



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

**Parshat Re'eh:
“Doing What Is Right and Good”:
Nelson Mandela and Moral Courage**

Rabba Sara Hurwitz
President and Co-Founder, Maharat

Published on [HuffPost](#)

My parents moved our family out of apartheid South Africa in December 1989 with the dream of a new life where justice and equality prevailed. We settled in South Florida, and on Feb. 11, 1990, just two months after we had arrived, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. On that day, I discovered a role model for the pursuit of a good and just path. Mandela could have walked out of prison with anger and hate in his heart. Instead, he publicly called upon humanity to “conduct themselves with morality, integrity and consistency.”

For Mandela, the ethic of morality was an inherent part of his being. He emerged from prison with a deep-seated belief that the rest of humanity, each of us, would have the same moral consciousness. This raises the question: Are our lives guided by our own moral intuition or must we rely on God and the Torah for instruction on how to conduct ourselves?

The Torah seems to outline a code of conduct for living ethical lives. We are told to love our neighbor as ourselves; to value the stranger, the orphan and the widow; and we are warned against inappropriate behavior. I find it surprising then, that the Torah has to once again remind us to “do what is good (“tov”) and right (“yashar”) in the sight of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 12:28).

Ramban (Nahmanides on Deuteronomy 6:18) explains that it would be impossible for the Torah to express in detail the proper behavior in every circumstance, and therefore, God teaches through the laws in the Torah that one must go above and beyond the letter of the law, and act with morality – to do what is yashar and tov.

According to this formulation, God dictates our morality. The Torah is the blueprint offered by God for how people must live out ethical lives; there is no space for moral intuition independent of God’s guidance.

And yet, Rashi, basing his comments on the Sifrei (Deuteronomy 12:28), credits the individual for determining what is right. The Sifrei breaks up the phrase “good and right” so that these two values are placed in two different spheres: “For you will be doing what is good and right – good in the eyes of Heaven and right in the eyes of people – thus said Rabbi Akiva.”

Rabbi Akiva offers the belief that people do indeed have an inherent moral conscience that is independent of God’s will. According to this interpretation, the Torah presents moral guidelines and teaches how to be tov, but humans determine what is yashar, what is right.

This understanding, however, ignores the end of the verse: “...do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord.” God must, therefore, instill within us the drive and ability to be righteous. People strive towards morality not because God demands it, nor because moral intuition is naturally inherent



within each of us. We do what is *tov* and *yashar* because we are seeking to know God. In Chapter 54 of his treatise “The Guide for the Perplexed,” Rambam (Maimonides) explains that when a person acquires the highest and most complete knowledge of God, a person “will then be determined always to seek loving kindness, judgment and righteousness, and thus imitate the ways of God.”

For Rambam, God is the source of morality, and in knowing God we begin to emulate God’s ways of *tov* and *yashar*. The journey to knowing God shapes the way we choose to live our lives, and we must do so with *chesed* (“kindness”), *mishpat* (“judgment”) and *tzedakah* (“righteousness”) as our guideposts.

The Zohar (II 198a) takes Rambam’s idea of morality one step further. With every act of kindness and every moment we are guided by moral intuition, we are acting Godly, to the extent that we even have powers of creation. “Whoever feels compassion for the poor and restores his soul is considered by the blessed Holy One as if he created his soul.”

I believe that Nelson Mandela has helped create many souls. He pursued the ethics *tov* and *yashar*, of good and right, through actions that influenced thousands like myself to pursue justice, bringing light into the world. I like to think that Mandela’s moral consciousness is driven by an attempt to manifest God’s glory on this Earth. Like Mandela, we each have the capacity to choose to pursue that which is good and right, *tov* and *yashar*, thereby continuing God’s creative process and transforming the darkness of injustice into light.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.