

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Six

Beyond Fair Haven

*Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?
(Genesis: Chapter 25, Verse 25)*

With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter's definition of the situation, into performing harsh acts. ...A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority. (Stanley Milgram as quoted at StanleyMilgram.com)

The patriarch Abraham, is motivated by his physiological needs and by his desire for security for himself and for those closest to him. Abraham is also motivated, by a powerful need to act not for himself only, but for others, as well. This focus, beyond his own immediate concerns, is expressed in many ways, but most famously in the following episode.

As God is contemplating the destruction of Sodom, Abraham tries to stop Him. As Abraham and God hash it out, Abraham raises a profound question. "Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?" This question reflects Abraham's passion and concern for even the most treacherous people on earth. Abraham is willing to put himself in jeopardy-by possibly angering God with his *chutzpa*--in order to try to stop God from destroying the people of Sodom.

Abraham's question hints at a new way of thinking about behavior, and not just God's behavior, but more to the point--our own behavior. To make sense of his question, it must necessarily be the case that Abraham has come to the hard-won realization that truly ethical behavior must conform to broad and potentially universal principles that apply to everyone in exactly the same way. Treat everyone justly. Easy to say, but nearly impossible to apply.

Abraham's ethics are lofty indeed. To truly live the kind of life that Abraham aspires to, one's moral concern must be ever expanding. It must go beyond self, family, and community to include "outsiders," as well. Many people have correctly compared ethics to an ever widening

circle. The hope is that today's outsiders will become tomorrow's insiders. Remember Shimon ben Shetach's decision to return the pearl to the heathen.

If you think back to the previous chapter, we begin to see the very beginning of this kind of growth. Reuven and Shimon are concerned about themselves only, but Levi's decision to go to the rabbi shows that he is pulled beyond himself by a feeling of sympathy for his friends welfare and a feeling of responsibility to the community of Fair Haven.

Judith and Her Mixed Motives

In this chapter, I introduce Judith, a college student who like Levi has grown up in Fair Haven and is motivated by her desire to become an important contributing member of this community, but is now just beginning to realize that maybe this isn't quite enough for her.

With the help of her family, Judith got a great part time job working for US Zionists, a pro-Israel organization dedicated to promoting the universal recognition of Israel's right to exist and to defend herself. The organization, like other Israel-friendly groups, lobbies the US government and provides and disseminates accurate information about the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Judith is quite mature, hard-working, and highly articulate. This was recognized quickly by her superiors, and Judith, although still in college, was given the important jobs of searching the media (magazines, newspapers, and television) for anti-Israel biases and doing research to assist others in writing pro-Israel articles.

Judith loved her work and knew she was gaining invaluable experience. Judith decided that after graduation she wanted to work in some capacity as a Jewish communal leader. Her father was the director of Fair Haven's Jewish Federation, and Judith always admired his idealism and his desire to serve the Jewish community.

After a few months of working at US Zionists, Judith began to learn more about the organization. Judith says:

Unlike many Jewish organizations, this specific organization was [and is] the most virulent in its opposition to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. The organization has become famous for being one of the few to speak out against the Oslo Accords in 1993, and for constantly pointing out the Palestinian Authority's numerous violations of Oslo, especially when the "world community," including many Jewish organizations, ignored such seemingly minor breaches in hope that Palestinian leadership would sign a final status peace agreement with Israel and would end the conflict.

Judith does not support the Peace Now movement nor does she consider herself "left wing" in terms of her politics. For the most part, she agrees with the "organization's historical and legal portrayal of the conflict" and she recognizes "that the Arab states have perpetuated this brutal 'cycle of violence' through aggression, rejectionism, and propaganda."

Nevertheless, Judith did not agree with the US Zionists extreme policy of not negotiating with the Palestinians. She believed that a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict was the only realistic compromise. Judith points out that the US Zionists position is actually less flexible than Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's position.

Like much of the world community, I support the creation of a Palestinian state in much the West Banks and all of Gaza. For the most part, I support[ed] the Clinton Peace Plan, which was presented in December 2000 and rejected by Chairman Arafat and his negotiators.

The US Zionists organization believes that any compromises like those contemplated in previous Arab-Israeli peace plans would be suicide for Israel. Its current executive director is opposed, under any and all circumstances, to a Palestinian state on the West Bank. Such a state, he believes, will encourage more terrorism and will gravely imperil the State of Israel, putting its very existence at risk

Judith's personal belief, however, is that a Palestinian state "is a *fait accompli* and the only solution to this ostensibly endless conflict." She believes that justice ultimately demands a fair and equitable solution to the seemingly unending war between Moslems and Jews, and that Israel has a responsibility to actively seek out some kind of compromise.

As Judith's work responsibilities expanded, the clash between the organization's clear goal of no-negotiation and her own beliefs that a Palestinian state is inevitable became more acute.

Judith began to examine her own moral principles and stands. Where did they come from? In part, she believed that they drew from her education and upbringing. How many times had she studied the stories of Abraham? In part, they were nourished by her love of Israel. And, finally, she recognized that they were also an echo of her father's moderate political inclinations.

Since Judith was doing such a good job writing up her research findings (she obviously had a way with words), her supervisors decided to let her write some political material, as well. This was a promotion for Judith and revealed just how much everyone at work trusted her. She wasn't just doing routine research work anymore, she was fast becoming part of the team.

In describing her dilemma, Judith demonstrates a degree of honesty and self-awareness that is truly remarkable for a college student. She is an astute observer of her own behavior and motives:

When it came to political writing, numerous issues came up. First, I would be required to espouse an opinion that I did not agree with. Moreover, not only did I reject their political leanings, I felt their opinion is contrary to the interests of the very object which they are trying to defend. With that in mind, how could I contribute in hurting the State of Israel, when my very reason for working at a pro-Israel organization was to strengthen her standing in the Western world and to help find a solution to the conflict?

Yes, I understood the effects of my decision would hardly constitute an earth-shattering effect influencing millions. But since the primary aspect of this organization is disseminating information to its readers and others, if I were to participate in helping the organization publish articles propagating a position I greatly eschew, I would be directly responsible if public support for a Palestinian state declines. So this issue was pretty pertinent.

This is heavy stuff! The way I see it, Judith is being pulled in two directions at the same time. She doesn't ever quite say it explicitly, but she is driven by mixed motives. On the one hand, it must be incredibly satisfying to Judith to be recognized as an integral and useful part of her new organization. For most of her life, she has watched her father dutifully carry out his important work as a Jewish communal leader in Fair Haven. Now, for the first time, she is being recognized and rewarded for her own contributions to her own work community. If she does a good job on the public relations work, perhaps she'll be asked to stay on full time after graduation? This might be the fastest path for Judith to realize her career aspirations. On the other hand, Judith senses an obligation beyond her responsibilities to work. She feels an obligation to the State of Israel, and she wants to be true to her own emerging principles and beliefs. This sense of justice is in many ways less tangible than her desire to contribute and "belong" to US Zionists, but this doesn't make it any less real.

You can see that Judith's dilemma is very different than Reuven, Shimon, and even Levi's. She's not motivated by money, nor is she motivated by a desire for security. To over simplify, she is torn between a desire for community and a desire to live a life in accordance with a more abstract principle—universal justice.

Judith's Choice

Suppose you're one of Judith's friends and she calls you for advice on what to do. What would you tell her? In many ways, this is a classic right versus right choice. So you might tell her:

First Friend:

Listen, Judy, I think you've got an incredible opportunity here. US Zionists is an internationally-known organization. It is a powerful and highly influential group and they've recognized you as an important contributor.

Don't you think you're being a little arrogant in claiming that there is an ethical problem with their views? Maybe the problem is not with them, Judy, but with you. No one can dispute how much they care about Israel, and they've been studying the situation a lot longer than you have. It's not going to be your name on the published documents anyway. In the end, it's their responsibility and not yours.

In any event, Judy, don't blow it. Seize the moment. An opportunity like this doesn't come along all that often. The important thing for you, at this stage in your life, is to get real world experience. If you really want to have an effect, you have to be in the game.

An opportunity of a lifetime is being offered to you on a silver platter. Go for it.

Or, alternatively, you could say:

Second Friend:

Judy, remember what happened to Aaron back in Chapter 1. He panicked and broke Shabbat in order to pacify his boss's wife. Through his unthinking actions he said that rice cakes were more important than Shabbat. Don't make the same mistake that Aaron made!

You said that you think the US Zionist's position harms Israel rather than helps it. You claimed that justice demands a fair solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and that Israel has a responsibility to actively search for some kind of resolution. These are nice sentiments. But, did you really mean them or were you just talking?

Well, put your money where your mouth is. You can't possibly write something up and not really believe it. There's a word for this. It's called being a hypocrite.

Judy, this is the beginning of your career. If you're setting aside your principles now just to keep a part time job, what's going to happen down the road when the stakes are even higher?

So, which is it? Judith's dilemma here, as in all right versus right choices, is that both friends seem to be correct. The optimistic way of looking at this situation is that no matter what she does, she'll be okay. Of course, the flip side of this is that no matter what she does, she'll be wrong, too.

Judith's Solution

Judith is between a rock and a hard place. What did she decide to do? Let's let her speak for herself:

I realized the importance of working to support Israel, even within an organization whose most important creed I eschewed. Israeli Public Relations border on horrid, and it seems the only convincing, workable PR for the Jewish state comes from American Jewish organizations. And I did not disagree with everything the organization espoused.

After thinking about it, it was not a question of good versus bad, but rather a question of good versus less good.

The concept of Palestinian autonomy [the solution favored by US Zionists] is modeled after numerous examples in world history and is hardly an evil alternative. Had the organization proffered a solution of "transfer," it would have been a choice of good versus bad. In that case I would be required to shine a glaring spotlight on the bad and

reject it. But since the solution of autonomy is not bad, just not as good, perhaps I could ignore it while working to exemplify the good.

In the end, Judith's decision was to:

work with the organization to further our agreed goals on the one hand, but on the other hand, to try and change what I felt objectionable. This way I could achieve the best of both worlds. I could promote Israeli interests and (hopefully) convince a major Jewish organization to support what needs to be done. Hopefully this was the right thing to do. This chapter of the story has not yet been completed, but hopefully, it was the correct path.

In all honesty, when Judith first told me about her dilemma and her chosen solution, I was disappointed. In her conclusion, she said that she finally realized that "it was not a question of good versus bad, but rather a question of good versus less good." "So what?" I thought to myself. Adopting an overly moralistic attitude, I fixated on this part of her statement. Even if this is true, why not choose the good option over the less good?

With the passage of time, though, I have come to admire and respect her decision. First of all, if this truly is a right versus right dilemma (as I think it is), one should keep in mind that no matter what--after the fact--there will always be reasons to criticize. This is not the fault of the person making the decision, ultimately this is just what it means to be faced with a decision like this with no easy answers.

Further, I admire Judith's experimental and tentative attitude. She's certainly no fanatic. In her very last sentence, she recognizes that "the story has not yet been completed.." To the extent that Judith continues to monitor her own behavior and feelings as she has done up until this point, Judith will be fine.

If it turns out that in the future, the organization becomes even more radical and does adopt a position "unequivocally condemned by the world community," there is no doubt in my mind that Judith will terminate her association with the group regardless of the personal cost. For now, though, Judith is a fighter and not a quitter. She says that she is going to try and work to change what she feels is objectionable about the organization, and I believe her.

To some extent, it is true that Judith is now compromising, but that is what always has to happen in a right versus right dilemma. But, exactly, what kind of compromise is Judith really making here? At first, I interpreted her behavior (like the second friend above) as an abandonment of principle.

Now, I see that this is simply not so. From beginning to end, Judith is motivated by her twin desires to become a contributing member of her community and to always treat everyone justly. Her compromise is that she realizes now that, in the real world, the justice principle means that she must continue her work in support of the State of Israel, despite the fact that she will probably have to write things that she personally will not agree with. Even if it means getting her hands dirty, she has to keep her eyes on the prize. She isn't putting justice aside, she's re-

interpreting what it means in light of her own development and increasing understanding of an incredibly complex situation.

Most importantly, I have come to trust Judith's ethical intuition. I am viewing her situation as an outsider looking in. She is looking at it as an insider looking out. She's got the better view! She has a kind of tacit knowledge of the situation that can't be substituted for by theory, no matter how elegant the theory is. Will Judith really be able to achieve the "best of both worlds?" I'm not as sure as she is. But in the end, what matters is that she is being honest with herself. Like Levi from the previous chapter she displays a healthy amount of self-efficacy, she is going in with her eyes open, she is maintaining a dose of skepticism while trying to be optimistic, and she is taking full responsibility as the author of her own actions. I'm not sure you can really ask for much more than this from anyone, regardless of age.

Conclusion

Ethics is an ever widening circle. A global community demands that everyone always acts justly towards each other. But just how to apply this in a world that rarely conforms to our wishes and theories?

Abraham never caved in on his demand that even God must act justly. But, in the end, it is worthwhile to recall that he doesn't really get what he wants. While Lot is saved, Sodom is destroyed. If Abraham is continually trying to understand the precise contours of what justice demands, how much more so do we? Ethics is about the process of decision making, as much as it is about the end result.