

Personal Responsibility:

Who am I responsible for? For whom are we responsible?

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Touchstones for our conversation

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen. Therefore, **what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.**
- Our aim today is to hold a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves. It is not to dispense advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. To that end, in this conversation we will agree to **speak in the first-person**, to speak about our own truth.
- **We will assume good faith in one another.**
- **We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.**
- **We won't rush to fill the silence.**

A Story

Below is a story written by Rabbi Herbert Friedman, an American Reform rabbi who died in 2008. Friedman grew up during the Great Depression. His family was poor. One night, his mother attended a meeting of her synagogue sisterhood, where a representative of the U.S. National Refugee Service made urgent plea for Jewish families, to “take into their homes German-Jewish children whose parents were willing to let them emigrate to the United States, not knowing if they would ever see those children again.” Here is the rest of the story:

Of the more than 100 women assembled, all mothers, no more than a dozen raised their hand. My mother stood and announced that she would take three children. God has been good to her, she said, giving her three healthy sons; this was her opportunity to repay. She added without embarrassment that her family was living in a small apartment, with only two bedrooms, because their house had been foreclosed by the bank during the Depression. Hence, she could take only boys, who could sleep mixed in with her sons.

Mother came home with the affidavit forms, placed them under my father's nose at the kitchen table, and told him of her commitment. Signing the forms, as far as she was concerned, was only a formality. He saw it differently, because of the legal obligations his signature would impose... He could not envision for an instant how they could handle the additional expense of food, clothing, school, etc., for three more persons.

My mother answered him quietly, but with great passion. Even though we were poor, how could we refuse to save Jewish lives if we were given the chance to do so? She was ashamed of the other sisterhood members. All of them should have volunteered, and she would not hesitate to tell them so

at the next meeting. “But if we have enough food for five of us.” She asked, “why can’t we simply make it enough for eight?” If I must wash shirts for six boys instead of three, what’s the difference?

The parental argument raged all night- the only time I remember my parents raising their voices in anger and disagreement. She won. In the morning, my father signed the affidavits, and she proudly took them back to the synagogue.

As I mulled over the matter, I decided that my mother’s fight with my father symbolized the whole problem, and the only conclusion was therefore to act according to moral Jewish values, without permitting rationalization delay or any other diluting factor. “When history knocks, you answer.”

~ Quoted in Noam Zion and Barbara Spectre, *A Different Light* (2000), pp. 79-80

Chevrutah/Small Group Questions:

- How do the characters in this story understand who they are responsible for?
- How do they act on their sense of responsibility?
- Are there people they feel more responsible for than others? How do they prioritize? If you were in the same situation, would you do the same?
- How do you decide to whom you are responsible?

Self Reflection

What is my personal responsibility in this world? Who am I responsible for? What stories in my life have led me to these conclusions?

Please use this space to draw or write your responses.

If different, please use this space to draw or describe how you would **ideally** envision who you are responsible for?

Text

Laws in Allocating Tzedakah (Charity)

Talmud*, Tractate Bava Metzia 71a

In the case of a Jew and a non-Jew, the Jew takes precedence; a poor person and a wealthy person, the poor person takes precedence; your poor and the poor of your town, your poor come first; a poor person of your own city and a poor person of another city, the poor of your city take precedence.

1. Why do you think the Talmud builds a hierarchy in this way?
2. The text lays out four binaries, four pairs of people who might be seeking economic aid. What are the four binaries and, in each case, which of the two people does the text privilege?
3. Do you agree with it? How does it compare to your list of who you are responsible for?
4. If you could continue adding preferences, in terms of people who should be helped, or in terms of the ways we should help, what would you add?
5. How can this text be reconciled with the text from Gittin 61a (next text), if at all?

**The Talmud is the Jewish oral law. It consists of two parts: the Mishnah (codified by 200 CE), which consists primarily of concise legal statements; and the Gemara (codified around the 6th or 7th century CE), which expands upon and comments on the Mishnah. The Talmud is divided into tractates (Hebrew: masekhtot), each of which deals primarily with a certain set of topics.*

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

1. How does this text define or shape the universe of obligation?
2. What might “for the sake of peace” mean?
3. How can this text be reconciled with the text from Bava Metzia 71a (previous to this), if at all?

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and our world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportions to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine, runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom? - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*, The Dignity of Difference, pg. 30

1. How does this text define or shape your sense of responsibility?
2. Do you agree with Sacks that media exposure to people suffering far away has increased your feeling of empathy and/or compassion for those people?
3. What are some advantages and disadvantages of our greater exposure to distant suffering?

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom's main body of Orthodox synagogues.*

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b

Whoever can prevent his household from committing a sin but does not, is responsible for the sins of his household; if [he can prevent] his fellow citizens, he is responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens; if [he can prevent] the whole world, he is responsible for the sins of the whole world.

1. What are the implications of the word “can” in this text?
2. What does the text suggest about the relationship between power and responsibility?
3. What are some ways that you exercise power that could have an impact on the people and communities you encounter?
4. If you were to draft this using positive language, what would it look like?

“He (Hillel the Elder) used to say: An ignoramus cannot fear sin, nor can an unlearned man be pious. A bashful man cannot learn, nor can an impatient man teach. And not everyone who engages overmuch in business grows wise. And in a place where there are no men, endeavor to be a man.”

1. What message is Hillel trying to share? Do you agree? Disagree?
2. What meaning do you find in the last line?

The following is a commentary on the line from above, “And in a place where there are no men, endeavor to be a man.”

“And in a place where there are no men – if there are none in your city from whom you can learn Torah, endeavor to be a man, - and study by yourself according to your ability to become a man of wisdom and upright character. Others comment: Where there are no people to care for the needs of the community, endeavor to be that man.” – Pinchas Kehati

1. What is the text saying (the simple meaning of what is written)?
2. In the commentary above, what is Kehati saying are the responsibilities of a person?
3. If you were to create a list of what it means to actually endeavor to be a person today, what would be on your list? What are the responsibilities (if any) that it would entail? How do they differ from what Kehati and perhaps Hillel were referring to?
4. Are these responsibilities easy or difficult to take on? Does every person need to endeavor to be a man?

“When no one is ready to assume responsibility, you are required to do it.” – Vitry

“You are not required to complete the task, nor may you neglect it.” - Rabbi Tarfon, Ethics of our Fathers

1. What is the general meaning of each of these statements?
2. Is there a difference between them, or are they saying the same thing?

Other things to consider:

- What is the difference between being responsible for something and being “required” to do something?
- How do you determine if there is someone responsible?
- How is it determined that one is required to do something?
- How much of a task does one need to complete to be considered not neglecting it? Half? Ten percent? Ninety percent?

Conclusion

To be responsible—for ourselves, for other people, for ideas, for the world—is an elemental feature of human life. It is a question that never goes away. Our conversation today is the latest installment in a great conversation that has been going on for millennia. It is the conversation of the Torah, of the Talmud, of the world’s great religious, spiritual, and intellectual traditions. It is a conversation we will keep having, again and again, for the rest of our lives. And it is a conversation our children, and their children’s children, will have throughout their lives. Thank you for contributing to it today.

As you leave, here are some final questions to ponder:

- Did today’s conversation bring you some insight about your sense of responsibility?
- What is one thing you can do in the next 24 hours to live more responsibly?