

A young man is about to go into business with a friend. His father want to teach him some practical ethics. He explains, "Suppose a woman comes in and places a large order. She pays you with a \$100 bill. But as she is leaving, you realize she has given you two \$100 bills stuck together. Now tell me my son, what is the ethical dilemma here?"

His son immediately picks up on the ethical dilemma, and says, "I call the customer back and tell her that she gave me too much money and return the second \$100 bill!"

"No," the father says, "You misunderstand. The ethical dilemma is this: should you or should you not tell your partner?"

Every day, we encounter situations which invite us to to make decisions. We weigh many factors - personal desires, the needs of our family, what is best for the community, what our religious tradition teaches, the requirements of the legal system. This decision making process, the weighing of these various factors, are the elements of a system of ethics.

As we approach another national election, we will be asked to make choices based on the things that are important to us, and those choices should draw upon our most basic values. Because a political race is a win or lose scenario for the candidate, there is a tendency to present the issues in black and white, to say, "My candidate's position is right and any opposing position is by definition wrong." 21<sup>st</sup> century America is far too quick to make the claim that our answer is the ethical answer and the position of the other side is immoral. I'm not saying that this is never the case, but I suggest that it is rarely the case. You may believe that the other side's position is wrong, but rarely is it evil, and the people on the other side are rarely stupid.

One of the weaknesses of American life is our inability or unwillingness to regard the words, stories, and positions of the opposition as having value. As the Presidential campaign moves into what seems like its fourth year, we never read stories of friendly crowds of democrats and republicans gathering together to listen to a candidate's speech and talk about it. Instead, we read about Democrats heckling a republican candidate and Republicans disrupting a Democratic candidate. We increasingly listen only to those with whom we agree. When a pro-life candidate states his opposition to abortion, the pro-choice people condemn him as a woman-hater, rather than respecting the sincerely held religious or secular bases of his belief. When an anti-gay marriage candidate states her support for a law banning same-sex partner benefits, the pro-family organizations call her a homophobe rather than respecting her right to read Leviticus as it has traditionally been read.

Part of the problem is that we have fallen into the trap of believing that ethics are absolute and therefore only one position can be right. If, however, ethics are not absolute, then it is possible that both answers have value. In that case, we would have far more incentive to listen to the other side and possibly learn something.

I am going to argue for ethical pluralism, not ethical relativism. Ethical relativism is the position that there are no absolute moral rights or wrongs, because all ethics are based on social norms. It is the position that claims that I have no standing as an outsider to criticize the ethics of the government of China for forcing an abortion on a woman pregnant with her second child, or female genital mutilation in West Africa, amputating a hand as a punishment for theft in Pakistan, or the action of Hitler's Germany.

Ethical pluralism, as Rabbi Elliot Dorff describes it, is the position that claims that we may form an ethical system and take positions on specific issues and claim that those positions are the best positions as far as we know, but that we can never claim to have absolute knowledge of God's positions.

This allows me to denounce forced abortions, genital mutilation, and the barbaric act of amputation of limbs for stealing because they contradict my ethical system. It also forces me to accept that an abortion that I consider ethical can be called murder by Catholics.

My ethical pluralism has limits. At the heart of an ethical system must be the idea that we are all created in equality. An ethical society grant rights and obligations to the individual, and prizes the freedom to make choices as one of those rights. Thus, a repressive Nazi system which holds that some races or classes are fully human and others sub-human, or a Chinese system which does not recognize inherent human rights, cannot be an ethical system.

That's not to say that imperfect systems cannot become better. The American system was founded on the principle that "All Men are Created Equal" and counted men with black skin as only 3/5 of a man. Fortunately, the foundational document laid the groundwork for an ethical system in which all men and eventually women would be granted equal protection and rights under the law.

The Hebrew Bible's story emphasized social responsibility, but drew sharp lines between obligations of love and support to fellow Jews, and suspicion and standoffishness towards outsiders. The Bible also permitted behavior such as slavery that we find unacceptable today.

We need to keep in mind that our sacred stories and texts were written or revealed to a specific generation of people with certain religious expectations and needs. The Bible needed to mold a distinct Israelite identity if the religion were to succeed, and that meant excluding outsiders. The Bible could soften slavery, but eliminating it entirely would have alienated the generation of people who first told its stories. Over time, though, through reinterpretation and additional stories - Talmud and Midrash - our system did succeed in eliminating slavery and most of the fear of outsiders. An ethical system is not a static system. A pluralistic ethical system acknowledges that the system can grow to accommodate new questions not envisioned by the foundational stories. Pirkei Avot praises a system in which people disagree agreeably. When we disagree *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, we generate positive energy and growth.

Ethical pluralism demands humility and openness to alternative positions. Too often, appeals to religious ethics are made not out of a desire to learn, but out of a desire to support the position we have already chosen. I was contacted to be the Jewish speaker regarding President Obama's changes in an employer's obligation to provide birth control benefits. Before accepting, I replied that I hadn't studied the issue yet from a Jewish point of view, and asked whether I would be welcome to speak regardless of the position that I took. The response was that it was a rally against Obama, and unless I would speak for the religious freedom to deny birth control coverage, they did not want me to speak. I declined the invitation, noting that the organizers were not looking for an honest Jewish point of view, they were looking for a Jew to say what they wanted to hear. I don't in fact think that there is a single clear Jewish point of view on this question. If we are to live honest lives in accord with Torah, we have to see the possibility that in many cases, Torah is a large tent.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky teaches:

Now God said to Abram, Lekh Lekha, Go forth from your country, from your birthplace, from your father's house, and go to the place that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)... Lekh lekha ... [is] an emphatic GO! Get out of here. Stretch yourself beyond the limits of what is familiar. That is ... what is required in developing a "big tent" Jewish community. We are taught that Abraham's tent was open on all four sides so that he and Sarah could welcome in strangers coming from any direction. They pursued the reward of a "great nation" by welcoming in people. We can do the same.

I want Ahavas Israel to exist within the largest tent possible and to be a great synagogue. This means that we ought to welcome and celebrate the involvement of people who are very traditional in theology and practice alongside people who are more liberal in theology and practice. The point of connection between all those who choose to align themselves with us is that for the purpose of forming community, we accept the notion that our primary guide to Jewish practice is Torah.

A Jewish community has a certain standard of practice when it comes together. In our case, kashrut and Shabbat are required in the building because we believe them to be a mitzvah, but we certainly do not require that people keep those same standards in their private lives in order to qualify for membership.

Similarly, we accept diversity of values - as a congregation, we take selected positions on issues, but we do not require that members vote in specific ways or take the same positions in their private lives.

Congregation Ahavas Israel stands for an approach to the paths of Torah that also stands for the big tent values of inclusion, openness, and welcoming. We want to be a place where people come to learn with people who take alternative positions on "applied Torah."

Our goal ought to remain the goal of creating a sacred community in which we meet one another, celebrate Jewish life, take part in Jewish celebrations of life cycle events, and comfort each other when we need support. May all of our disagreements be for the sake of heaven; may we be united in our faith that the pathways of Torah are pleasant and peaceful, and may we create multiple pathways, religious, educational, and social, for people in this community to connect with each other.