

Rabbi Jesse Gallop

Yom Kippur-Morality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

I remember back when I was an undergraduate in Denver, an acquaintance of mine, whom we usually disagreed on social issues, where having a debate about “right and wrong.” In the conversation he asked, “Is murder wrong?” I argued that culture defines the answer differentiating murder from homicide or manslaughter. I reasoned that I could not answer “yes” because there were too many assumptions related to the understanding of what murder is, which could be used as a logical fallacy in regards to political issues in our society.

I was being asked this question because my acquaintance was a devout Catholic who wanted to argue, that if murder is universally wrong then abortion would be considered murder. This is because in his view, which he believed was absolute truth, inducing a preterm fetus was considered taking a life. Thus he summarized that abortion was an act of murder.

This situation exemplifies why it matters if morality is viewed as a universal ethic, or if values are seen as being relative and particular to each individual culture. If I argued ethical relativism, it would mean that the term “murder” was a cultural construct. This is because murder is beyond an action, it includes intention. And if one has intentions to kill, then it is no longer a situation where death occurs.

Now it becomes an act of murder. Therefore, the cultural understandings have large and lasting impact. For example in America, we consider self-defense to be a homicide based on our jurisprudence of law. In addition, as a society, we have decided that both abortion and the death penalty are not considered murder, but other nations may have different cultural understandings. This is challenging to one who has a universalist mindset because cultural relativism does not support the concept of universal truth, which contradicts teachings in some religious traditions.

For religious universalists, if there is universal right and wrong then God can command all people to do what is correct in the world. With this world-view is the assumption that all human beings are born with knowledge bestowing morality within each of us. Furthermore, Abrahamic faiths teach that God symbolically plants the eternal spirit within each human heart. According to Genesis, God breathed into the nostril of the first man, Adam; thus turned clay of the earth into a life. Because of this narrative, we commonly say that all humans have a spark of the Divine within them.

As a result of this moral compass, the Bible teaches that each human has basic ethical responsibilities. In the words of the Prophet Micah, “[God] has told you, O [humanity], what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Therefore, according to this way of thinking, deep inside we all know right from wrong.

Over time, Jewish tradition clarifies universalism through a more sophisticated approach. The Babylonian sage, Saadia Gaon explains the prohibition against bloodshed in universal terms:

Wisdom lays down that bloodshed must be prevented among human beings, for if it were allowed people would annihilate one another. That would mean, apart from the pain suffered, a frustration of the purpose in which God intended to achieve through them. Homicide cuts them off from the attainment of any purpose God created and employs of them.

Therefore, sages of the post-Talmudic period reason that all human beings are able to recognize that certain types of behavior are morally wrong. This example of rabbinic teaching explains that beyond the obvious reason of death, God is against bloodshed because in this act, humanity cuts short God’s purpose in the world when a human life is taken.

On the other hand, ethical relativism is the theory that holds morality is subject to the norms of one's culture. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral standards of the culture in which it is practiced. The same action may be principled in one society but may be morally wrong in another. For the ethical relativists, there are no universal moral standards - standards that can be universally applied to all peoples at all times. The only moral standards against which a society's practices can be judged are its own. Therefore, one cannot take American values and compare them to the ethics of a third world country. Nor is it accurate to use our world view today and judge it in relations to pre-civil war American south.

Jewish tradition takes into account ethical relativism as well. There is a moral system that is binding for Jews alone by virtue of our special contract with God. Therefore, we are commanded specifically as Jews to live by the 613 commandments of Torah. According to tradition, all Jewish people have a double relationship with God: first as a human being, and second as a member of the covenant between Israel and Adonai. In this brit we have accepted specific responsibilities like observing Shabbat and keeping kosher.

Within our religious observances are responsibilities of action on both a personal and communal level. We each have divinity within us and we share it with one another, as *B’nei Yisrael*, our peoplehood. The covenant requires us to act with high moral standards in our daily lives. This means that all people are to be ethical, and honest. And within Judaism we have a

higher ethical standard, like helping the livestock of our neighbor who has wronged us. By entering the covenant and living active Jewish lives, we are internalizing these sacred responsibilities of serving God, the Jewish people, and the greater community. And therefore strengthen our lives and the world around us.

As a world view, I think that while the moral practices of societies may differ, overall the fundamental ethical principles underlying these practices do not. Deep inside we know that life is the most fulfilling and spiritual when we act with integrity and are honest and upright in our character. This is how millennia of Jewish scholarship summarize humanity's moral responsibility. Societies, then, may differ in regards to their application of fundamental moral principles, but agree on the principles itself.

Therefore, we all might define murder a little differently, but we all consider the concept wrong and immoral! This multifaceted approach to ethics and morality can help us to better understand the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where social norms are consistently adapting and changing. This complex and intricate understanding of morality can provide insight on a societal level regarding contemporary issues. Both on a macro level such as medical ethics, as well as government and business practices. And on a more micro-personal level relating to topics like sexual ethics and family life. My teacher, Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmor, Provost of Hebrew Union College, summarizes the understanding of morality from the perspective of the individual who is of faith while also balancing these religious teachings with science and modern ethics. He states, "We seek a religious moral imperative, but want to remain open to the demands of each new situation." The sacred experiences in life and tradition both influence how we act. Jewish tradition has grappled with being ethical. Yiddish speaking Jews commonly use the term "*mensch!*" Meaning we are supposed to be good and decent human beings.

As Pirkei Avot teaches, "In a place where there are no humans, strive to be one!" Our tradition explains that in a community or situation where true humanity is not apparent, it is incumbent upon us to act with integrity and morals. Jewish law has made a social construct based upon the idea of limits and responsibilities in hopes of helping each Jew live a good life. These structures, rules, and Jewish teachings are meant to remind us that our actions impact society. And the goal is to make a world that is fair and just; which gives us safety allowing us to trust and thus grow spiritually.

When we act with honor by respecting our ethics and morals, we not only make space for community but we also remind ourselves to focus on what makes life sacred, and not merely a lifetime pursuit of ephemeral happiness. As Jews, we have learned these sacred eternal sources of truth including acting with integrity, making the world a better place, treating all

lives with respect, and seeking holiness in our daily encounters. And that is why we are here today, on Yom Kippur. We want to be proud of our actions and decisions in life.

When our values and ethics are used as a blue print to guide our individual morality, they make limitations and boundaries in our lives fighting off hurtful and negative inclinations of greed, manipulation, and power. Helping each human being to live a life that is fulfilling and purpose driven. This makes our limits internal contracts. So, as modern Jews, we do not necessarily feel bound by divine law just because it is in the Torah. Rather we also ask ourselves, “Why is the rule written?” And “can these teachings have meaning today, impacting our lives with deeper levels of divinity or sacredness?” And therefore we choose to follow the laws that we think will bring purpose to our lives.

We strive to be good people. And within our synagogue community we work together within a spectrum of viewpoints and beliefs. Therefore, we have the freedom to disagree on politics and cultural understandings while remaining ethical and just. And this is counter-cultural in our media obsessed world, with scrolling headlines 24/7. It is a misnomer to demonize those who have different political stances as being unethical. However, it is fair to ask how those attitudes and stances impact individual lives.

Instead of getting caught up in talking points that are falsely viewed as the moral path for our country. We know that our key responsibility is to ask ourselves the tough questions, looking deep beyond the answers, reflecting on the goal of strengthening our relationship with God through our covenant as both an individual and together as a community. Which helps us to think deeply and gives us room to adapt and change our views over time. Helping our society evolve to meet the needs of each generation.

We recognize that the world is culturally adapting, and social norms of different generations can conflict with one another. And when we strive for spiritual fulfillment, we understand that instead of judging others, a better way to exemplify ethics and morals is through our actions. Where we spend our energy helping to lead and nurture rather than argue and put down those with which we disagree. And thus the prophetic-vision, which is core to Judaism and our lives, will remain vital and true. Where we can be a beacon of hope, serving God and community with love and patience.

On Yom Kippur we are to look inside ourselves to see where we have succeeded and where we have failed. We do not need to worry about the judgement of others or their perception of what is moral. Our sacred purpose is to find peace within ourselves, striving to nurture the

divinity that brings awe and holiness in our lives. Therefore inspiring our energies to live as role models, reaching out to others helping them bring forth their best selves.

Through this way of sacred living, we fulfill the word of Isaiah, where each of us is able to be a light unto the nations. With the goal of not judging or changing others, but rather to inspire them to be their best selves, and thus re-inspire us to continue our sacred work of holding ourselves to the highest ethical standards. We strive to be *mensches* and help make a decent world. On Yom Kippur we are reminded that we atone because we believe in the possibility of good in our lives and we want to bring forth the best that is within us. And that begins with being moral and decent human beings.

*Ken y'hi ratzon*, may this be God's will!