

# Why do we act the way we do?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Philosophers are divided over the ethical question of why humans behave the way they do. There are and have been different theories, "labels" such as "utilitarianism" or "moral imperative". None is without its strengths and weaknesses. That is precisely why the debate burns as fiercely as ever.

Log onto Harvard Professor Michael Sandel's excellent series for a wonderful free online course in ethics and you will be treated to an overview of many, not all, of the options. All the old chestnuts are there. There is a runaway train heading towards five men working on the track. Can the driver redirect the train so that it veers off onto a sidetrack and only kills one man? The yacht, "The Mignonette", capsized at sea and three survivors were in a leaking boat. Were they right to kill the cabin boy so that the others would survive? The great German philosopher, Kant, in his Critique of Pure Reason wrote that we humans could indeed work out for ourselves the morally right thing to do. Others, such as Jeremy Bentham, thought it was simply a matter of what was best for most people. The great revolutions that shaped the modern Western world were all influenced by his "utilitarianism".

Sandel does not refer to the French thinker Sartre, the existentialist. The Anglos regard French thinkers as rather airy-fairy, loose, and ill disciplined pseudo-philosophers. Sartre's contribution was to put the onus on individuals to ensure that whatever decisions they made, they did so as individuals empowered to decide their own fate. Any pressure or coercion was anathema and he was not prepared to brook any prior moral or religious system.

He gives the example of a boy and a girl sitting at a café table together and all of a sudden the boy's hand comes to rest on the girl's hand. She now has an existential decision to make. Should she leave her hand there or take it away? She can, knowing that one thing will lead to another, leave it there, precisely because she knows how things will develop and she wants them to. That's a legitimate decision. Equally, she could withdraw her hand because she does not want to have a relationship with the young man and does not want to start something she is unwilling to finish. That too is a legitimate existential decision. But what if she leaves her hand there, not because she wants to, but because she is too embarrassed to make a scene? She hopes she will be able to break things off later on. This, says Sartre, is betrayal, because instead of deciding what she wants to do, the circumstances have trapped her into allowing something she does not want.

I suggest that very few people make such rational decisions. Kant might, but he was by all accounts such a remarkable person that one could tell the time by his regular movements. In my book, if the young lady had been brought up in a very strict religious atmosphere she would be much less likely to find herself alone with such a "forward" young man in the first place. And if she had been brought up in twenty-first century Los Angeles, his hand would have

to be a lot further up her body before she would notice anything unusual. Most of our moral decisions are, if not “conditioned”, then influenced by our upbringing and environment.

There are no guarantees. Usually our moral or ethical decisions are confined to special occasions; should a dying relative be resuscitated, should a human body organ be taken from a poor person for money, the sort of challenges and conundrums that Professor Sandel so admirably highlights. But for most people the stress and pressure of daily life, lead them to functioning on a sort of “autopilot”.

Now this autopilot is often not so terrible, particularly if one is living, say, a religious life that is constantly preoccupied with “correct” behavior, even if adherence to the norms is out of habit or convention. It would, on the other hand, be very dangerous in authoritarian societies, for example, which require unquestioning obedience to authority without the right to challenge or question. For a good literary example, read Kafka’s *The Penal Colony*.

The beauty of Judaism is that it requires a way of life that is indeed regulated, covering codes of behavior that try to improve the relationship between humans as well as with God. Even when they are obeyed on autopilot (or out of a misguided belief that halacha is not concerned with ethics only obedience), one can still argue that a system that automatically requires one to give charity or to help one’s neighbor is preferable, if not morally superior, to one that does not. True, many on autopilot will stray when tempted and go off track, but a system that gives constant reminders is more likely to reign in the strays than one that does not.

That, dear friends, is why I so value Judaism, precisely because it offers ways to remind us of our moral standards and obligations. The artifice of the Rosh Hashanah ritual—the shofar and the liturgy—reminds us of human failings, of ideals we fail to live up to. The device of imagining we are being judged by a Heavenly Court, are all designed to jog our lazy minds and remind them of their obligations. That is Judaism’s answer to utilitarianism and philosophical morality. Both can be manipulated, just as Marxism and Fascism have manipulated the minds and actions of millions for evil. Religion offers an alternative, even if humans have always failed it and abused it. It is at least a system designed to provide us with a daily constitution and the practical mechanisms to remind us to check our moral compasses all the time. It is less an abstract system of thought and more a practical method. Were it not for religious rituals we would have no Rosh Hashanah, no days devoted to introspection and repentance. Of course, too much is not good either; it can be debilitating and frustrating. I suggest that, like Goldilocks, we have got it just right.

Shanah Tovah. May you all have a sweet year.