

## Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 8: The Emergence of Ethical Man II

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



In the last article, we explored Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's (d. 1993) novel approach to the concept of mankind as an ethical being. One of Rabbi Soloveitchik's key points is that no person can become an objectively moral being by themselves. He writes, "As a natural being, man is arrested with concreteness, and, as such, can never reach a transcendent God. In order to reach man (i.e. revelation) God descends from transcendental infinity to concrete finitude and confines Himself to the identical area in which man was placed. Man discovers God in finitude, within man's own realm, and this discovery determines man's belonging to a determinate environment" (*Emergence of Ethical Man*, pp. 61-62).

In another work entitled *U'vikashtem Misham* ("And From There You Shall Seek"), Rabbi Soloveitchik adds that since God created Adam from both the natural (physical) and ethical (spiritual) worlds, every human has the capacity to make positively moral choices, thus revealing God in the natural world. However, the moral evolution of mankind cannot happen spontaneously; it requires the catalyst of each individual's desire to forge their own connection to God. In order to mitigate against competing human interests, God's Divine input is essential.

Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to describe how Judaism provides the framework to refine and elevate all human consciousness – Jewish and non-Jewish – in every generation. In doing so, God gives mankind the creative opportunity to help transform the natural world into an ethical world. Specifically, he notes that Judaism never demanded that we disown our natural, biological origins and become ascetics. The ethical human must be connected to their natural roots, not detached from them. But nor are we permitted to indulge in a hedonistic lifestyle, as this would merely enslave us to our animalistic urges. True

freedom is found in the ability to control one's carnal desires.

Yet his most important observation is that those scholars tasked with applying God's laws in each generation must engage their creative intellectual faculties, within God's pre-existing protocols. Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that: "There is no change or reform within the Halacha [Jewish law], but there is unlimited innovation (*chiddush*)". This point disarms the critics who claim that Jewish law is rigid, archaic or obsolete. He continues, "Those who disparage us say that the Halacha has become fossilised, God forbid, that it contains no creative activity. These people have never studied a page of the Talmud and have not partaken of the creativity and innovation in the Halacha".

Rabbi Soloveitchik's key point is that God always intended to make mankind partners in applying Divine law, giving mankind the opportunity to bridge the gap between the finite and the infinite. Indeed, the Talmud records that Moshe initiated three unique acts by himself to which God gave Divine approval *ex post facto* (Shabbat 87a). Yet when he is shown a vision of Rabbi Akiva teaching Torah hundreds of years later, Moshe struggles to understand what he is saying (Menachot 29b).

As we embark on the next part of our exploration, we will elaborate on this intersection between God's revelation through both the Written and Oral Torah, and our own moral and ethical sensitivities.



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Answer: Yehudit and Bas'mat