

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 5: Mankind's Moral Compass

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So far in this series, we have argued that mankind needs Divine intervention in order to develop an objective set of moral and ethical standards. Before we discuss those areas of God's laws which may appear to us 'unethical', let us

first deal with a more fundamental question.

Classical secular ethics are based on the premise that mankind is able to reason into existence some kind of moral consensus. And many would agree.

In his work *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks notes: "There is nothing inherently 'religious' about a moral sense. The Bible takes for granted that human beings know the difference between good and evil". There are many individual displays of morality and altruism by people outside of the Israelite nation, such as Pharaoh's daughter rescuing Moshe (Shemot 2:5-10), the Cana'anite Rachav saving Yehoshua's spies (Joshua 2:4) and Ruth the Moabite showing compassion to Naomi (Ruth 1:16). Our sages note that Avraham, long before the Revelation at Sinai, independently deduced the existence of God and the 613 mitzvot, which he observed (see Talmud Yoma 28a).

Rabbi Sacks quotes Rabbi Nissim Gaon (d. 1062) who stated unequivocally: "All commandments that are rational and amenable to human understanding have been binding on everyone since the day God created mankind on earth". Mankind has the inherent capacity to deduce that acts such as murder, brutality and violence are immoral, without Divine revelation.

This immediately sets mankind apart from the animal world. Animals regularly kill, steal and use violence. A *New Scientist* article, for example, described how male chimpanzees have been known to beat, murder and cannibalise rivals when competing for a mate. A 2014 study published in *Ethology* reported that female

cuckoos misappropriate the nests of magpies by laying their eggs in them while the magpie is still incubating its own. Despite violent pecking, the magpies are unable to evict the invading cuckoo and eventually abandon their nests, leaving their eggs behind.

Most humans would accept these examples as part of animal behaviour; no one is planning to arrest a chimpanzee for murder or serve an eviction order to a cuckoo! Yet we would consider murder, cannibalism or theft between other humans as immoral. Avraham's sensitivity to God's moral code allowed him to deduce the whole of the Torah himself. Whilst this was exceptional and none of us could claim to be as morally objective as Avraham, it indicates that there must nevertheless be some inner source to our innate sense of morality, however subjective it may be.

The Ramban (Nachmanides d. 1270) explains that God created humanity from both physical and spiritual matter, indicated by the formation of Adam from both the dust of the earth and the breath of God (see his commentary on Bereishit 1:26 and 2:7). Mankind is therefore comprised of both carnal desire and Godly intent. Our animalistic needs and higher moral aspirations often conflict, but we have the freedom to choose between them. As we will see in the next article, this points to the original creation of mankind as the seminal moment in conceiving a moral framework for human civilisation and the entire world.

