

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 1: Introduction

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A few years ago, the news broke that a number of well-known multinational companies had managed to avoid paying a substantial amount of corporation tax in the UK. One caller to a popular radio talk show was livid. Yet when the presenter challenged her, pointing out that what those companies had done was actually entirely legal, she retorted, "It might have been legal, but it was immoral!"

This was a striking point. Companies are generally keen to show that they engage in moral and ethical business, not least because the company's standing as perceived by the consumer is very important for business. Yet it can be difficult to strike a balance between encouraging an ethos of ethical behaviour from within and attempting to legislate from the outside for every possible scenario.

This problem is part of a much broader jurisprudential question. What is the purpose of the law of the land? Is it the responsibility of governments to create a system of laws and judiciary merely in order to protect its citizens from anarchy, or should laws promote ethical and moral behaviour? If promoting ethical behaviour is an important goal of jurisprudence, who decides what ethical behaviour is and what it is not?

In general, human beings have an innate sense of justice and morality that informs how we act; we refer to this a natural morality. However, there are two catches. Firstly, we often have a vested interest in the decisions we make and cannot therefore be considered objective deciders of morality. Secondly, we often disagree on the correct course of action, even in neutral cases.

From a Jewish perspective, the Written and Oral Torah provide us with both an integrated system

of laws and a set of ethical teachings, which promote both moral behaviour and the spiritual sensitivity to do what is right.

Nevertheless, the Torah itself contains many commandments and concepts that may jar against our sense of justice, mercy and natural morality. Is a 'good Jew' really supposed to advocate capital punishment for certain transgressions or consider the destruction of the entire nation of Amalek as a moral good?

As we start this series and embark on our journey through these important and engaging issues, the most important tenet to keep in mind is that there are often no simple answers. Each of these three areas – Torah law, secular law and natural morality – will play an important role in navigating this journey. The series will take us through an analysis of relevant areas of secular law, the Written and Oral Torah, as well as contemporary ethics such as the worlds of business, medicine and emerging technologies.

By doing so I hope we can gain a better understanding of the intersection between these three areas, which will give context to many of the classic and contemporary ethical challenges we face in the 21st century.



Answer: with its horns caught in a bush