

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 6: Mankind's Moral Compass II

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In the last article, we noted that humanity can and often does derive some basic moral and ethical laws without the need for Divine revelation or even belief in God. For example, most people can recognise that

murder, theft and adultery are immoral without needing to refer to the Ten Commandments. This innate sense of morality is what some moral philosophers believe underpins 'natural law', the moral theory of jurisprudence which claims that secular law should be based on fundamental ethical principles which can be deduced by mankind; these principles can transcend time and culture.

What, however, is the source of this natural sense of morality we possess?

Adam was uniquely formed from both the physical "dust of the earth" and the Divine "breath of God" (see commentary of the Ramban on Bereishit 1:26 and 2:7). According to many Jewish philosophers, the spiritual element, the *neshamah* (soul), is the basis for human intellect, emotional intelligence and moral sensitivities. Rabbi Yitzchak Arama (d. 1494) links the notion of human intellect to the ability to make moral choices. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (d. 1141) explains that intellect allows mankind to develop and refine character traits which in turn help to form a civil, functioning society.

Yet body and soul conflict with one another. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (d. 1746) explains that each element of mankind – body and soul – are drawn towards their natural origins. The body is drawn to instant, physical gratification whereas the soul is drawn to eternally Divine, spiritual and moral ideals. Mankind has the capacity to choose between these extremes (see also Devarim 30:19).

The freedom to make constructive moral choices, despite the temptation to do otherwise, is an inherent part of our spiritual apparatus. Yet things do not always go to plan. A direct consequence of free choice is the risk of moral failure. Human history is filled with appalling examples of individuals making evil choices that have had tragic, often bloody outcomes. Why did God risk allowing sin and immorality to flourish by giving mankind the capacity to choose between good and evil?

If God's ambition for mankind was absolute obedience to His commandments, He could have created us as an army of compliant angels. By giving us freedom of choice, we are able to earn reward for our decisions.

In addition, the freedom of moral choice and our unique intellect endows the human mind with the capacity to think about the outcomes and consequences of our actions. The Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon explained that one of the attributes of "a virtuous path" is to be able to "see the wider consequences of one's actions" (see Pirkei Avot 2:13, green siddur, page 533).

This explains the source of mankind's unique moral compass. Our sense of morality, albeit subject to a variety of environmental factors, stems from the Divine soul invested in every one of us. This, however, leads to a new question: what use is the moral compass that God entrusted us with if His word is final on questions of morality? We shall begin to explore this question in the next article.

