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**Morality**

Is there such a thing as an objective basis of morality? For some time, in secular circles, the idea has seemed absurd. Morality is what we choose it to be. We are free to do what we like so long as we don't harm others.

Moral judgments are not truths but choices. There is no way of getting from "is" to "ought", from description to prescription, from facts to values, from science to ethics. This was the received wisdom in philosophy for a century after Nietzsche had argued for the abandonment of morality – which he saw as the product of Judaism – in favour of the "will to power".

*'True Morality', Covenant & Conversation, Noach 5770, 5773 (Rabbi Sacks)*

Do you believe that Human Beings define Morality? Aren't "Do No Harm" or "Live and Let Live" appropriate moral ideals?

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"What we have today is not the religious ethic of Judaism and Christianity but the civic ethic of the ancient Greeks. For the Greeks, the political was all. What you did in your private life was up to you. Sexual life was the pursuit of desire. Abortion and euthanasia were freely practised. The Greeks produced much of the greatest art and architecture, philosophy and drama, the world has ever known. What they did not produce was a society capable of surviving."

*'Why the Ancient Greeks were wrong about morality', February 27, 2010 (Rabbi Sacks)*

"The most accurate characterization of the Chanukah story is the struggle for the perpetuation of *chochmas haTorah* (Torah wisdom) over Hellenism or *chochmas Yavan*, the secular wisdom of the Greeks.

It wasn't the actual specific secular knowledge of the Greeks that was problematic, but rather their perspective on it...

Yavan’s wisdom, beauty, and culture become superficial, like an empty shell. This is where Yavan went wrong. Instead of using their knowledge of science and nature to see Hashem behind it all, the Greeks presupposed that since they discovered and understood the inner mechanics of certain natural and scientific phenomena, there was no One God. Thus, to all intents and purposes, they deified the understanding they possessed, considering it the supreme intelligence. In effect, they made it their god – the omnipotent wisdom they would live by...

...the Greeks sought to eradicate the idea of Hashem because His existence invalidated their claim that their own intelligence was the supreme wisdom. Deluding themselves this way helped them maintain their arrogant fantasy that they were the supreme culture and, moreover, freed them from the responsibility that comes along with knowing there is a higher wisdom...

Because there was no omnipotent God in their view, and mastery belonged to human beings, the Greeks worshipped the human body and pursued its external perfection. Outwardly they preached the virtues of an ethical, civilized society, but their internal convictions were driven by base pleasures, self-aggrandizement, and personal gratification.”

*Inside Chanukah, p. 31-35*

Does this description of Chanukah change your previous answer? (What was the underlying battle with the Greeks?)

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“The Bible offered a different perspective. A singular God meant a singular standard for behavior. Consequences couldn’t merely be attributed to the interplay between self-interested gods; instead, consequences were life lessons, meant to teach us to be moral. Sin had consequences in the real world... Judaism argues that we ought to be holy in imitation of God.”

*The Right Side of History, p.26-27*

Who or What, defines Morality?

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Do you know of an example in Modern History where the Greek model of morality was followed with disastrous results?

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On the other extreme – instead of avoiding conflict in the name of morality, the Torah demands conflict in specific situations:

זָכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לָךְ עַמְלֶק בְּדַרְדָּר בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:

אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדַרְדָּר וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כָּל-הַנְּחָשִׁים אֲחֵרֶיךָ וְאֵתָה עִנְיָ וַיִּגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹקִים:

וְהָיָה בְּהַנִּיחַ יְקַנָּה אֱלֹקֶיךָ לְךָ מִכָּל-אֲבוֹיֶיךָ מִסְבִּיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְקַנָּה-אֱלֹקֶיךָ נִתְּן לָךְ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עַמְלֶק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשָּׁכַח:

*דברים (פרשת כי תצא) פרק כה פסוק יז - יט*

רַק מֵעַנְי הָעַמִּים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר יְקַנָּה אֱלֹקֶיךָ נִתְּן לָךְ נַחֲלָה לֹא תַחֲיֶה כָּל-נִשְׁמָה:

כִּי-הִחַרְתָּם תַּחֲרִימָם הַחַיִּי וְהָאֶמְרִי הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרָזִי הַחַיִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקַנָּה אֱלֹקֶיךָ:

לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִלְמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל-תּוֹעֲבוֹתֵם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם וַחֲטָאתֵם לִיקַנָּה אֱלֹקֵיכֶם:

*דברים (פרשת שופטים) פרק כ פסוק טז - יח*

Are you comfortable with these commandments to kill and annihilate several nationalities? If you were presented with the opportunity (with no doubts and 100% certainty even by certification of a true navi), do you believe that it is moral to fulfil these commandments?

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“Peace is possible, implies Moses, even with an Egypt that enslaved and tried to destroy us. But peace is not possible with those who attack people they see as weak and who deny their own people the freedom for which they claim to be fighting. Freedom depends on our ability to remember and, whenever necessary, confront “the eternal gang of ruthless men,” the face of

Amalek throughout history. Sometimes there may be no alternative but to fight evil and defeat it. This may be the only path to peace.”

*Essays on Ethics, Beshallah: The Face of Evil, p.102 (Rabbi Sacks)*

Does Rabbi Sacks change your perspective of the above commandments? Why?

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Can you think of a contemporary event or situation (21<sup>st</sup> Century) that helps you understand Rabbi Sacks’ perspective on the destruction of groups of people?

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If so, would you consider it moral? Why?

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