

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

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MORAL COMPASS

Immediately prior to detailing the forbidden sexual relationships, God declares: 'My judgements you shall do and My decrees you shall safeguard; I am the Lord, your God.'¹ The Torah's use of two different terms - 'judgements' and 'decrees' - in the same sentence, seems strange. Rashi distinguishes between these two terms.² He explains that the logic behind a judgement is clear. Decrees, on the other hand, are handed down by those with authority and are not necessarily always understood by those who are subjected to them. Thus one generally understands the rationale behind *judgements* - for example, the prohibitions against murdering and stealing³ - and would follow them even without the existence of a command imposed by an external authority. In contrast, with regard to *decrees*, such as the prohibition against wearing a garment that combines wool and linen,⁴ there would be no obvious reason to act in that way in the absence of the explicit command. Whilst the latter seems to lack the

obvious reasoning of the former, they both derive from the same eternally binding divine source, and this is reinforced by the repetition of the aforementioned refrain: 'I am the Lord, your God' throughout this chapter that is entirely devoted to forbidden relationships.⁵ Why is the divine origin of these laws so strongly emphasised in this chapter specifically?

If a liberal group of twenty-first century university students was asked to define a standard sexual ethic, their typical response would be expected to be that consenting adults may choose to do whatever they want in private as long as it does not cause harm to or impede upon the rights of others. However, applying this principle to two consenting adult siblings would repulse the vast majority of these same students. Even though in principle, incest between consenting adults complies with the aforementioned standard, an intuitive morality forces most people to differentiate.

Many moral issues are considered 'black and white'. Most people would agree that killing, lying and incest are all immoral acts. **The challenge arises, however, when one is required to identify the moral path in a *grey* context - one that does not automatically lend itself to moral clarity. As Peter Geach asks Man's reason can readily discern that certain practices, like lying, infanticide and adultery are generally undesirable...but what man is a competent judge in his own cause to make exception in a particular case? The rational recognition that a practice is generally undesirable and that it is best for people on the whole not even to think of resorting to it is thus in fact an expression to man of the divine law forbidding the practice - even if he does not realize that this is an expression of the divine law, even if he does not believe there is a God.⁶**

This explanation might perhaps help us understand the Torah's repetition of the refrain, 'I am the Lord, your God' throughout this chapter dealing with forbidden relationships. Through the repetition, the Torah is emphasising the objective divine source from which it derives its sexual ethic.

If moral laws are based on subjective preference, eventually even the stipulation that the rights of others may not be impeded upon will be challenged. Hitler famously wrote:

Yes, we are barbarians! We want to be barbarians! It is an honourable title... Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing men from the dirty and degrading self-mortifications of a false vision (a Jewish invention) called 'conscience' and 'morality'.⁷

When the standards of moral behaviour derive from a subjective source, the floodgates are thus opened. The Aztecs believed that human sacrifices were necessary for the sun to rise,⁸ and the Torah mentions child sacrifice in the context of those worshipping the pagan deity Molech.⁹ These extreme historical precedents show the extent to which personal subjective ethics can justify acts that we today instinctively deem as immoral.



History shows the countless pitfalls of subjective morality. While not immune to tragic exceptions, Judaism has always revered an objective morality that adapts rather than changes in accordance with the context. **In an ever-changing ethical landscape, the Torah serves as an objective moral compass for every individual,** requiring us to be sensitive to others, while maintaining a constant sense of moral integrity.

Notes

- ¹ *Leviticus* 18:4.
- ² *Rashi* ad loc.
- ³ *Exodus* 20:13.
- ⁴ *Leviticus* 19:19; *Deuteronomy* 22:11.
- ⁵ *Leviticus* 18:2, 4-6, 21, 30.
- ⁶ Peter Geach, 'The Moral Law and the Law of God,' in *Divine Commands and Morality*, ed. Paul Helm (NY: Oxford University Press, 1981), 165-174.
- ⁷ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks* (Chapel River Press, 1939).
- ⁸ Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961), 96.
- ⁹ Ramban on *Leviticus* 18:21.

Parasha Fact:

The modern adage 'scapegoat', is taken from the sacrificial goats of Yom Kippur mentioned in this week's parasha, whereby an innocent goat was thrown off a cliff in atonement for something done by others.

Next week in Kedoshim :

It would be very easy, and somewhat natural, for us to simply accept the habits, tendencies and character traits with which we were created. 'That's just who I am' we can humbly say to ourselves and anyone who is listening. Self-acceptance, after all, seems so much less challenging than self-growth. Yet, a very subtle yet specific ordering of the words in the commandment about honouring our parents alludes to our responsibility to challenge our default path, and to take the reins in determining our own destiny.