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The Limits of Our Caring

> [If] one is walking on a path and hears the sound of a scream in the city and says, "May it be [God's] will that this scream not be from members of my family," that is an empty prayer. *Mishnah B'rachot 9:3*

Once upon a time, a rabbi had a grown daughter who lived in a nearby village. All was well until one day, when he heard that his daughter's village was on fire. Terrified for his daughter, he raced to the village and searched everywhere to find her. As he grew more and more anxious, his daughter suddenly came around a corner and saw him. She ran to his side, and they embraced. But despite having his daughter in his arms, the rabbi was wracked with sobs. Tears coursed down his cheeks. His daughter tried to comfort him. "Papa," she said, "you don't need to cry! Here I am, safe and sound!" Still, his tears continued to flow. "Papa," she cried, "your fears were unfounded. Our family is safe. Why are you still crying?" When the rabbi quieted a little, he shamefacedly explained to his daughter the reason for his tears. "I cared more about whether you were safe," he said, "than whether others in your village may have lost their lives."

Why does the rabbi cry? Surely there is nothing wrong with caring deeply for the members of our own families, for our friends, for those closest to us in the world. And surely it is understandable that at a time of stress, we would focus on the threat to those dear ones. But the rabbi's experience makes clear to him in an instant the huge gap between the intense concern he has for his daughter and the callous indifference he can show toward other people in danger, equally precious human beings who are worthy of the same respect, dignity, and care. Looking back on that moment, he sees it as a test, much like the test that Abraham faces in our Torah reading today. Abraham is forced into a choice between the close and the slightly less close, between his first wife, Sarah, and their son Isaac and his second wife, Hagar, and their son Ishmael. Abraham fails the test. He listens to Sarah and abandons Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, where only an angel's care saves their lives.[1] He opens his heart in one direction and closes it in the other. In our story, the rabbi, thinking back on his desperation for his daughter and his lack of caring for the villagers, feels that he, too, has failed the test. He has opened his heart in one direction and closed it in the other. And that is why he cries.

What are the limits of our caring? And what should they be? How do we balance our natural inclination to care for those closest to us with our obligation to care for others, even for strangers we may never meet, or for future generations not yet born? And in times of stress, when great strain is place on us and we feel endangered, in the times when we are tested, how do we not fail the test?

Of course, this is very hard. It might not be too much to say that all of Torah and all of the texts of Jewish tradition are oriented toward helping us somehow find a balance between

[1] Genesis 21:8-21.

the care we show for those close to us and our concern for those further away. Yet we all know how easy it is to fail. When the COVID vaccine became available, I knew that the most at-risk groups needed to be prioritized for vaccination: health care workers, elders, and those with conditions that made COVID more dangerous and more deadly for them. I knew that I and my family needed to wait our turn. But how did I feel? I felt that I wanted those closest to me to get their vaccinations as soon as possible, whether they fell into those groups or not. I wanted them to be spared from this terrible disease, even as others got sick. And I know I was not alone. Across the country we have seen that when people are asked to take measures like masking and vaccination that create difficulties and even pose some risk for those closest to them in order to spare those they do not know from contracting and possibly dying of COVID, many also fail the test. They open their hearts in one direction and close them in the other. And we all are failing the test as we prioritize vaccinating everyone in our country but ignore the plight of Africa and much of Asia, where lack of resources means that only a tiny percentage of people are vaccinated, while millions of others live in fear or get sick or die. Before we condemn others, we must see and address the failings in ourselves.

It used to be that climate change was something we imagined affecting us in the future. But today we see its impact all around us: in terrible wildfires surging around the globe, in extreme weather that causes crop failures, water shortages, and deaths from heat-related illnesses, and in rising sea levels that are already wiping out coastal communities and reshaping our planet. For years, our own GJC member and environmental justice leader Rabbi Arthur Waskow has rejected the term "global warming," with its gentle imagery, in favor of the term "global scorching" to truly convey the deadly impact that our changing climate is having on the earth. And there is no doubt where the responsibility lies. We know that human action is causing these disasters, and we know that human action—including severely reducing our reliance on burning fossil fuels—can at least mitigate their effects. And yet we, the inhabitants of the earth, are failing the test. As long as we can ensure that those closest to us are shielded from the effects, we are content to treat the earth as disposable, to close our eyes to the terrible impacts of global scorching on vulnerable communities in the present, and to turn away from the dire consequences it holds for future generations. We are opening our hearts in one direction and closing them in the other.

And on and on it goes: The crisis in Afghanistan. The suffering in Haiti. The conflict in Israel. Racism and economic inequality right here in Philadelphia and across the U.S. We live at a time of incredible moral danger, when we are repeatedly challenged to respond to extraordinarily difficult circumstances and to make ethical choices that could have a real impact on the large problems facing the world. And yet again and again we know we have failed the test of caring for others as much as we care for those closest to us. It is easy to despair on these High Holidays, to look back and lament the tests we have failed in the past year, and to look forward into a murky future in which there is no hope, for us or for humanity. But the history of the Jewish people is also a history of turning from despair to action, to the conviction, repeated so many times in the prayers of these holy days, that we and the world around us are capable of change. The ancient rabbis teach that it is always the next choice we make that

counts, and this is a day for imagining how we can do better in the year that lies ahead of us. So today, I want to offer two core questions from Jewish tradition that can help us to prepare ourselves to pass the next test, and the one after that. Because, my friends, if the past year is any guide, the tests are just going to keep on coming.

Question #1: Who am I responsible for?

After killing his brother Abel, Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?!"[2] and God's lack of response to that question speaks volumes. The Torah repeatedly commands us to guard, to protect, and even to love not only our "brother" but also our "neighbor" and even the "stranger." But the interpretation of these commandments frustrates any attempt to create firm boundaries around our obligations. In the ancient midrash, Rabbi Yohanan condemns Cain's words by taking them extremely literally: "He replied to God: Sovereign of the universe! You made me a keeper of vineyard and field [not a keeper of my brother]!"[3] Rabbi Yohanan is teaching us that the comparison is vacuous; care for a sibling is not a job given to some but not to others, and it is not something that comes with a salary or reward. What is more, since Cain and Abel are the first children born on earth, brothers by virtue of being the children of Adam and Eve, as are all of humanity, the text is hinting to us that the obligation under discussion is not limited to close relations.

Even expanding the boundaries of obligation to include your "neighbor," the midrash teaches, may not be enough. When Rabbi Akiva quotes the Torah's commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself"[4] and states that this is the greatest principle of Torah, Ben Azai has the temerity to disagree. Instead, he argues that the verse, "This is the book of the generations of Adam,"[5] which immediately follows the story of Cain and Abel, is an even greater principle.[6] How could the history of the descendants of the first human being be so important? As the 19th century commentator Malbim explains, Ben Azai is using this verse to teach us that

> all people are bound together like one body. All of them were created in the image of God to complete the highest image and form which contains the souls of all humanity. All of them are like one single person, and like one body which is composed of different members…"[7]

It is not proximity that obligates us, and neither is our obligation limited to family. We need not be a "neighbor" or a "brother" to come to someone's aid, and we should not see ourselves simply as fellow travelers living alongside the other human beings who happen to inhabit the earth. Instead, Malbim asks us to see ourselves as parts of one body, whose every part affects the others. In this vision, relationships with others are both visceral and infinitely multi-

[2] Genesis 4:9.
[3] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 21:9.
[4] Leviticus 19:18.
[5] Genesis 5:1.
[6] Sifra Kedoshim 4:12.
[7] Malbim on Sifra Kedoshim 4:12.

dimensional, and siblings and neighbors are tied together with sinews, bound in the body of our intertwined humanity.

But what about those whom we may disregard or even dislike? What about those we think are bad or wicked people? We know that the Torah says again and again to love the stranger, but less discussed are the verses that command us to give aid even to our enemies and to those we hate. The Covenant Code of Exodus, coming directly after the Ten Commandments, challenges us:

> When you encounter your enemy's ox or donkey wandering, you must take it back to them. When you see the donkey of one you despise lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with them.[8]

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, explains:

> The principle is simple. Your enemy is also a human being. Hostility may divide you, but there is something deeper that connects you: the covenant of human solidarity. Pain, distress, difficulty – these things transcend the language of difference.[9]

So important is it that we work against our natural inclination to shirk our obligations to those we dislike that the Talmud prioritizes helping our enemies over helping our friends: "If [the animal of] a friend requires unloading, and an enemy's loading, you should first help your enemy – in order to suppress the evil inclination."[10] Of course it is a mitzvah to help an animal in distress, but the Talmud's instruction makes clear that it is just as important to train ourselves to become more human by first helping precisely the one we may wish to avoid, forcing us to open our hearts in the direction that they may naturally be closed.

The teachings of Torah and the interpretations of the sages are united, not in helping us to make distinctions among our relationships but rather in urging us to get <u>more</u> confused about them, to see distinctions between different types of people <u>less</u> clearly, and to focus instead on the massive breadth of our obligations. We need to blur the sharp distinctions we usually make between strangers and siblings, enemies and neighbors, beloveds and strangers. It is only natural that we would care for those closest to us more than for those further away, and that is precisely why the Torah spends so much effort trying to work against that natural impulse and to redirect our hearts. Cain asks if he is his brother's keeper, and God's failure to answer teaches us that the question is rhetorical, its answer so obvious that it is contained in the question itself. When we pose the question of to whom we are obligated, we, too, simultaneously provide our answer. God's silence whispers, "To every human being."

[8] Exodus 23:4-5.
[9] https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5769-mishpatim-helping-an-enemy/
[10] Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 32b.

Question #2: What belongs to me?

Today marks the beginning of the last year in the Biblical cycle of seven years, known as the year of *Sh'mitah*, or "release." The Torah creates a system in which every seven years the land is allowed to rest, just as we rest every seven days.[11] In this year of rest, when the land is not plowed, seed is not sown, and owners do not harvest their crops, both landowners and landless have equal right to whatever food the land happens to produce. In addition, whatever debts have been incurred because of the unequal distribution of resources and luck are forgiven in this Sh'mitah year. The Torah commands each of us: *Tashmet yadecha* – "open your hand"[12] and release any debt you may hold, as well as any sense of ownership over what the fields produce. The effect of this year of rest was meant to be as far-reaching as the institution of Shabbat. Shabbat teaches us that work does not define us, that there is so much else to life that we need to value and provide time for. The Sh'mitah year teaches perhaps even a more fundamental lesson: that we are not defined by the economic system in which we operate, what we own, what we accumulate, and what we owe. Instead, Sh'mitah calls us to remember a deeper truth that is obscured by our day-to-day economic interactions: "The land is Mine," says God, "and you are but strangers residing with me."[13] Our time on the earth is short, and no matter what we think we own and control, we are truly only "renting" our use of it from the One who spoke and the world came into being. Ownership of land, of objects, and of wealth is an illusion that we cling to in order to give ourselves a false sense of security, a way to guard ourselves against privation. Sh'mitah pulls that sense of security away from us.

The Sh'mitah year teaches many lessons about the depth of our obligations to each other. First, Sh'mitah teaches that we are all in this together. Beyond the economic forces that separate us, beyond the work that each of us does, we depend on each other for our survival. This idea entered our consciousness forcefully during the early lockdowns of the pandemic, when those of us lucky enough to be able to work from home realized that our ability to exist depended on grocery workers, delivery drivers, and other "essential workers" without whom our lives would not be possible. Perhaps never before have we been so aware of our dependence on each other, not just for food and material goods, but also for our safety, as we learned that masking and then vaccination protect other people at least as much as they protect those who take those precautions. Second and related, Sh'mitah teaches us that my well-being depends on yours. The provision of debt relief that is embedded in the Sh'mitah year necessitates that we care about others' economic well-being as much as our own. Even if we intend to be ruthlessly self-serving, we can't simply take advantage of our fellow humans' poverty to enrich ourselves when the time horizon for exploitation is so short. A reckoning will always come because the debts will be forgiven. In this system, we have every incentive to make sure that the economic system doesn't get too far out of balance, that the gap between rich and poor, which has widened even more in the U.S. during the pandemic, is narrowed again. Even in our current unequal system, we have recently seen the power of workers in the

[11] Leviticus 25:1-7.
[12] Deuteronomy 15:3.
[13] Leviticus 25:23

service economy grow, a hopeful sign that narrowing our world-leading wealth gap is possible. But we have a long way to go.

Third, Sh'mitah teaches us that no matter how much or how little we own, we need to hold what we possess loosely in our hands. This is an old lesson, but the Sh'mitah year is a good time to remember and meditate on it. We need to redefine our relationship to property and objects, the things we can buy and sell, the things that for many of us fill our houses and occupy our minds. As attractive and engaging as they can be, objects and even the houses that contain them are not things on which we can rely. Sh'mitah reminds us that everything can be taken away, that we are merely the custodians of the resources we temporarily control, the tenders of the garden of earth. We are the caretakers of all, but we are not truly the owners of anything. We cannot depend on our possessions to save us, to comfort us, to protect us from harm, from chance, from disease, or from death. Objects will never be the source of our security. Our only route to safety is to form a human web of caring, one that ties together families, communities, nations, and world. And rather than striving to stand alone, we will see that the more strands that connect us, the more we can feel and be truly secure.

Maybe it is not surprising that the laws of Sh'mitah seem to have been honored more in the breech than in the observance. We don't see many historical instances of the land being allowed to rest, and as the Torah anticipates, in ancient Rabbinic times people become reluctant to make loans when they know that any balance will have to be forgiven in six years, leading the sage Hillel to create a workaround just to allow the agricultural economy to function. Even thousands of years before Marx wrote about capitalism, it seems to have been very difficult for people to separate themselves from their property and assets. So even though we live in a world far from the agricultural economy imagined by the Torah, we still have a lot to learn from the laws of Sh'mitah. They still call us and push us to refocus our attention on the health of our collective situation rather than nearsightedly concentrating our vision only on the wellbeing of those closest to us.

By asking these two questions when we face difficult choices, asking them again and again, maybe this year we can break our habit of opening our hearts in one direction but closing them in the other. Imagine the change that could make in our day-to-day lives, in our community, and in our society. We know what the alternative is. We've already seen it and are continuing to see it every day. A world of people so concerned with themselves and those closest to them that they can't act in a way that benefits others, can't see their obligation to them. A world of people captivated by a narrow definition of their self-interest. This is, simply, not a world that can survive. We live in a society that perhaps more than others has trained us to make decisions by focusing on what is good for us as individuals, not what might be best for all of us as a whole. So we need some retraining in the opposite direction. And there is no better time to get started than in this new year, a year of caring, a year of Sh'mitah, a year of release and recommitment to each other.

When the rabbi realizes the yawning gap between his overwhelming care for his daughter and his lack of concern for the other villagers, he cries, and we cry with him, recognizing that same gap within ourselves. But that is not the end of the story, for him or for us. After drying his tears, he resumes his work, pushing himself to widen the limits of his caring, to embrace more and more of the world in its grasp. May our tears, too, melt our hearts, and may we use the resources of Jewish tradition, the challenging questions it poses to us, to make change inside and outside of ourselves this year.

L'shanah tovah nikateiv b'ya<u>h</u>ad – may we all be inscribed together for a good new year.