

THE BIG PICTURE

Questions discussed:

- Do Jewish values demand that journalists in Jewish media develop and follow a Code of Ethics?
- Should a Code of Ethics for Jewish media incorporate Jewish values?

In October 2013, 30 Jewish teens came together in Los Angeles for the first convention and Shabbaton of the Jewish Scholastic Press Association and established a quiet but remarkable turning point for Jewish media in North America. Students from high school newspapers from the Jewish day school world and their advisors gathered to learn from each other and professional journalists, to, in the words of Joelle Keene, faculty advisor to *The Boiling Point*, of Shalhevet High School of Los Angeles help students become “educated, top-flight journalists who can one day lead college and professional publications, adhering to the highest standards of objectivity and thoroughness while employing Jewish values.” JSPA, she writes, looks at journalism “through an explicitly Jewish lens.”

Those looking from the outside in — whether from the non-Jewish community or members of the Jewish community who don’t work in our field — might consider Keene’s goal for the student group obvious, that Jewish media outlets would *naturally* interweave Jewish values as part of our professional standards. But in practical terms, Keene’s pronouncements were bold and ambitious, even *chutzpadik*.

They should lead editors, publishers and journalists who labor in our field to ask: Can Jewish media outlets employ Jewish values as we navigate ethical dilemmas in journalism? And if we can, should we?

Reporting Jewish: Do Journalists Have The Tools To Succeed?

In 2013, AJPA and the IEngage Project of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem partnered on a survey to find out the literacy level of journalists and editors who work in Jewish media regarding Judaism, Jewish ethics, Israel, and generally-accepted Western media ethics. More than 100 journalists with Jewish media outlets in North America (and some in Israel and Europe) responded to our survey.

Key survey findings gave us a snapshot of the journalist in American Jewish media and taught us that they are a dedicated and devoted group with virtually all of the tools they need to succeed:

- Journalists with Jewish media are highly educated. 99% of survey respondents have college or advanced degrees (nearly one-half have a master’s degree, and 7% have a Ph.D.), compared to 62% of the overall American Jewish population having a college degree or more.
- Nearly half of survey respondents studied journalism or another communications field in college.
- Nearly half of the survey respondents have worked in journalism for more than 20 years.
- 24 percent of survey respondents identified themselves as Orthodox Jews, 13 percent as Reform, 23 percent Conservative, 20 percent just Jewish.
- 61 percent said they have studied Israel in an educational setting.
- The percentage of journalists who have visited Israel three or more times, 64%, is the same as American Jews who have never been to Israel.

- More than 90 percent of North American survey participants said that being Jewish is extremely or very important in their lives, compared with slightly more than one-third of the Jewish population.

Also of note is that North American respondents were less likely to view themselves as “detached observers” who keep themselves apart from their community than mainstream North American journalists, and that the respondents were more willing to advocate and influence public opinion than their mainstream counterparts.

A point of concern to AJPA among the results was that respondents were more willing than mainstream American journalists to apply situational ethics. At the same time, these North American respondents were slightly less willing than Israeli journalists to adjust their ethical standards to a specific situation. Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with the statements:

- Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context
- What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation
- What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment.

Survey results didn’t completely explain *why* North American Jewish media answered the questions with a slight leaning toward moral relativism. One interpretation is that they felt comfortable using what they perceived as their innate – dare we say, Jewish – moral compass in relying on their own instincts. Yet the results can also lead to the conclusion that they haven’t studied general ethics or media ethics, let alone Jewish ethics. The results served as a wake-up call for AJPA and indicated the value that studying Jewish values in the context of journalism ethics is needed and a project of significant importance.

We can and should train our journalists about Jewish ethics and how to apply them to journalism. We cover stories about the Jewish world for our readership, but we can also cover them in thoughtful, careful accordance with Jewish ethics. Ethical codes promulgated in mainstream media are a necessary starting point for Jewish media, but they are just that. We can and should steer our journalists to study general media ethics. But to fully serve the communities we cover, our Jewish media outlets should imbue and live the values that Jewish tradition puts forth, respects, and celebrates.

Jewish media outlets do have an obligation to consider and develop our own codes of Jewish ethics as they intersect with moral dilemmas inherent in Jewish journalism. Our Jewish media outlets should also encourage our journalists who are Jewish to form their own codes of Jewish journalism ethics; journalists who aren’t Jewish and work for Jewish media outlets should understand and conduct their journalistic work for these outlets in accordance with the full code of ethics put forward by their media outlets, which hopefully consider Jewish ethics.

What we’re not saying:

1. Consideration and crafting of Jewish media ethics doesn’t necessarily have to follow halakha, or Jewish law. Just as not all Jews adhere to halakha, indoctrination of Jewish belief and adherence to Jewish law should not be the goal of Jewish media overall; halakha should already be part of the working systems of those self-defined “frum” publications within the framework of religiously observant communities and, with a careful eye not to violate general media ethics in pursuit of sustaining halakha.

Whether someone accepts or does not accept religious aspects of Judaism, Judaism espouses key moral values that, at the very least, Jewish media publications should understand and seriously consider. Halakha provides excellent case studies to benefit all of us as we learn about Jewish ethics and how we might apply them to Jewish journalism.

An overarching ethical dilemma of Jewish journalism is the tension between the two commandments found in Leviticus 19:16: “You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people; you shall not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed; I am the Lord.” We must often navigate the balance between privacy and avoidance of lashon hora and the need to provide for social justice, to repair a broken world. The ethical values don’t change, but the situations do.

2. Considering and adhering to Jewish values in journalism doesn’t mean hiding behind those values to prevent us from covering uncomfortable or controversial stories. Such values should not be used as an excuse to avoid covering stories that are painful but needed to bring about a needed change in the community, make readers aware of a current danger, and expose hypocrisy.

3. At the same time, considering and employing Jewish values in journalism does not mean using those values as a shield to overstep the importance of privacy. Though we cherish the mainstream media value of a right to know, within the purview of Jewish media ethics, the right to know is contingent upon a true need for the reader to know.¹ Within Jewish journalism, there is no blanket right to know. There must be a good reason to disseminate information to our readers. Often there is. But we need to consider this in every case.

4. It is not an either/or situation. Working editors and journalists in Jewish media must be up to date on the latest discussions and explorations of journalism ethics in mainstream media, and continue to learn and explore Jewish ethics and how they intersect with our constantly evolving methods of gathering and disseminating news.

5. This is not easy. And it should not be. We love our communities. The health and wellness of our communities is always at stake and oftentimes, in our hands. At the end of last year’s JSPA conference, students from SAR Academy in New York said one takeaway from the Shabbaton was a phrase Marshall invoked, “ringing your kishkes out.” As in, “You never stop ringing your kishkes out over the controversial stories, even when the right path is clear.”

If we check Jewish values at the door of a Jewish media outlet, why bother putting out what we claim is Jewish journalism? It’s not enough to cover news of the Jewish world using general codes of journalism ethics, as critical as they are to Western civilization. We can reach higher to imbue the values Judaism espouses.

- Marshall Weiss and Alan D. Abbey

¹ Other essays in this report weigh in-depth the issue of how to balance privacy with the “right to know.”