

Increasing Moral Capital Through Moral Imagination: Its Use For Jewish Ethics In a Time of Crisis

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Abstract: There exists an ethical crisis in traditional Jewish communities. One way out of this crisis is for communities to embrace moral imagination. This paper suggests that moral imagination includes each of the following elements: 1. Importing, 2 Responsible Choosing, 3. Inventing, and 4. Interpreting. The paper defines each of these elements and demonstrates how they can be of practical use in solving contemporary problems.



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Traditional Jewish communities are beginning to recognize an increasingly obvious crisis in the area of applied ethics. This is not a sociological paper, so no attempt will be made to document this problem in a systematic way. I will begin simply by citing three extreme examples of ethics failures inside traditional Jewish communities. These are highly emotional issues and raise questions about the very identity of the Jewish community.

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First, the last decade has seen numerous allegations of lapses in business ethics. Many of these stories are well known, and I will not elaborate on them here. Second, the murder of Yitzchak Rabin by a young man who claimed to act out of religious convictions should have provided the impetus for a deep soul searching in religious communities, but it never did. Third, the allegations that a well-known and widely respected former employee of the Orthodox Union's National Conference of Synagogue Youth committed acts of sexual, physical, and verbal abuse against children deserve careful and balanced scrutiny. The charges against this individual and the organization that employed him may represent the most difficult failure of all to fathom. Although morally different, each of these examples reveals unexamined problems inherent in traditional Jewish communities. Taken together, in my view, they suggest a crisis.

This paper is primarily directed to those of us who already recognize these unfortunate situations as cause

for grave concern inside the traditional community. It is an attempt to formulate, if not a solution, then at least, an optimistic case for the future moral integrity of traditional communities. I write this paper from the perspective of an involved and responsible insider looking out. It is an attempt to consider this crisis in an authentic and honest way, in a way that takes both tradition and the contemporary world very seriously. In writing it, I hope as much to ignite a discussion of who we are and where we are going as to persuade you of my conclusions.

The Quest for Ethical Leadership

I begin with a definition of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership means using the moral language that belongs to all of us. Ethical leaders learn this language and apply it uniquely and creatively to solve emerging human problems. This definition of leadership can be put more starkly (if slightly less accurately) as follows: *Ethical leaders use yesterday's language to solve tomorrow's problems.* In doing so, ideally, they both solve the problem and expand our language.

No one—not even the greatest and most innovative leader—can create a complete and private language. In fact, when we consider what language is and what it is for, it dawns on us that a private language is a contradiction in terms. Leaders, like everyone else, always emerge from community and, first of all, absorb its traditions and existing language. All of us begin life's journey by seeing our way through the eyes of the community. Perceptions are filtered through its vocabulary and gram-

mar.

But, as one matures, new and confounding problems inevitably present themselves. They can arise in any number of ways; they can emerge from within or be imposed upon us from without. At first, many of these new problems seem very different from our earlier ones. Often, however, they are not, and the traditional view that there is nothing new under the sun offers reassurance. What looks new on the surface turns out to be an old and familiar problem. One is correctly taught, as a first step, to re-frame the new problem and solve it using the trusted language and techniques of the past. Many seemingly intractable ethical problems can be solved in the same manner as apparently complex mathematical problems. While I can't solve *this* algebraic equation, I can solve *that* algebraic equation, and it turns out that *this* algebraic equation can be cleverly transformed into *that* algebraic equation.

Ethical leaders use yesterday's language to solve tomorrow's problems.

Easy and Hard Cases in Ethics

Ethical problems that can be transformed in this way—and almost all ethical problems have to be tweaked at least a little—make up the *easy* cases, or, at least, the relatively easy cases. A kind of “ethical technology” is useful in solving such cases, where standard rules and procedures play the most important roles. Easy cases fit with the assumptions of the rule book. You figure out what kind of case you're faced with and you apply the appropriate pre-determined rule to resolve the dilemma. Not every ethical problem is easy, however. Sometimes, the honest decision maker must admit to herself that this really is a *new* situation. Conditions change, technologies develop, and values evolve. While a new situation shares some of the characteristics of the old cases, it doesn't share enough of them to permit a ready judgment. There is often no recognizable pattern. Capturing the new problem with the old language seems like putting a square peg in a round hole.

It may even be difficult to talk about or to describe the underlying ethical issue because our language lacks an appropriate and rich enough vocabulary. Existing language is not always adequate to function as the kind of tool we need. Just as a community that had never encountered an exotic bird before would have no name for it, a traditional community that had never before faced the problems of citizenship in a legitimate democracy would have no words to express those problems precisely, let alone resolve them. Whenever there is a gap between our language and our world, we face a *hard* case in ethics.

The Temptations of Fundamentalism and Moral Miserliness

Fundamentalists deny this possibility. According to their view, one never openly admits that there are hard cases in ethics. I think a good definition of fundamentalism is the *a priori* rejection of the possibility of new problems. To the fundamentalist mind, the idea that there is nothing new under the sun is not just good, prudent advice to use as a first step in approaching new problems, but it becomes an essential element of one's faith. It becomes not just the starting point for analysis but the end point as well.

In such situations, fundamentalists act in one of two ways. The first option is to ignore the essential defining elements of the new problem (i.e., those characteristics that make the problem different from the old problems) and to continue to apply the strategy of re-framing. In this view, all ethical problems are easy cases. In my work in Jewish business ethics, I have come to see that this is a familiar strategy among contemporary rabbis. Instead of dealing with real problems faced by actual managers in modern organizations, rabbis “solve” highly stylized, but more familiar problems. As an extreme example of what I mean by re-framing, I remember vividly asking a well-respected Orthodox rabbi about a corporation's social responsibilities to employees and local communities. The rabbi said he could not answer

this question, even if it is one of the most important issues in contemporary business, because the *Shulkhan Arukh* does not recognize the existence of corporations as a halakhic category. Instead he proceeded to deliver an hour-long lecture on whether or not a *bar mitzvah* boy has to pay taxes on his gifts (concluding, by the way, that he is not obligated by *halakhah* to pay even if the government requires such payment). Unfortunately for our community, many rabbis prefer to rehearse the answers to yesterday's questions rather than answering the relevant questions that today's community is posing. A second option for the fundamentalists, and even more radical than the first, is to simply ignore the new problem outright. The convoluted logic here runs as follows. I am certain that my existing language is perfectly complete. If I don't already possess the solution to the problem, there is no problem. While from time to time, all of us succumb to the temptations of this kind of arrogance and intellectual laziness, only fundamentalists suggest that this is the right thing to do! Ironically, fundamentalists, like many post-modern thinkers (those all the way on the other side of the intellectual continuum), claim that all we have is the text, as if there really were no world out there and no problems in it.

Here's an example. I vividly recall a proposal I once had for a Modern Orthodox Jewish think tank to examine possible contradictions and connections between traditional religious thought and the intellectual assumptions of the modern social sciences. Economics, for example, assumes boldly and proudly that human beings are best thought of as rational utility maximizers. This pervasive assumption in contemporary economics asserts that *all* decision making is exclusively consequentialist and preference-based. The only thing that matters is future outcomes (or consequences), and the only way to evaluate them is through individual tastes (preferences). This decision making model, far from being a testable hypothesis among economists, today provides the very method and foundation for economic analysis. My proposal included raising the question of whether or not such a method might not be antithetical (or at least problematic and worthy of discussion) from a religious

perspective founded on the idea that man is created in God's image. It might be especially problematic from a Jewish perspective that insists on explicitly linking all important decisions to traditional and authoritative texts. In addition, I suggested that there may be similar problems in other areas of social science (for example, psychology). I did not raise these issues because I think we need to abandon economic analysis or jettison religious language. Quite to the contrary, the point was to see if we could find some commonalities and to begin an honest process of integration. The proposal was immediately shot down, I was told by a prominent personality in the Orthodox community, because such a proposal might uncover problems for which the religious community does not yet have the answers. Better to shut our eyes and pretend the problems don't exist than to raise new questions without having preordained answers in hand—a nearly perfect expression of the fundamentalist world-view.

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What drives this willful blindness on the part of fundamentalists is, I think, an understandable desire to preserve moral capital. Fundamentalists are justly concerned that once we begin to play with language and to purposely manipulate it for our own interests, we risk the possibility of irreparable damage to the language that, quite literally, defines us. The obvious flaw here, however, is that fundamentalists completely disregard another kind of risk, at times much more dangerous, which is inherent in their decision to cut themselves off from continuing to examine the world and how it actually works. In short, this second risk to which those who ignore the world are eventually exposed is the likely possibility of evil.

Those who ignore the living world and the problems it throws at us are, in time, almost certainly doomed to extinction. In a world where there is a significant possibility of evil, ignoring it simply because one doesn't have

a name for it is not only careless, but is itself unethical. This is especially true for those in positions of leadership, whose wisdom and advice are relied on by others in the community. In their zealous attempt to guard and protect the tradition, fundamentalists turn their back on the future and face rearward. It is almost as if they were to drive a car facing the back window rather than the front.

Fundamentalists are *moral misers*, always refusing to borrow from the moral capital to build a better future. In treasuring their inherited language and traditions they miss their point entirely. In a literal sense, they begin to idolize the language, as if human language were itself a god.

While fundamentalism is not a credible option, there is something important for us to learn and take from it. Fundamentalists are right in claiming that preserving moral capital is the first principle of ethical decision making. In order to maintain and ensure our identity over time, moral arguments must be self-consciously grounded in traditional language. Herein lies the great strength of their position. This principle suggests that our *ethical decisions must always respect the integrity of moral language*. At the end of the day, the moral language is all we have to help resolve ethical predicaments. The fundamentalists are right when they insist that making it up as we go along is incoherent and self-contradictory. But that cannot be the final word on the subject.

Accepting the World and Rejecting Fundamentalism

The necessary rejection of fundamentalism suggests the existence of a second principle. This principle can be formulated simply: *Respond to the real problems in the real world*.

There is an independently existing world out there, and it can wreak havoc on us unless we attempt to understand it. Even if we do understand it, of course, there may be nothing we can do about it; but we would be irresponsibly and immorally naive were we to willfully

blind ourselves to our surroundings simply because we can't readily understand the environment on the basis of our current ideals, values, and language. To do so would violate the second necessary principle of ethical decision making.

There are gaps between our language and our world, which is to say that there are hard ethical cases to resolve, whether we like it or not. To move beyond fundamentalism and to avoid nihilism, we need a process of decision making, and a theory to undergird it, that allows us to integrate the two principles identified above.

A key step in moving out of fundamentalism lies in the recognition that language is dynamic, not static. Like people themselves, languages either mature and grow or wither away and die. To put it differently, it is a deep and fatal philosophical and religious mistake to believe that there exists a fixed amount of moral capital.

Ignoring evil simply because one doesn't have a name for it is not only careless, but is itself unethical.

Moral Spendthrifts

In facing and resolving the hard cases in ethics, there is, to be sure, a risk that we will eat into our moral capital, the shared stock of practical and human wisdom embedded in language and tradition. I would suggest, however, that in extreme cases, expending moral capital is the morally correct decision to make. There exist situations where, in the short run, more weight is correctly assigned to the second principle than to the first. There are real-world problems that require us to knowingly compromise the integrity of language in order to satisfy immediate survival needs. In an analogous point, Immanuel Kant, the justly famous moral philosopher, was wrong to think lying prohibited in every conceivable case. It is not only permissible to lie to an intruder who would kill an innocent person; it is the ethically correct action. Kant was correct that, in the long run,

lying will undercut the very possibility for truth. In the short run, however, it may very well be the lesser of two evils. To be sure, one must do this with extreme care, and, even as one damages the language, one should be aware of the damage and try to do so in the least offensive way.

It is possible and necessary on occasion to expend moral capital. But, at the same time, one must avoid becoming a *moral spendthrift*, who continually draws upon moral capital but never makes any new deposits. That means, however, that it makes sense to say that one can replenish or even enhance and increase moral capital. If one rejects this possibility, one is caught without hope between the miserliness of fundamentalism on the one hand and the eventual bankruptcy of moral language on the other.

Moral Imagination: An Investment in Moral Capital

As stated above, sometimes a case in ethics is so hard that it requires us, in the short run, to violate temporarily the first principle. If we must take that path, we try to do so in a way that causes the least amount of permanent damage. In addition, on occasion, we may choose to defer resolution of a problem and arrival at a final conclusion when the issue is not life threatening and the cost to integrity of any conceivable solution is judged prohibitive.

The difference between this prescription and fundamentalism is that here, if we do choose to “ignore” a problem—by saying that today there is no conceivable way of resolving this problem without permanently destroying the integrity of our language—we still keep conscious track of the problem as best we can. In other words, we attempt to “account” for the problem even if we can’t finally “solve” it. There is a huge difference between, on the one hand, admitting there is an unresolved problem

and engaging in an ongoing search for a resolution and, on the other, pretending that the problem never existed in the first place.

A good example of this kind of agnosticism, again taken from the business ethics literature, can be found in a recent paper by Michael Broyde and Stephen Resnicoff. This example provides a stark contrast to the response of the rabbi alluded to above. In a rich, long, and discussion on the modern corporation and Jewish law, the authors finally conclude that “none of the Jewish Law theories of a corporation is entirely satisfying or compelling.”¹ Some authors might have ignored the tough and intractable questions and issues raised in this paper altogether because there is no final, bottom-line resolution on the topic. The authors put aside a final decision even while they do an admirable job of keeping track of the problem. One might consider Broyde and Resnicoff’s well-documented admission of uncertainty an admirable and courageous step beyond fundamentalism toward moral development, especially considering the context in which the paper was delivered. (In the past, another invited paper at this forum was rejected outright because some of the members felt the conclusions the author drew violated basic tenets of Orthodoxy.)

In extreme cases, expending moral capital is the morally correct decision to make.

However, not every hard case in ethics requires deferral of decision. Some of them are, in fact, resolvable in a way that does not require a trade-off between the two principles cited above. On occasion, we can resolve an altogether new ethical problem by respecting the moral integrity of language, even while we are responding to the actual problem that confronts us. Indeed, not only can we resolve the problem; the resolution itself may

¹ M. Broyde and S. Resnicoff, "The Corporate Veil and Halakhah" in *Jewish Business Ethics: The Firm and Its Stakeholders*, ed. Aaron Levine and Moses Pava (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1999), p. 272.

enhance or *increase the moral capital*. This process of resolving hard cases in ethics in a way that increases moral capital requires something called “moral imagination.”

The idea of increasing moral capital requires one to reject the certain belief that our existing moral language is perfect. A perfectly complete and final language in an evolving and changing world is incoherent. In order to use yesterday’s language to solve tomorrow’s problems, leaders must find a legitimate way to alter yesterday’s language without destroying it.

In dealing with hard cases in ethics, the question finally boils down to this: How does one change the language while preserving its integrity? Note that the question is not whether it is permissible to change the language; it is the better and more interesting one of *how* such change can be achieved in an authentic way? In answering this broad question, it is useful to consider each of the following more specific ones:

1. *The Question of Importing*: Does the reasoned choice of incorporating elements of foreign languages into one’s native language necessarily violate integrity?
2. *The Question of Responsible Choosing*: Does self-consciously ignoring elements of one’s native language necessarily violate integrity?
3. *The Question of Inventing*: Does one necessarily violate integrity when one attempts to invent new vocabulary by building on the old vocabulary?
4. *The Question of Interpreting*: Is integrity necessarily violated in the search for new meanings inside the old language?

Advocates of moral imagination answer each of these questions with a resounding “no.” In fact, importing, choosing, inventing, and interpreting constitute the tasks of moral imagination and provide the mechanisms

for moral growth. This is not to say, of course, that *all* importing, choosing, inventing, and interpreting are legitimate in the context of every existing language. It is simply that each case of importing, choosing, inventing, and interpreting must be examined on its own merits.

1. The Question of Importing

No one language is perfect. Or, as we are often correctly reminded in myriads of ways, no one of us is as smart as all of us. When it comes to moral capital (as opposed to financial capital) taking from others should be encouraged, not discouraged. “What is mine is mine and what is mine is yours” holds for everyone in the case of moral capital. Languages that have developed and evolved under differing historical circumstances will embed a diversity of truths. One of the great benefits of language is that one does not have to learn every lesson the hard way. If I am smart, I can listen to you and capitalize on your experiences. The better one listens to others, the more one learns. In short, often the easiest way to use yesterday’s language to solve tomorrow’s problem is to realize that there are other legitimate languages out there. Martin Luther King Jr. learned ethical lessons from Gandhi, and Gandhi claimed that he imported elements into his own non-violent philosophy from the early American philosopher, Henry David Thoreau. In recognizing pluralism, one takes a first step towards a practical solution to hard cases in ethics.

A perfectly complete and final language in an evolving and changing world is incoherent.

How can importing be of practical use to the orthodox community? The leaders of the Orthodox Union who allowed Baruch Lerner to continue leading youth groups for 27 years, even after a series of independent accusations of child abuse had been made against him, should have immediately adopted the policies of other organizations and groups that had faced similar problems in the past. Accusations of child abuse against an employee are indeed an example of a hard case in ethics. Instead of trying to institutionalize a program of

sexual conduct appropriate for NCSY (such codes of conduct are easily available for adaptation), the leaders at the Orthodox Union continue to claim ignorance of the problem.

There is an inherent strength in importing from other languages.

Further, there is an inherent strength in importing from other languages. Borrowing, although it can only begin if we admit that there are differences among languages, can actually help to convince us that the differences are not as large or insurmountable as we might at first have thought. Borrowing is a practical way to solve our hard cases in ethics, to increase our moral vocabulary, and it has the collateral benefit of helping to build or widen bridges of understanding between moral communities. In solving a hard case in ethics through importing, the very notion of what makes up "our community" is put into play. It may turn out, at the end of the day, that our community is larger, more expansive, and more complicated than we originally thought. As moral capital expands, the idea of community is altered, as well. For two distinct reasons, however, importing is not always a practical option. First, it may turn out that importing does violate the integrity of one's own native language. It is easy to think of cases where borrowing a concept or a term from another language *would* undercut basic axioms of one's own position. The point made above was that importing does not always and forever violate integrity. Second, importing may not be practical because there simply may be no existing language that has the vocabulary needed to solve a new problem. Still, even with these two major limitations in mind, importing is a powerful and profound way to increase the moral capital. Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* may offer the single most important example of this

approach within Judaism, and much of the controversy surrounding Maimonides' approach focused on the legitimacy of importing in Judaism.

2. The Question of Legitimate Choosing

In looking at the question of importing, we find that the notion of pluralism—suggesting the simultaneous coexistence of many different moral languages—becomes important. Pluralism also helps us think through the question of legitimate choosing. Can one legitimately pick and choose from within one's own language? If one's language reflects only a single coherent voice, the answer to this question would be no. But to the extent that languages themselves are pluralistic or perceived to be so—that is, they reflect more than a single voice—then the very attempt to make the language coherent requires one to pick and choose.

It's not easy to solve a hard case in ethics. There are situations where an ethical leader using yesterday's language is going to have to make difficult choices. He or she may willfully ignore part of the tradition when that element of the tradition is seen as the cause of the problem in the first place. I wonder if some of the rabbis who openly encouraged Yitzchak Rabin's murderer considered the possibility that some of the textual resources they were exploiting simply should have been ignored as inappropriate in the context of a modern democracy. When great leaders pick and choose with care and attention in the face of difficult choices, moral capital is increased. The next generation inherits a language that is better suited to solving ethical dilemmas.

3. The Question of Inventing

Fundamentalists who continue to assert the perfection of the inherited language are opposed, of course, to the possibility of invention.² With a perfectly complete

² Even though fundamentalists deny the theoretical possibility of invention, fundamentalists themselves often invent new meanings and concepts, but without explicitly acknowledging their own roles in this process.

moral vocabulary in hand, we can only be harmed, and can never be helped, by invention. On the other hand, if hard cases in ethics truly exist, invention may turn out to be a legitimate tool to enlarge the moral capital. How do great leaders invent? First of all, it is important to keep in mind that invention is not creation out of nothing. Inventors—whether one is talking about inventors of mechanical or electronic gadgetry or ethical inventors—use the materials at hand. The genius of invention is always in how one puts those pre-existing materials together. Invention requires experimentation and the willingness to put up with temporary failure. When Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, he did not magically produce something entirely new out of thin air. His genius, as he was the first to insist, consisted almost entirely in his patient quest to find the best material to use to produce his filament, in spite of numerous false starts.

But if invention is not creation out of nothing, what is it? The best way to think about invention is as a kind of integration. One dictionary defines integration as the process of “making into a whole by bringing all parts together,” but I think there’s more to it. I define integration as *the process of uncovering new relationships among discrete elements from which new value emerges*. Rabbi Norman Lamm, the President of Yeshiva University, is surely correct when he notes that today we no longer view organic unity as a fact, but as a value to be pursued consciously in human life and civilization. In other words, integration is not a state of being to be taken for granted, but a valuable human process. Integration is something that reasonable people can do, and integration is something that reasonable people have good reasons to do. Restating this using theological language, Lamm proceeds boldly:

The unity of God is, unquestionably, not yet a fact; it must await...eschatological fulfillment. But that

fulfillment must not be merely a passive one, relegated only to the heart. If not (yet) a fact, it must be championed as a value. It must motivate an active program so that all of life will move toward realizing that “And the Lord shall be king over all the earth”; that the “World of Disintegration” will one day be replaced by the “World of Unity” and reintegration.³

In Lamm’s hands, unity becomes a goal to be pursued rather than a description of current reality. The whole of being is *not yet* a unity, but there is a religious and moral duty to come to see the world in this way. Integration is not passive, but active.

The genius of invention is always in how one puts pre-existing materials together

Viewing invention in this way, it is hardly a make-it-up-as-you-please process; rather, it becomes a core element of moral imagination. In Jewish business ethics, Hillel’s innovative and integrative reading of Deuteronomy, against the backdrop of what he perceived as a hard case in ethics, led him to invent his famous *prosbul*, a legal document that effectively allowed lenders and borrowers to circumvent the biblically mandated cancellation of the debt in the sabbatical year, and to thus ensure the healthy growth of the economy. This is exactly the kind of innovative thinking our community needs today to help resolve business ethics dilemmas, but it is almost totally absent from contemporary discussions of Jewish business ethics. The one notable exception is our community’s justifiable pride in Aaron Feuerstein’s well-publicized decision to continue paying his idle employees while a burned down factory was being rebuilt.

4. The Question of Interpreting

The behavioral scientist James March has astutely

³ N. Lamm, *Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), p. 65.

observed that sometimes decision making is not about deciding what I, or we, should do today, but it is better envisaged as rethinking the meaning of what we did yesterday:

Decision making shapes meanings even as it is shaped by them. A choice process provides an occasion for developing and diffusing interpretations of history and current conditions, as well as for mutual construction of theories of life. It is an occasion for defining virtue and truth, discovering or interpreting what is happening, what decision makers have been doing, and what justifies their actions. It is an occasion for distributing glory and blame for what has happened, and thus an occasion for exercising, challenging, and reaffirming friendship and trust relationships, antagonisms, and power and status relationships. Decision and decision making play a major role in the development of the meaning and interpretations that decisions are based upon.⁴

The basic idea here is that from time to time, when faced with a hard case in ethics, we can move forward only by first retracing our steps and reconsidering the meaning of our past accomplishments and failures. In other words, there may yet be new meaning embedded in the old language. From the perspective of the fundamentalists, the question of interpretation is the most controversial of all. In their view, meaning is something that is thrust upon us, once and for all.

Great moral leaders, faced with hard cases, can't afford such overly pious beliefs. Great leaders challenge us to rethink the meaning of our lives and communities. Here, one can cite Abraham Lincoln's imaginative reference to the "real" meaning of the phrase "all men are created equal" at a time of political and moral crisis. His example, I think, demonstrates the possibility of increasing moral capital—not by abandoning moral language

and making it up as you please, but by finding new and better meanings inside old and well-accepted language. This idea can be well illustrated in Jewish sources by rethinking one of the most important stories in the Bible. Consider the famous biblical narrative of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. This story, as related in Genesis 22, is traditionally understood as an example of "blind obedience" to a divine command. A careful reading of the biblical narrative, however, suggests an altogether different meaning.

In verse 2, the text literally translated states that God commands Abraham to "lift Isaac up as an offering." Abraham's initial interpretation of the Divine imperative is that God is asking for a human sacrifice and, as Abraham begins his three day journey to the "mountain which I will tell thee of," he is willing to obey. Abraham is predisposed to such an interpretation. In the environment in which he grew up, child sacrifice was considered the ultimate act of faith and piety. Had Abraham actually slaughtered Isaac, his contemporaries would have considered him a great Canaanite religious leader. To Abraham, however, this was not sufficient.

Great leaders challenge us to rethink the meaning of our lives and communities

Through an act of moral imagination, Abraham burst upon the world stage for posterity. With knife in hand, "Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked..." And what did Abraham see? He saw "a ram caught in the thicket by his horns." Abraham's genius resided in the fact that he finally recognized that he could fulfill the literal interpretation of God's command and demonstrate his ultimate devotion to God even as he replaced Isaac with a ram. The bible recounts, "and he offered the ram up for a burnt offering instead of his son." In a sense, this is the true climax of the story. When the angel speaks to Abraham and warns him not to "harm the lad," it is not

⁴ James March, *The Pursuit of Organizational Intelligence*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 27.

a new commandment—God doesn't change his mind—but it is the original commandment interpreted in a better and more ethically sensitive way. In recognizing that a ram can symbolically take the place of his son, Abraham demonstrates the power of creative interpretation and the revolutionary implications of the path of moral imagination. Abraham does not reject the commandment and become a superman; rather, he becomes a better and more authentic Abraham and thus provides a model for all ethical leaders who follow him. He solves a hard case in ethics. He avoids the temptations of fundamentalism and sidesteps the trap of moral bankruptcy. Most importantly, for present purposes, he increases the moral capital. Abraham understood that his case was a hard case. In solving it, he transformed it into an easy case for all his followers.

In this paper I am asserting that there exists a crisis in traditional Jewish communities. In short, the kinds of problems our community faces today simply didn't exist in the past. The good news is that we can solve these problems. But to do so, we must become more self-conscious about importing, choosing, inventing, and interpreting. Those of us who see this need first must have the courage to talk about it publicly, even at the risk of upsetting the fundamentalists.

Conclusion

To summarize the discussion: Great leaders use yesterday's language to solve tomorrow's problems. How so? They distinguish between easy and hard cases. Easy cases may require a reframing of a problem, but in reframing, one recognizes that the seemingly new problem bears a striking resemblance to old problems. Old problems can be resolved through old language.

If there truly is a new problem, ethical leaders have three options. One, they can temporarily violate the integrity of their inherited language (this is always a last resort). Two, they can avoid making a decision, even while they continue to monitor the problem and search for a solu-

tion. Three, they can engage in a process of moral imagination that will include importing, choosing, inventing, or interpreting (or, of course, some combination). The long-run benefit of moral imagination is the possibility for the growth of moral capital. Of the three possible options outlined here it, moral imagination is the only *necessary* option for solving hard cases in ethics. I suggest that all three of the examples with which this paper began require Jewish leaders and all members of the community to apply moral imagination in a judicious way.

My major conclusion for present purposes is that all of this is good news for those of us involved in areas of applied ethics. There is an "ethics of authenticity," as the philosopher Charles Taylor so aptly put it in his slim but important book by that name. Taylor suggests that authenticity, correctly understood:

(A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance), and (ii) self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed.⁵

Taylor's description of an "ethics of authenticity" emphasizes the human aspect in all of this. His is a prescription neither for moral miserliness nor for moral bankruptcy. He recognizes our modern predicament and offers a plausible way out. There are no final guarantees here, but authenticity at least promises some hope. For those of us involved in Jewish ethics, or any religiously grounded system of ethics, this paper is a suggestion to try it. At stake is the truth to our claim of constituting a moral community.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 66.