

## **Embracing Our Collective Responsibility**

The morning I wrote these words a couple of weeks ago, I got a bit sidetracked. When I woke up, my plan was to work on editing this sermon and hopefully coming to a final draft. But then I checked Facebook and saw that a local woman was starting a collection for Afghan refugees - clothing, toys, toiletries, all to be delivered directly to people who are literally coming here with nothing but the clothes on their back. There was no question that editing my sermon was going to have to wait.

I asked our six-year-old, Izzy, to join me in the basement where I proceeded to try to explain the situation in Afghanistan and why some kids out there needed some of his toys. Fortunately, we have a world map in the basement! While he was initially uncertain, he ultimately got very excited to choose toys to give to kids without; and of course, the quantity of toys that we have accumulated four children later, we were able to contribute a lot and hardly make a dent!

A week before Rosh Hashana, my sermons are not yet finished, so why did I stop everything? As a very disciplined task-oriented worker, I am good at avoiding distraction and buckling down when I know I have something to get done. But as a Jew, as a human being, how could I not put my work aside in this situation?

Within the Jewish community we have a saying, *Kol Yisrael Areivim ze ba ze*, all of Israel is responsible for one another, is “areivim,” mixed up together. But in today’s world, when we are all mixed together, when our world is smaller than ever, and we are connected in ways that may not even fully understand, it is our job to go beyond just looking out for the people of Israel. We are responsible for not only our family, our

friends, our own community, but everyone who we are mixed together with, sharing a common planet and a common humanity.

And of course Judaism teaches quite clearly that this is a responsibility, not just something nice to do. It is part of the rent we pay for the gift that is our very life in this world. Perhaps that's why it's called *paying* it forward. Of course, paying it forward, taking responsibility for others – be they in our immediate circle or halfway around the world – giving to and supporting others, sometimes at the expense of our own time, comfort, or schedule, does not always come so easily.

Let's look at our Torah reading this morning, where we read the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael. In this narrative, it is actually our revered ancestors Abraham and Sarah who failed to look out for another, leading God to intervene.

You may recall the story: Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive a child, so Sarah thinks it would be a good idea to use their maidservant Hagar as a surrogate. Hagar becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, Ishmael. But then in this morning's portion, we find out that Abraham and Sarah are going to be blessed with a child of their own, Isaac.

Alongside her joy, Sarah has quickly become threatened by Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah says to Abraham: *"Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share the inheritance with **my son** Isaac."*

Abraham is "distressed" at this request, but he listens to his wife, and sends Hagar and Ishmael away, leaving them to die in the wilderness. Things aren't looking good for them and it seems that no one is coming to their rescue, until **God** intervenes, opens

Hagar's eyes to notice a well of water that is right in front of her, helping to ensure their survival. And the Torah then says that God remained "with the boy and he grew up..." (Genesis 21)

There are two things that I find interesting about this narrative. First, as we the Jewish people are reading a story of our own ancestors as a part of celebrating our own new year, we read a text which brings focus on, and sympathizes with someone who is not one of our direct ancestors, but in fact someone who we would consider "the other."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks dissects this a bit:

None of this is as we would expect. Ostensibly, the hero of the story is Isaac. He is the chosen. But our sympathies are not drawn to Isaac, nor in these episodes at least, to Sarah... We are left in no doubt that Abraham is attached to Ishmael, that our sympathies are drawn to him and Hagar, that Ishmael will be blessed, that God hears his tears and is 'with him' as he grows up.

...we feel for Sarah and Isaac, *but we also feel for Hagar and Ishmael*. We enter their world, see through their eyes, empathize with their emotions. That is how the narrative is written, to enlist our sympathy. We weep with them, feeling their outcast state. As does God. For it is he who hears their tears, comforts them, saves them from death, and gives them his blessing. Ishmael means 'he whom God has heard.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Not in God's Name*, 115, 117-118

As we begin a new year together we are reminded that we, like God, are to empathize with, to have compassion for, and to look out for those who we might see as “other,” because they too are children of God.

But there is more here. We see here how easy it is to focus on our own needs and in doing so hurt the “other.” It’s easy to ignore *someone else’s* plight, *someone else’s* problems, even for a righteous person like Abraham. When Ishmael and Hagar were thrown out into the desert by Abraham and Sarah, their odds of survival were not great. But in the end, God came to their aid, God saw Hagar and Ishmael’s pain and suffering and took responsibility.

God was showing us that watching out for Hagar and Ishmael did not in any way “take away” from God’s covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. God was showing that caring for someone else, being responsible for someone else, was not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength. God was teaching us that looking out for the vulnerable was not only the responsible thing to do, it was the sacred thing to do.

Do we today understand that message? Do we live that message? These days, I am not so sure.

What does it mean to really believe that we are all a part of the collective, and responsible for one another? How would taking that worldview seriously inform the way that we live our lives? You may remember the story of what took place in Billings, Montana in the early 1990’s. The town had about 80,000 residents, overwhelmingly Christian and white. There were around 50 Jewish families living there, and fewer than

500 blacks. Adding in Latinos and Native Americans, the minorities in Billings added up to about 7% of the population.

By the end of 1992, the Ku Klux Klan and a band of skin-heads had started making their presence known in Billings. Klan newspapers were tossed onto driveways, and flyers surfaced attacking mainly Jews and people who were gay. By 1993, the hate activity had grown and, four days before the start of the Jewish New Year in September, vandals overturned headstones in the Jewish cemetery. And on Rosh Hashanah itself, the temple received a bomb threat before the start of the children's service.

The next months saw a slow but steady escalation of the hate incidents, and on the night of December 2nd, the hatred turned to violence when someone threw a cinder block through a child's bedroom window. Taped to the child's window was a paper menorah to commemorate Chanukah. When the police came to respond to the attack, they advised the family to take down the Chanukah decorations.

The next day, one of the adults from the home that had been attacked spoke with a local reporter from The Billings Gazette. She told him how troubled she was by the officer's advice. "Maybe it's not wise to keep these symbols up," she said. "But how do you explain that to a child?"

When reading this in the paper, a local Christian woman read the quote in the paper, and tried to imagine telling her own children that they could not have a Christmas tree,

or that they had to take a wreath off the door because it wasn't safe. She called her pastor with the suggestion that children in their church's Sunday school could draw menorahs and then put them up in their own windows. The pastor agreed, and started to reach out and spread the word to other local churches. That week hundreds of menorahs appeared in the windows of Christian homes in Billings.

One parent at the time said, "It wasn't an easy decision...With two young children, I had to think hard about it myself. We put our menorah in a living room window, and made sure nobody sat in front of it." Another parent reflected that, while "It's easy to go around saying you support some good cause...this was different. It was putting ourselves in danger." Some families nervous about putting themselves and their children in danger reached out to the chief of police, Wayne Inman, who told people, "Yes, there's a risk, but there's a greater risk in not doing it."

On December 7, The Billings Gazette published a full-page picture of a menorah to cut out and tape up. Local businesses also distributed photocopies of menorahs, and one put a message on a billboard, proclaiming, "Not in Our Town! No Hate, No Violence. Peace on Earth."

The more menorahs that went up, the more hate emerged. Glass panes on the doors of the Evangelical United Methodist Church were smashed. Someone fired shots into a Catholic school. The windows were kicked out of six cars parked in front of houses with menorah pictures in the windows.

But people kept hanging up the menorahs, until there were probably as many as 6,000 homes in Billings with menorahs on display. A local leader at the time said, "The people of this town understood that an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us." This power of this united town was too much for the haters – the Ku Klux Klan and skinheads backed off. The acts of vandalism stopped, the hate literature disappeared, and the anonymous calls ended.<sup>2</sup>

If you are listening to this thinking- "Yeah right. That would never happen today with the divisiveness that we feel, with everyone looking out for their own interests, or what they perceive to be the own interest of 'their group,' that is exactly my concern. Because one this is certain- we will all face moments of vulnerability in our lives. Think back to other times that you have been vulnerable or struggling in your life. Moments of hardship, loss, despair, confusion, suffering. Who was there for you? Who looked out for you? Who took care of you? Who accepted responsibility for your physical, spiritual, or emotional well-being?

Some of these moments are dramatic and powerful like the story of the community coming together in Billings. Other moments are small and maybe even forgettable, but things that make a big difference to people who are struggling. I cannot tell you how many times when our oldest kids were all little and Jane-Rachel and I were ourselves in extremely high stress moments and people went out of their way to help us. And they weren't helping us because our kids were "cute." Believe me, two adults walking on to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/not-our-town-0>

a plane with a rambunctious toddler, two infants, three car seats, and about 14 bags, with kids screaming and snacks flying, is anything but cute. When I think back in shock that we were actually able to successfully and without major incident travel across the country multiple times a year with our young crew, we know it was each time in part thanks to the generosity and care of random strangers who offered to help carry our bags, who entertained Aviva while we were getting the babies settled, or who moved seats in order to enable us to all sit together.

We each can probably come up with many moments in our lives, big and small, when we were struggling or suffering, and someone stepped in to empathize, to take responsibility, and to help us or care for us.

And beyond the caregivers, helpers, and protectors who we remember, there are countless people who have cared for us, helped us, impacted our lives, who we may not even know about or think about.

I read a great story about a retired naval officer shared by minister Steve Goodier.<sup>3</sup> The officer's name was Charlie Plumb. After Plumb graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, he flew jets in Vietnam, where he was unfortunately shot down by a surface-to-air missile after 75 combat missions. He ejected and parachuted into the jungle. When he landed, the Vietcong captured him and held him prisoner for six years in North Vietnam.

One day years later, when Plumb was sitting in a restaurant, a stranger approached

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<sup>3</sup> <http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2011/03/who-is-packing-your-parachute.html>



him. “You’re Plumb!” the man said. “You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!” “How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb. “I packed your parachute!” he said, “and I guess it worked!”.

(Plumb) couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about the stranger. He wondered how many times he might have seen him on their ship and not spoken to him because Plumb was a fighter pilot and the man who packed his chute was “just a sailor.” He thought of the many hours the sailor had spent on a long wooden table in the bowels of the carrier, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn’t know.

Who has watched out for you, cared for you, taken responsibility for you without you even realizing or considering it? Who has figuratively packed your parachute? To whom might you owe your life, your safety, your health, or your success?

We know the simple but powerful teaching of the great sage Hillel, who said:

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאַנִּי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתָי

If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when? (Avot 1:14)

These familiar phrases encapsulate some of the most central Jewish values we have. We must make sure to care for ourselves, for our bodies, and for our souls. But we can’t stop there -- it’s not enough to take care of ourselves, but we also must balance that out with caring for others, with a responsibility towards the collective. There are so many people who pack our parachutes with or without us knowing it, and we must do the same for others. And if not now- when?

These days I fear that we, as individual human beings, as Jews, and as Americans, focus too much on “if i am not for myself” and have forgotten the “if I am only for myself” part of Hillel’s dictum. A narrow focus on ourselves or on our own families and communities is easy to understand in a world full of uncertainty, instability, and risks. But this self-focus often makes us neglectful of our responsibility to care for or give to other people, especially people who may be suffering or struggling more than we could ever imagine. Our family that goes all the way back to Abraham and Sarah is both tribal and global. As our parsha reminds us this morning, we are responsible for **both** those who are in our inner circle, and those who are not.

How can we better work to remember this responsibility to support, help, and care for others? This poses challenges to us as individuals, as members of the Jewish people, and as Americans.

Let’s take our favorite example of that little piece of cloth that has caused so much agita over the past year and a half -- the facial mask. Something that medical experts have explained protects us as individuals, and protects those around us. Unfortunately, many individuals make their calculus about whether to “mask up” or not solely based on their **own individual preferences and beliefs**. “I don’t need a mask- I am vaccinated,” people claim. “I don’t want to wear a mask, it’s not comfortable to **me**, it is hot for **me**, it is annoying to **me** and hard **for me** to breathe,” people insist.

Some of these claims are likely more valid than others, but as the cliché goes: “There’s no “I” in team. All of the resistance focuses only on the perspective of the person wearing the mask. As Hillel taught, I must be for myself. But what about wearing a mask for the health and safety of others?

A friend of mine who is a doctor said to me many months ago: “Do you know why masking is just an accepted custom in Japan? Because in Japan, people have been taught and long accepted that they are wearing a mask for someone else. There are too many Americans who only think about how the mask affects themselves. As individuals we can be so hyper-focused, on our own individual rights and needs, that we can be blinded to the harm we are causing others.” As Hillel warned- if I am only thinking about myself- what am I?

This is not to say that self-care is a bad thing, or that self-love is not important. Indeed, there are times when taking time for ourselves, caring for ourselves, and being good to ourselves is of critical importance. But not if or when it comes at the expense of the larger whole.

Over the years I have many times received questions like: Why should the synagogue care about the problems of other communities? Why should we get involved with issues that mostly don’t affect us? Don’t we need to focus on Israel, on fighting anti-Semitism, on making sure that the future of Judaism is not only safe and secure, but thrives in America?

My answer is always the same: of course those things are critically important. Of course we Jews must deal with the tragedy of anti-Zionism that is often anti-Semitism in disguise. Of course we Jews must work to create a strong and safe Israel, an Israel that is Jewish, democratic, and will one day live, God willing, in peace with her neighbors. Of course we must worry about Jewish demographic trends, about the challenging time that we are having as a shifting and evolving American Jewish society. After all, **אם אין אני לי, מי לי** **If I am not for myself, who am I?**

But just because we have a responsibility to care for our own community's issues, doesn't mean we can ignore the plight of others. The responsibility of looking out for our own family, does not absolve us of responsibility for others, even when it is difficult or complicated. **וכשׁאני לעצמי, מה אני** **because if I am only for myself, what am I?**

Today we all know that we are in a time of unprecedented political divisions in this country, many of which are because of voters and politicians who are only looking out for their own interests, who are only interested in "their team" winning at all costs. This has become a norm for many in our country – this competitive, winner take all, triumphalist mindset.

But how did so many Americans forget that we are all a part of the same collective, the collective that is the American people. Unless and until we prioritize, on local, state, and national levels, looking out for interests other than our own, I am afraid we will see more of the same. Our tradition reminds us that we have a responsibility to those who

have less, to those who look different, to those who believe different things than we do. As one of our earliest mottos stated: E pluribus unum, out of many, we are one. It is time more people in our community and country started acting like it, honoring the many and remembering that the strength of our character, our union, our whole can be found in honoring our diversity.

As we enter this New Year, for whom are we responsible?

The answer is simple: Everyone.

The Talmud states it in a very forceful way:

Rav, Rabbi Hanina, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Habiba taught: Whoever can **forbid** his household from committing a sin but does not, is punished. If he can forbid his fellow citizens from committing a sin but does not, he is punished for their sins. If he can forbid the whole world from committing a sin, but does not, he is punished for the sins of the world. **BT Shabbat 54b.**

Talk about responsibility- the bar is set very high. We are responsible for the people in our household, for our fellow citizens, even for the whole world. This is a tall order, but if we take it one person at a time, one day at a time, one interaction at a time, our lives will be changed for the better as will the lives of the countless strangers who we meet along the way.

I'll give you one more ancient example. Do you know who one of the most significant figures in the Torah was? A man who once gave Joseph directions to find his brothers. Joseph had recently shared his dreams of grandeur with his brothers, and they were not happy with him. After looking for them in Shechem, and not finding them, Joseph encounters a man who asks what he is looking for.

We never hear from this man again, we don't even know his name. But we do know that when Joseph asked this unnamed stranger where his brothers were, the man pointed him in the right direction. It is this unnamed man who forever changed the course of the Jewish people. As our Etz Hayim commentary points out, were it not for this man, for this stranger:

*Joseph would have never found his brothers. He would have never been sold into slavery. The family would not have followed him to Egypt. There would have been no Exodus and the history of the world would have been completely different! (229)*

Like our ancient biblical mystery man, we may never know what the smallest act of kindness, consideration, or care might mean. We may never know how much we have changed the course of someone else's life, just by helping them with something as simple as directions. We may never know just exactly where our actions, stemming from a collective responsibility for all of God's creatures, may lead. But if we stop to think of the countless people, the countless strangers, or mere acquaintances, who have by chance, or divine providence, helped **us** in the smallest and largest of ways, we may start to get an idea.

Too often our ego gets in the way. Too often, we somehow think that **all** of our successes, **all** of our blessing, **all** of our privilege is somehow due to us as individuals, **alone**, and we fail to see the sacred ways in which we are merely a very small piece in the puzzle that is God's world. All too often we inflate ourselves, and in doing so fail to see that we are a part of a beautiful, complicated, diverse, and sacred whole. A whole that is blessed and privileged to be in this world together.

Hayom Harat Olam. Today, the entire world was created. Not just your world. Not just my world. Not just the world of the Jewish people. **The whole world.** As we begin another new year together, let us celebrate that incredible blessing by embracing our sacred calling to care for all of its inhabitants. אָם לֹא עַכְשָׁי, אֵימָתִי If not now- when? Shanah Tovah.