

“Living on the Ethical Edge”

May 5, 2006

Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

Over a year ago, the folks at MSNBC asked the three of us – your rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a professor of law – to meet at their headquarters in New Jersey to tape a sample show. The subject? Ethics and morals in today’s world. Our moderator was (and still is) the lovely and intelligent anchorwoman, Chris Jansing.

I began with no clue as to “why me?” or for that matter, just what I should do or say. Clearly, this was not to be an in-depth comparative religion course.

Pacing was brisk. Decisions had to be instantaneous and, when necessary, Jewish teachings and attitudes needed to be stated in both cogent and simplified language. It was soon obvious to me that ethical issues had become so much more complex that a four or five word response did not do justice to the weighty issues with which our world and faith now confront and struggle.

So, Chris, Father Thomas, Dr. Hill, and I had a little conference with our producers. We needed more time to address fewer subjects at a greater depth. And, we needed video segments with which to set the issue in proper perspective, or else our remaining time would never be sufficient for a worthy examination of the ethical issues we meet today.

Generations ago, most people had firmly anchored beliefs and ethical practices. Not that much had changed in business, scientific, and ethical issues over the preceding centuries. When many of us failed to behave ethically, it wasn’t because we were uncertain what the proper ethical course of action really was.

Not so today! We recognize now that there are abundant and compelling competing sources of ethical values. Which one shall we choose to employ?

For instance, in the area of business practices, ultra-sophisticated accounting tools blur the line separating tax avoidance and tax evasion.

Electronic commerce has bequeathed us an unprecedented anonymity in business. Gone are the days of handshakes and eye-to-eye agreements to close a deal.

But, this much is still the case: people – you and I – still want to be ethical. Though we worry about postmodern possibilities of moral indifference, or relativism, few people either espouse or excuse them.

To the contrary, our Ethical Edge show and those who write to the wide array of ethical mailboxes and magazine columns reflect a determined effort to clarify and define the proper and moral action in every area of life within the broad context of religious ethics.

What is it people hunger for today in their ethical search? They are not so much desirous of discovering a papal or rabbinical authoritative “yes” or “no.” In fact, that’s probably what most of us do not seek!

Instead, we're simply engaged in a personal search to uncover those underlying ethical and moral principles that apply to the penetrating questions of our times.

This week's Torah portion is the heart of the heart of the heart of the Torah. The Holiness Code of Leviticus presents us with just the kind of practical questions with which we Jews have pondered and concerned ourselves over 3500 years.

Holiness in our faith is not sainthood. Its commitment requirements are eminently approachable by every one of us who is willing to put the well being of the other person ahead of our own.

Read the Torah, the Talmud, the detailed response down to our own day, and take pride in the irrefutable fact that Judaism does not condemn business or consider it religiously unwholesome to make a fair profit.

The Torah sanctifies and elevates our human activity, regulating how one makes an honest living, even as it regulates our eating, our praying, our resting, and our labor. Jewish business ethics, as with all other areas of moral standards, are reasonable, yet rigorous.

Now, of course, it is impossible to find exact prescriptions in the Torah or Talmud as to how we should behave in each and every moral conundrum science and industry present.

So, we Jews rely on the advice of Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Nachmanides), who once rendered this commentary on the Torah's mitzvah: "And you shall do what is straight and right."

What the Sage is telling us is to use our common sense! Deduce general ethical and moral principles from the specific mandate that may extend beyond the stated law.

We have to draw extensions and extrapolate new understandings from ethical examples we are provided by the past. Clearly, we need to always carefully assess and examine the nature of ethical insights provided within Scripture.

Here is an illustration. Since the Bible allows human slavery, does that mean it is ethical? We must, as Jews, acknowledge that the Torah does not dictate exactly how our society ought to function.

The object of the Torah is not that we Jews should be robots and behave as inflexible servants to the Divine decree.

The Torah provides specific laws that legislate a basic level of behavior, but which necessarily include our consciences and best ethical judgment to be brought to

bear, moving humankind forward toward the Divine will for us all in a more refined and greater state of moral perfection.

In this bleary world where much can be made relative and the border between acceptable and inappropriate can be blurred, we, all the more, need personal standards.

Jewish ethics and codes of morality provide us with well-rooted, reasonable and time-tested guideposts by which to measure and assess all such quandaries we inherit with contemporary life.

Asreminu – How greatly we are blessed!

Mah tov Chelkenu – How goodly our portion.

Oo-mah Na-eem Go'rahleynu – How pleasant our lot.

Oo-mah Yah-fah Y'ru'shatenu – And how truly beautiful our heritage.

Amen