

Source Sheet for Global Day of Study in Honor of the International Day of Social Justice

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible. (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement", 1973).

There are four types of character in human beings: One that says: 'mine is mine, and yours is yours': this is a commonplace type; and some say this is the behavior of Sodom. [One that says:] 'mine is yours and yours is mine': is an unlearned person; [One that says:] 'mine is yours and yours is yours' is a pious person. [One that says:] 'mine is mine, and yours is mine' is a wicked person (Pirkei Avot 5:10).

"Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:8).

The Sages taught: One sustains poor gentiles along with poor Jews, and one visits sick gentiles along with sick Jews, and one buries dead gentiles along with dead Jews, on account of the ways of peace [i.e. to foster peaceful relations between Jews and gentiles] (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a).

"You give it openhandedly, feeding every creature to its heart's content" (Psalm 145:16).

There are eight levels in charity, each level surpassing the other. The highest level, beyond which there is none, is a person who supports a Jew who has fallen into poverty [by] giving him a present or a loan, entering into partnership with him, or finding him work so that his hand will be fortified so that he will not have to ask others [for alms]. Concerning this [Leviticus 25:35] states: "You shall support him, the stranger, the resident, and he shall live among you." Implied is that you should support him before he falls and becomes needy. A lower [level] than this is one who gives charity to the poor without knowing to whom he gave and without the poor person knowing from whom he received... A lower level than that is an instance when the giver knows to whom he is giving, but the poor person does not know from whom he received... A lower level than that is an instance when the poor person knows from whom he took, but the donor does not know to whom he gave... A lower level than that is giving [the poor person] in his hand before he asks... A lower level than that is giving him after he asks... A lower level than this is giving him less than what is appropriate, but with a pleasant countenance... A lower level than that is giving him with sadness (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Giving to the Poor, 10:7-14).

Question | In a world in which social and economic inequality is only increasing, what can be learned from Jewish sources regarding our responsibility toward the Other/vulnerable members of society?




Source 1 | "If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

Source 2 | "Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:10-11).

Adam, the first human being, relted to God on the basis of a question. Aiecha? Where are you? The question to Adam asks about orientation, which necessarily requires to be aware of the existence of another. I can only be, if I am in relation to someone else. For there to be orientation there has to be more than pne point, i.e. the point in which I am, and that 'other' in relation to which I am. Another, in Hebrew 'acher' is he who addresses me and imposes on me the duty of responsibility 'achraiut' which stems from the same root as 'acher'. The question posed to Adam can only be answered in relation to the second question that a human being is asked, the question to Cain. 'Hei hevel achicha'. Where is Abel your brother? He who does not know where his brother is will hardly be able to respond to Aiecha. A person who cannot find the other, will never be able to find himself. Therefore, the question about another, the duty of responsibility not only provides an identity to the other, but it essentially allows us to be (Rabbi Guido Cohen from Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center, FL, USA).

In a few words, in order to realize himself, man must be alone, but at the very same time a member of a community... If the lonely man is to ascend from the existential uniqueness to existential community, he must first become aware of a different reality... awareness means an action of sacrifice; the individual retreats in order to make room for You. Man frequently finds himself in a crowd, amongst stranger. He feels lonely. No one knows him, no one notices him, no one is interested in him. This, too, is an existential experience. He begins to doubt his own worth and arrives at a feeling of alienation from the crowd that surrounds him. Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder and says: "Aren't you so and so? I have heard so much about you!" In the blink of an eye, his consciousness changes. An alienated being becomes a member of an existential community (the crowd). What brings about this shift? The awareness of someone else. The word "to know" means not only to be physically identified. It is more than this: knowing the other is identifying him existentially as a person with a role that no one else can properly fulfill. To know a man means to admit that he is irreplaceable. To injure a person means to tell him that he is cancelable, that we do not need him... it is not enough for the generous man to aid the needy. He must do more: He must attempt to rehabilitate the sense of dignity and self-worth of the man who is dependent on his mercy... from the moment that I have acknowledged the other and invited him to join the community, I have immediately undertaken responsibility for him. Knowing is identical to commitment... I carry responsibility toward every friend in the community, a friend to whom I have granted acknowledgement and whom I have found worthy of being my colleague. In other words, the I carries responsibility for the well-being of the You (Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, Divrei Hagut ve-Ha'aracha, The Community).



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