

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 7: The Emergence of Ethical Man I

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The previous article highlighted the role of the soul as the source of mankind's emotional and empathetic abilities, unique intellect and capacity to engage in abstract thought. This makes humans distinct from animals; we can

consider the wider consequences of our actions and develop an innate moral intelligence. Nevertheless, the Torah is filled with discourse between God and mankind, through both individual and national revelation. If humans can use their intellect, via their God-given soul, to discern ethical behaviour, what role does Divine revelation play? Clearly an individual's subjective experiences and environment may deflect the needle of their moral compass towards immorality. Yet does that mean that God's purpose is limited to merely being a moral authoritarian who keeps His human subjects in check?

One of the most profound and original contributions to the subject of Jewish meta-ethics was made by the Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (d. 1993). While the nature of the God-human relationship is discussed in many of his classic books, it was one of his lesser known works, published posthumously in 2005 – *The Emergence of Ethical Man* – which contains the most noteworthy expression of his unique perspective.

The book originated as ten handwritten notebooks bound together under the title *The Concept of Man* and refers back to the story of Bereishit, to emphasise mankind as part of a continuum of life, from plant to animal to human. This idea was first proposed centuries ago by medieval Jewish philosophers such as Rabbeinu Bachye ben Asher (d. 1340). Furthermore, a careful reading of Bereishit by the Italian commentator, Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (d. 1550) leads him to write that “Adam” describes a type

of animal which had already been established and was now being elevated by being endowed with a Divine spirit.

Yet rather than assume that Adam's soul made him a transcendent being, above nature, Rabbi Soloveitchik places mankind back on the naturalistic continuum. The ethical character of mankind emerged from entirely naturalistic beginnings, but only because of mankind's Divine soul. From here Rabbi Soloveitchik begins to address the relationship between mankind and God vis-à-vis mankind's ethical development.

He writes that the *tzelem Elokim* (the image of God) in which mankind was made (see Bereishit 1:26) “signifies man's awareness of himself as a biological being and the state of being informed of his natural drives”. According to Rabbi Soloveitchik's reading of the Torah, while Adam is born from naturalistic beginnings, it is only God's direct interaction with him and his descendants that allows humanity to transcend the hedonistic drives, in order to experience the moral and ethical self.

Rabbi Soloveitchik contrasts the moral consciousness of Avraham, who was able to derive Divine law and ethics from his own spiritual intuition (see Talmud Yoma 28b) and Moshe, the reluctant leader who required Divine revelation to serve as a conduit for God's message of ethical responsibility. While Avraham became the forefather of our Biblical nation, Moshe was the leader who began the chain of transmission of God's ethical and legal intent for all mankind in every generation.



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik