 107.11.

³⁴ Epictetus, Enchiridion 45, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments. A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter*, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>.

³⁵ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, 12:26 trans. Francis Hutcheson and James Moor, edited and with an Introduction by James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2133>>.

³⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

philosophical and ethical similarities detailed above, there are also significant differences as well. I will now focus on several important ones.

The Stoic Conception of the Creator. The Stoic conception of the creator is at odds with Judaism's belief system. The Stoic conception of the divine is not the G-d of monotheistic religions. The Stoic god is a force in the cosmos and is equivalent to "Nature." The early Stoic philosopher Chrysippus said "that divine power resides in reason and in the soul and mind of nature taken as a whole, and then again he declares that the world itself is god and the universal outpouring of its soul, then that it is this same world's guiding principle, operating in mind and reason, together with the common nature of things and the totality which embraces all existence."³⁷

The Torah states that people are created in the image of G-d, but they are not G-d. However, in Stoicism the fiery *Logos* ("an ordering principle for the universe," as explained by Heraclitus) exists in both 'God' and humans. Humans are part of the deity³⁸ and the deity is part of humans.³⁹

The Stoics are most frequently considered pantheists, they believed that God is the universe and found everywhere in nature; however, there are also deist, polytheist (they believed in the pantheon of Hellenistic gods), and theist qualities found in their surviving writings. Stoicism was, from the very beginning, not purely pantheistic, but an amalgam of pantheism, deism, polytheism, and theism.

Suicide. The ancient Stoics were not averse to suicide and even encouraged it when circumstances seemed to dictate it. Many prominent Stoics committed suicide including Seneca, Cato (95 BCE–46 BCE), and possibly Zeno and Cleanthes.⁴⁰ "The door is always open" was a stoic adage concerning the possibility of escaping grievous situations such as illness, torture, or imprisonment via suicide. Suicide would even be justified for milder forms of adversity: "remember the principal thing; that the door is open. Do not be more fearful than children; but as they, when the play

³⁷ As quoted in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods), trans. Francis Brooks (London: Methuen, 1896), <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/539>>.

³⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.17 27-28.

³⁹ Ibid. 1.14.6.

⁴⁰ Seneca was ordered to commit suicide by Emperor Nero. Concerning Zeno and Cleanthes see Diogenes Laërtius, (1925), *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, translated by Robert Hicks, Loeb Classical Library

does not please them, say, 'I will play no longer'; so do you, in the same case, say, 'I will play no longer'; and go; but, if you stay, do not complain."⁴¹

In contrast, the Torah treats suicide as a grievous sin. The body is not considered the possession of the individual but rather belonging to G-d. Moreover, since this results in the death of the individual, repentance is not possible. And then there is a biblical admonishment "But your life-blood I will seek from every wild animal I will seek it and from every man and I will require an accounting for human life from every man concerning his fellow man" (Genesis 9:5,6); this is expounded upon in BT *Bava Kamma* 91b as including a warning against suicide. Also note Rabeinu Moshe ben Maimon 1135-1204 (Rambam), in *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Nezikin, Hilkhot Rotze'ah U-Shmirat Ha-Nefesh* 2:2-3, "and likewise one who kills one's self, all of these are considered a shedder of blood". Rambam interprets "*et dimkhem li-nafshoseikhem edros*" to refer to suicide.⁴²

Ancient Stoics justified suicide by noting that since they did not ask to enter the world, they can choose to leave it. This is in direct contradiction to the Mishnah in *Avot* which states that one is born against one's will and will die against their will. "Do not let the evil inclination tell you that 'Sheol' is a refuge for you, because against your will you were formed and against your will you were born, and against your will you live, and against your will you will die, and against your will you are destined to give an accounting before the King of kings, The Holy One, blessed is He."⁴³

Consistent with the Stoic approach, Marcus Aurelius sees no reason

⁴¹ Epictetus, Discourses I:24, Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments.* A Translation from the Greek based on that of Elizabeth Carter, by Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1865). 5/1/2019, <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1477>>.

⁴² Rabbinic authorities generally assume that almost all suicides are the result of pain, fear, intolerable stress, depression, other mental illness (chronic or temporary) and are not classified after-the-fact as a deliberate, sinful action—based on *Arukh Ha-Shulchan, Yoreh De'ah* 345.5

⁴³ *Avot* 4:22.

to elongate life in the face of infirmity and impairment,⁴⁴ whereas the Torah sees every moment of life as valuable⁴⁵. Philosophically, the Torah view is that one could repent and/or do more *mitzvot* with the balance of one's time. Or as Rav Yaacov states in *Avot*,⁴⁶ one hour of repentance and *mitzvot* in this world is worth more than the entire life of the World to Come (one can no longer repent for sins or get credit for *mitzvot* in the afterlife).

Epictetus Did Not Believe in Learning *Lishmah*. Epictetus discusses the wisdom of being able to decipher the words of early Stoic sage Chrysippus of Asos.⁴⁷ Epictetus sees no value in the act of deciphering his teachings to gain wisdom. When anyone shows himself vain, on being able to understand and interpret the works of Chrysippus, say to yourself: “Unless Chrysippus had written obscurely, this person would have had nothing to be vain of. But what do I desire? To understand Nature, and follow her. I ask, then, who interprets her; and hearing that Chrysippus does, I have recourse to him. I do not understand his writings. I seek, therefore, one to interpret them.” So far there is nothing to value myself upon. And when I find an interpreter, what remains is, to make use of his instructions. This alone is the valuable thing. But if I admire merely the interpretation, what do I become more than a grammarian, instead of a philosopher?⁴⁸ Except, indeed, that instead of Homer I interpret Chrysippus. When any one, therefore, desires me to read Chrysippus to him, I rather blush, when I cannot exhibit actions that are harmonious and consonant with his discourse.”

This reasoning “that there is no value in the interpretation, only in getting the actual knowledge” is not consistent with the Talmudic view of Torah study—which sees value in learning Torah for its own sake expressed as “*Drosh vi-kabel skhar*.”⁴⁹ The Talmud states that there are certain Torah cited cases that never happened and never will happen but are to

⁴⁴ *Meditations Book 4*.

⁴⁵ A discussion of when aggressive, life-prolonging treatment need not be dispensed, DNR protocols, or when halakhic death occurs is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴⁶ *Avot* 4:22.

⁴⁷ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 49.

⁴⁸ Paradoxically, it is the Epicureans who saw value in study for its own sake. See Epicurus, *Life* 121b.

⁴⁹ BT *Sanhedrin* 71a.

be studied anyway. There are many long Talmudic debates in which both the prevailing and non-prevailing opinion are studied and analyzed in depth over multiple folio pages. At times the Talmud will launch in to lengthy discourses to explore the extent that the *Amora* espousing the non-prevailing view would continue to hold that view and under what circumstances. Judaism has the concept of learning Torah for the sake of learning. Nevertheless, studying Torah for the “sake of learning” is not the principal reason to learn Torah, but rather the primary reason for Torah study is to do *mitzvo*t.⁵⁰

Why the Commonalities?

Some assume that if there are commonalities between Judaism and ancient Greek or ancient Roman writings, the Rabbis must have borrowed those teachings. It is not theologically challenging that certain Stoic adages and aphorisms could have been adopted by the Rabbis.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is improbable that the Rabbis borrowed from the Stoics for several reasons. Firstly, many of these thoughts are in the Tanakh which certainly predates the advent of Stoicism. Other teachings are part of the Oral Law, that although written down in the second century CE, were handed down orally earlier. Most notable, there is a total absence of the mention of Stoics or Stoicism in the Mishnah or Talmud. Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Musionus Rufus, Epictetus, and Seneca or for that matter notable non-Stoic ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE), and Theophrastus⁵² (371 BCE–287 BCE) are not mentioned anywhere in the Talmudim or Midrashim.⁵³ Interestingly, there is a reference

⁵⁰ Mishnah *Avot* 1:17.

⁵¹ Consistent with the Mishnah “Who is wise, one who learns from everyone” (*Avot* 4.1), Rambam, “take truth from whatever source” (*Shemoneh Perakim*) and Rav Kook concerning the good in learning from the wisdom of all nations; “that G-d did not place all talent and wisdom in one place: not in one person, not in one nation, not in one land, not in one generation, and not even in one world instead all talent and wisdom is scattered and spread out” see *Orot* “Yisrael” 5:2.3 as quoted in Ari Ze’ev Schwartz, *The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook: The Writings of a Jewish Mystic* (Gefen, 2018) pp. 178-179.

⁵² The philosopher Theophrastus (4th–3rd centuries BCE), a disciple of Aristotle and his successor as head of the Lyceum, referred to the Jews: “Being philosophers by birth.” (Theophrastus as quoted by Porphyry, *DeAbstinencia* 2.26).

⁵³ Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

to a second century cynic philosopher Oenomaus of Gedara⁵⁴ in BT *Hagigah* 15b.⁵⁵ There are also countless references to Epicureans (*Apikorsim*). The early Stoics Xeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus apparently had no contact with Jews or Jewish thought and no references were found in any surviving writings, fragments, or third-party reports. Rabbi Saul Lieberman emphasized “That many of the [Jewish] ethical aphorisms alleged to be derived from the stoics might have been formulated by any intelligent person raised on the teachings of the bible.”⁵⁶

What of the actual extra-biblical Stoicism in the writings of Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE)? The philosophy of Philo is influenced by Stoicism as he tried to show the similarities between Judaism and Hellenism. Philo was not a follower of the early Tannaim but rather had his own philosophy. Perhaps the Stoicism in the writings of Philo and Josephus were a way for them to reach a Greco-Roman or Greco-Roman/Jewish audience. Josephus maintains that the Stoics (as well as Pythagoras, Plato, and others) held similar views about the nature of G-d as the Jews and learned from Moses.⁵⁷ The above notwithstanding, the most likely reason for the shared wisdom is the result of “G-d spreading wisdom amongst all the peoples of the world” as detailed by Maran Ha-Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook (1865-1935).⁵⁸ Consider that common wisdom is found amongst many groups of people with no contact with each other. For example, the teachings⁵⁹ of Lao Tzu who lived in China in the sixth century BCE have common ideas, adages, and aphorisms with both Judaism and Stoicism. There was no known contact between the Chinese sage, one of the founders of Taoism, and Jewish or Stoic sages.

⁵⁴ Also referred to in *Genesis Rabbah* 68.20.

⁵⁵ Cynics were well known as they preached from street corners. See Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Saul Lieberman, “How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?” in *Studies and Texts*, Vol. 1: Biblical and other studies, ed. Alexander Altman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) 123-141.

⁵⁷ Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book 2.168.

⁵⁸ *Pinkesi Ha-Ra'aya* 2, pp. 113-14 as quoted in Ari Ze'ev Schwartz *The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook: The Writings of a Jewish Mystic* (Gefen, 2018) pp. 178-179.

⁵⁹ His teachings are recorded in Tao Te Ching (*The Book of the Way*).

Great Stoic Philosophers' Interaction with Jews

What was the actual interaction between Jewish and Stoic sages? As noted, early Stoics had no known contact. Later Stoic Musinius Rufus makes no mention of Jews. Epictetus, however, was familiar with Judaism. Many of his adages, similes, and views have much in common with Jewish thought. Epictetus⁶⁰ came from Hierapolis, Phrygia (present-day Pamukkale, Turkey) and later lived in Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, areas in which there were sizeable Jewish populations.

Epictetus references Jews several times in *Discourses*: they have a specific diet,⁶¹ one must immerse⁶² to convert to Judaism. Epictetus comments in *Discourses* concerning an all-seeing G-d.⁶³ In another passage he refers to and criticizes G-d-fearers or “sympathizers.”⁶⁴

Seneca expressed anti-Jewish sentiment amidst grudging admiration. Seneca gives grudging praise to the Jews: “For,” he says, “those [the Jews], however, know the cause of their rites, whilst the greater part of the [Roman] people know not why they perform theirs.” Seneca also found fault with Jewish practices. “Seneca, among the other superstitions of civil theology, also found fault with the sacred things of the Jews, and especially the Sabbaths, affirming that they act uselessly in keeping those seventh days, whereby they lose through idleness about the seventh part of their life, and also many things which demand immediate attention are damaged.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Epictetus was born an enslaved person but was allowed to study philosophy. He gained his freedom sometime after 68 CE, started teaching philosophy and was banished from Rome by Emperor Domitian and relocated to Greece, where he opened a school.

⁶¹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.11.12-13, 1.22.4.

⁶² Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.9.19-21.

⁶³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 1:13(3).

⁶⁴ G-d-fearers or sympathizers were non-Jews who adopted certain Jewish beliefs and practices—most notably, monotheism—and many came to the aid of Jews when they were in dire circumstances. Some adopted the Sabbath, joined and/or donated to synagogues. Epictetus is criticizing G-d-fearers/sympathizers because he views this as a “halfway” position and considers it to be illogical. see Epictetus, *Discourses* 2:9.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, Chapter 11 of Book VI which bears the title: “What Seneca Thought Concerning the Jews.” Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.*, Vol. II, *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, LL.D. (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887). 5/12/2019, <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2053>>.

He thus gives expression to his displeasure. “The Romans,” says he regretfully, “have adopted the Sabbath.” And, further speaking of the Jews, he says in conclusion: “When he was speaking concerning those Jews, he said, ‘When, meanwhile, the customs of that most accursed nation have gained such strength that they have been now received in all lands, the conquered have given laws to the conquerors.’”⁶⁶

Seneca is incredulous that the Jews conquered by Pompey in 63 BCE and whose land was occupied and controlled by Romans by that time for over 130 years were attracting converts and G-d-fearers, or sympathizers. Seneca served in the court of the Emperor Nero whose wife Poppaea Sabina (30 – 65) was a G-d-fearer.⁶⁷ According to the Talmud, Nero eventually fled Rome and converted to Judaism.⁶⁸ The Jews attracted converts and G-d-fearers and that may have been a point of contention with the Stoics who may have considered them to be rivals. This comes out in Epictetus’s negative comments about G-d-fearers, Seneca’s criticism and resentful comments of Jews, and in the anti-Semitic canards and polemics of Alexandrian Stoics Apollonius Molo and Posidonius.⁶⁹

Marcus Aurelius makes no mention of Jews or Judaism in Meditations. Some have maintained that Antoninus,⁷⁰ the Roman emperor friend of Rebbe,⁷¹ was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus⁷². Although identifying the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Poppaea, Nero’s wife, who was a worshipper of God,” Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.195.

⁶⁸ BT *Gittin* 58a.

⁶⁹ Josephus, *Against Apian*, Book II, Chapters 6-7 and as detailed in Chapter 2 of Bernard Lazare’s *Antisemitism: Its History and Causes*, 1894. “The Stoics charged the Jews with irreligiousness, judging by the sayings of Posidonius and Apollonius Molo; they had a very scant knowledge of the Jewish religion. The Jews, they said, refuse to worship the gods; they do not consent to bow even before the divinity of the emperor. They have in their sanctuary the head of an ass and render homage to it; they are cannibals; ‘The Jews,’ says Apollonius Molo, ‘are enemies of all mankind; they have invented nothing useful, and they are brutal.’ To this Posidonius adds: ‘They are the worst of all men.’”

⁷⁰ BT *Avoda Zarab* 10b, BT *Sanhedrin* 91a.

⁷¹ Rebbe Yehuda Ha-Nasi, known as Rebbe or Rabeinu Hakodesh, lived approximately between 135 and 217 CE.

⁷² If we assume that he is Antoninus, it would explain some of the common aphorisms between *Mediations* and *Mishnah Avot* edited by Rebbe.

reflective and justice seeking Stoic philosopher with the wise Antoninus⁷³ rings true, this cannot be confirmed, and Marcus makes no mention of Jews or Judaism in his writings. An anti-Jewish remark attributed to Marcus Aurelius⁷⁴ lacks credibility as it was first mentioned 200 years after the supposed event and is referenced in no other source. There is no anti-Jewish sentiment recorded in Meditations.

Is the Practice of Stoicism Consonant with Jewish Observance?

Is the practice of Stoicism consonant with Jewish observance? A more fundamental question is do negative Talmudic references concerning *Hokhmat Yevanit*⁷⁵ detailed in BT *Sotah* 49b, BT *Menahot* 64b, and BT *Bava Kamma* 82b/83a proscribe even studying it? Several of the Rishonim explain that the prohibition against the study of *Hokhmat Yevanit* does not include all forms of wisdom studied by the ancient *Yevanim*, for this would include almost all types of knowledge. According to Rabeinu Shlomo ben Avraham ibn Aderet, 1235–1310 (Rashba), and Rabeinu Yitzhak ben Sheshet Perfet, 1326–1408 (Rivash), the *Hokhmat Yevanit* that is prohibited refers to the special way of expressing ideas through hints or in a language that not all people can understand or use.⁷⁶ This is consistent with the view of Rabeinu Shlomo Yitzkhaki 1040–1105 (Rashi)⁷⁷ and

⁷³ In addition to Marcus, there are several other Roman emperors that have been suggested as being Antoninus, including Antonius Pious (86 CE–161 CE), Septimius Severus (145 CE–211 CE), and Caracalla (188 CE–217 CE).

⁷⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus (330 CE – 391 CE) makes reference to a supposed quote from Marcus Aurelius in 175 CE while he was traveling through Eretz Yisrael on his way to Egypt in order to put down a rebellion by Avidius Cassius. Ammianus states that Marcus Aurelius was “disgusted with the smelly and rebellious Jews” (Iudaeorum fetentium et tumultuantium), Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XXII.5,” and that he reflected that the barbarian peoples were less disruptive than the Jews. There is no proof that Marcus ever said this and Ammianus is making this remark at least 200 years after the supposed reference was made.

⁷⁵ The term “*Hokhmat Yevanit*” is not translated since there are several interpretations as to its meaning.

⁷⁶ Responsa of the Rashba, Responsa of the Rivash number 45.

⁷⁷ BT *Menahot* 64b, Rashi s.v. *Hokhmat Yevanit* refers to it as *remizot*.

Rambam⁷⁸ who define it as a kind of oblique language. Rambam maintains that it no longer exists.⁷⁹

In another Talmudic reference,⁸⁰ a question is asked of Rav Yishmael by his nephew Ben Dama, whether he, who has learned the entire Torah, can now study *Hokhmat Yevanit*. Rabbi Yishmael responded by citing the verse from the first chapter of the Book of Joshua: “The Sefer Torah should not depart from your mouth and you should study it day and night.”⁸¹ Go and find an hour that is neither day nor night and learn *Hokhmat Yevanit* in it.” This would imply that the problem is *bitul Torah* and not anything problematic with *Hokhmat Yevanit*. Likewise, Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein (1933-2015) cites⁸² the Maharal of Prague – Rabbi Yehuda Loew (1512-1609): “The *hokhmat Yevanit* in question is not genuine wisdom but an amalgam of various disciplines which are bereft of spiritual import, lacking any relation whatsoever to Torah. But the *hokhmat* whose purpose is the perception of reality and the structure of the world, it is certainly permissible to study.”⁸³

Rav Kook emphasized that “*Haʿazal* did not place a clear ban on the study of ancient *Hokhmat Yevanit*. They sufficed in giving general guidance: Find an hour that is neither day nor night, and study *Hokhmat Yevanit* at that time. However, regarding the education of youth, *Haʿazal* were very afraid that the outward beauty and appeal of *Hokhmat Yevanit* would entice the next generation away from their fathers’ faith.”⁸⁴

Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Ha-levi Herzog (1888–1959) assumed that these decrees against learning *Hokhmat Yevanit* were never accepted by the Jewish community and accordingly were null and void.⁸⁵ Rambam called Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE) the greatest of philosophers and was certainly

⁷⁸ *Pirush Ha-Mishnah L-ha-Rambam, Sotah*, 9:14

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ BT *Menahot* 99b.

⁸¹ Joshua 1:8.

⁸² J. Schacter, A. Lichtenstein, *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures* (Magid, 2017), p. 346.

⁸³ The Maharal of Prague, “Netivoh Olam” *Netiv Ha-Torah*, Chapter 14.

⁸⁴ Based on Rav Kook, edited by Rav Moshe Tzvi Nerya “*Mo’adei Ha-Re’iyah*” (Moriah 1982) pp. 182-184 and Rav Chanan Morrison, *Sapphire from the Land of Israel*, pp. 34-35.

⁸⁵ I. Herzog, *Pesakim u-Ketavim 2* (Jerusalem 1989). As quoted in footnote 32 of J. Schacter, G. Blidstein, *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures* (Magid, 2017).

very familiar with his philosophical views.⁸⁶ Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) noted that “for the blend of Greek and Jewish thought has oftentimes been truly magnificent.”⁸⁷

Certainly, parts of ancient Stoic philosophy such as a benign view of suicide and any non-monotheistic and non-theist view of the Creator are discordant with orthodox Judaism. However, certain parts of Stoicism may be useful as a way of dealing with life’s perturbations. Stoic teachings were used in the development of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Logotherapy, and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).

Conclusion

Stoicism is one of the most esteemed schools of Hellenistic philosophy and its practical manifestation as taught by later Stoic sages such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius is having a renaissance. As noted by Josephus and implied by Philo, there are many commonalities in the philosophical and ethical outlook of Stoicism and Judaism. There are many beliefs, attitudes, adages, aphorisms, and maxims that are common to both Judaism and Stoicism. Many ethical attitudes including treating others with respect, sexual restraint, etiquette, and manners are comparable. At the same time, the Torah is an all-encompassing lifestyle that includes *mitzvah* observance and there are many fundamental differences including the belief in the nature of G-d and the attitude toward suicide.

There was some interaction between certain later Stoic philosophers and Jews but no known contact with the Tannaim as evidenced by no mention of Stoics or Stoicism in the Mishnah, Talmudim and Midrashim. The commonalities are likely the result of the fact that G-D spread wisdom amongst all the nations of the world, as detailed by Rav Kook, as well as certain interactions between Stoics and Jews. It is highly unlikely that the Rabbis took their views from Stoics considering that many of the Jewish adages precede the advent of Stoicism and the lack of any mention of Stoics or Stoic philosophy in the Talmudim and Midrashim.

It would appear that the adoption of certain Stoic attitudes and interpersonal skills would not be inconsistent with an observant Jewish lifestyle as long as it does not contradict the Torah. ❧

⁸⁶ Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book 1, Chapter 5.

⁸⁷ Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind* (Seth Press, 1986) p. 102.