

## Morality

### Thoughts on Morality Throughout The Ages

“Honor is simply the morality of superior men.”

H. L. Mencken, American Social Commentator, 20th Century

“A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true.”

Socrates, Greek Philosopher, 5th Century BCE

“A man does what he must - in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures - and that is the basis of all human morality.”

John F. Kennedy, POTUS, 1961-1963

“Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.”

Alexis de Tocqueville, French Philosopher, 19th Century

“Human morality is unthinkable without empathy.”

Frans de Waal, Dutch-American Primatologist

“Morality, not money, is the principle commerce of civilized nations.”

Thomas Jefferson, American Political Thinker, POTUS, 1801-1809

“Art, like morality, consists in drawing the line somewhere.”

Gilbert K. Chesterton, English Philosopher 20th Century

“Morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality.”

Mahatma Gandhi, Indian Civil Rights Leader, 20th Century

“Aim above morality. Be not simply good, be good for something.”

Henry David Thoreau, American Philosopher, 19th Century

Question: We have thoughts above spanning millennia. Can you see a common theme among them? Which one speaks particularly to you, and why?

### **Rabbi Sacks on Morality**

“Morality is what broadens our perspective beyond the self and its desires. It places us in the midst of a collective social order. Morality has always been about the first-person plural, about ‘We’. ‘Society’, said Lord Devlin, ‘means a community of ideas; without shared ideas on politics, morals, and ethics, no society can exist.’ Society is constituted by a shared morality.”

Morality, Introduction, p. 12

“Morality is essential to freedom. That is what John Locke meant when he contrasted liberty, the freedom to do what we ought, with license, the freedom to do what we want. It is what Adam Smith signaled when, before he wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, he wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is what George Washington meant when he said, ‘Human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people.’ And Benjamin Franklin when he said, ‘Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.’ Or Thomas Jefferson when he said, ‘A nation as a society forms a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society.’ Lose morality, and eventually you will lose liberty.”

Morality, Introduction, p. 13

“Morality matters because we believe that there are other and more human ways of living than instinctual gratification tempered by regret. It matters because we believe that some essentials – love, marriage, parenthood – are so central to our being that we seek to endow them with as much permanence as is given to us in this unpredictable and transitory life. It matters because we must not abdicate our responsibility for those we brought into being by failing to provide them with a stable, caring environment within which to grow to maturity. It matters because we believe there are other routes out of the Hobbesian state of nature – the war of all against all – than by creating a Leviathan of a state. It matters because as long as humanity has thought about such things, we have recognised that there are achievements we cannot reach without the collaborative bonds of civil society and the virtues that alone make such a society possible. Morality matters, finally, because despite all fashionable opinions to the contrary, we remain moved by altruism. We are touched by other people’s pain. We feel enlarged by doing good, more so perhaps than by doing well, by material success. Decency, charity, compassion, integrity, faithfulness, courage, just being there for other people, matter to us. They matter to us despite the fact that we may now find it hard to say why they matter to us. They matter to us because we are human and because, in the words of Victorian philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore, we are worth what we are willing to share with others. These truths, undervalued for a generation, are the cultural climate change we now need. They are about to become vital again, and not a moment too soon.”

Morality, Chapter 22, p. 315

“The contemporary world has given morality a rough ride. The word itself now evokes all we distrust most: the intrusion of impersonal standards into our private lives, the presence of judgment where judgment does not belong, the substitution of authority for choice. When a

politician moralizes, we suspect that he or she is searching for an excuse not to pay for something. When a religious leader moralizes, we fear the imposition of certainties we no longer share, and we suspect that fundamentalism is not far behind. When a particularly newsworthy crime or social trend provokes ethical debate, it will not be long before voices are heard dismissing the conversation as 'moral panic'. We have come to share George Bernard Shaw's conviction that morality is one person's way of disrupting someone else's innocent enjoyment, or as H.G. Wells called it, 'jealousy with a halo'. But this cannot be the whole picture. We do still care, and care passionately, about concerns that are essentially moral. We are disturbed by legal injustice and extreme economic inequality. We are distressed by our destruction of the environment in pursuit of economic growth. We are not indifferent to the suffering of others or to the harm we may be laying in store for future generations. We are as moral as any other generation. Perhaps more so, for television and the Internet have exposed us in the most vivid and immediate ways to sufferings that in a previous age we would hardly have known about, let alone seen. And our greater affluence and technological prowess have given us the resources to address ills – physical and economic – that an earlier generation might have seen as something about which nothing could be done, part of the sad but natural order of things. We are certainly not amoral. We remain sharply aware of the difference between what is and what ought to be."

Morality, Chapter 22, p. 313

"Trust cannot be restored by the market or the state, because these are arenas of competition, not cooperation. It cannot be restored by smartphones and social media, precisely because these are not face to face. When I use social media, I am presenting myself, not encountering you in your full and distinctive otherness. When I use them to acquire information about the world, I have no immediate way of knowing whether the message I receive is true or false,

objective or manipulative. When I use wealth or power to achieve my purposes, I am advancing my interests as an individual, not our interests as a moral community. This does not help the cause of trust. It further damages it. The beautiful thing about morality, though, is that it begins with us. We do not need to wait for a great political leader, or an upturn in the economy, or a new mood in society, or an unexpected technological breakthrough, to begin to change the moral climate within which we live and move and have our being.”

Morality, Chapter 22, p. 310

**Questions:** Compare and contrast the quotes above. Do you see a common theme in them?

Now try to pinpoint Rabbi Sacks’s essential view of morality. Can you boil it down to a few sentences?