



Moral Intuitions • Parshat Lech Lecha

How do we know what is morally correct?

In *Parshat Lech Lecha*, Abraham courageously rescued his nephew Lot from captivity. In a fascinating analysis, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky creates the following anachronistic thought-experiment. If Abraham would have asked whether he was obligated to risk his life to save Lot according to Jewish law, the answer would have been no. Since a person does not have to put his own life in danger to save another, he would have been legally exempt. Rabbi Kamenetsky argues, however, that Abraham's actions were not motivated by Torah law, but by moral intuitions. The patriarchs were attuned to internal moral knowledge, which God endowed as part of human nature (*Emet LeYaakov*, p. 91).

Making a similar point, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, often referred to by his acronym, Netziv, writes that the stories of the patriarchs are included in the Torah because the patriarchs serve as moral exemplars for us. As Rabbi Walter Wurzburger notes regarding the Netziv's opinion, "Implicit in this view is the belief that the legal part of the Torah would not have sufficed for proper moral guidance. Despite the fact that the Law constitutes the very foundation of Jewish ethics, these "stories" were indispensable, if the Torah was to provide adequate direction for ethical decision-making, especially with respect to intricate and complex moral issues" (*Covenantal Imperatives: Essays by Walter S. Wurzburger on Jewish Law, Thought, and Community*, 2008, p. 30).

Developing his idea one step further, Netziv writes that our forefathers were described by the Sages as "yesharim," morally upstanding individuals. Besides being righteous and pious, this term indicates that they extended care and concern for outsiders. This is especially apparent in *Parshat Lech Lecha* when Abraham attempts to identify the innocent people in Sodom. Netziv points to another exemplary moral behavior of Abraham in the *parsha*, namely, his graciousness and civility in his treatment of Lot, even though Lot did not follow in the righteous path of Abraham.

Professor David Shatz notes that the Netziv is one of several Jewish authors who believes, "in an ethical standard that (1) is valid independently of Halakhah and also (2) can be known independently of Halakhah, a kind of 'natural law' or rational ethic" (*Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories*, 2009, p. 307). These thinkers acknowledge that we look to Jewish law to guide our moral decisions and that there *is* an independent moral imperative that serves to supplement Jewish law.

The question as to whether morality is an innate feature of human nature has long been debated in philosophy. Empiricists argue that there is no built-in moral knowledge, rather it is learned through experience. Nativists disagree and assume that moral beliefs are inborn and would develop even if they were not taught or learned. Based on his research, moral psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Haidt suggests that across cultures, people do have

innate moral intuitions, causing them to react with thoughts and feelings when they perceive certain social scenarios, including: “When they see others (particularly young others) suffering, and others causing that suffering; when they see others cheat or fail to repay favors; and when they see others who are disrespectful or who do not behave in a manner befitting their status in the group” (Haidt, J., & Joseph, C., “Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues,” 2004). While cultures may vary on how they react to these moral intuitions or in how they navigate moral conflicts, these moral intuitions seem to be naturally embedded in human nature. Returning to Abraham and using the language of Haidt, we can point to the natural moral intuition Abraham must have felt when he witnessed the suffering of others, which was particularly potent

when other humans caused that suffering. In addition, Rabbi Kamenetsky notes Abraham’s intuitive sense of fairness. According to one midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:13), Nimrod burned Abraham’s brother and Lot’s father, Haran, because Haran sided with Abraham’s monotheistic ideas. Consequently, Abraham felt the moral obligation of reciprocity to ensure Lot’s safety.

In the past weeks, Hamas has perpetrated acts of moral maliciousness that surpass the evilness of Sodom. Those who perpetuate violence and suffering are somehow condoned or even championed. Now we must follow the moral lead of our patriarchs, tuning in to our God-given innate moral intuitions, channeled through the moral principles of Jewish law and be a beacon of moral clarity for the world.

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Character Challenge: Pay attention to your moral intuitions. What do you think, feel, and do when you witness suffering, cheating, or disrespect? Think of Abraham. Would he think, feel, and do the same? What can you do to better align yourself with the “*yashar*” approach of our forefathers?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Our capacity to feel and be moved by the pain of others is an undeniable fact of our nature. In short, as soon as we exercise our moral sense, in terms of helping others in particular, we gain enormous benefits, not just psychological but physical. It is as if we realign ourselves with deeply engraved instincts that have somehow become underused in a world of self-esteem, self-satisfaction and self-preoccupation. The benefits are real, measurable and lasting” (*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, p. 324).