Am I My Brother's Keeper If My Brother Lives Halfway Around the World?

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In March of 1991, a tsunami struck Bangladesh and killed 138,000 people. Both citizens and governments in the West scarcely registered the disaster, and the few who did scarcely acted. The news media barely covered the story, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) provided limited international humanitarian response. Likewise, the Jewish community's reaction was muted. The disaster was too far away to connect with. CNN was a nascent network; there was no Internet, nor were there tourists with video cameras to record the damage. The essayist Annie Dillard described a conversation with her daughter that tries to make sense of our apathy:

> At dinner I mentioned to my daughter, who was then seven years old, that it was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning. "No, it's easy," she said. "Lots and lots of dots, in blue water."[1]

Lots and lots of dots in blue water. It's a childish image, but how far is it from our own? Annie Dillard recounts the image because it helps to explain why we were unable to connect with what happened. These people are so far away and so anonymous, their problems are so different from our own, that we can't imagine ourselves in their circumstances. And because we can't imagine ourselves in their circumstances, we don't act.

Fast-forward thirteen years. A tsunami once again strikes in the Indian Ocean, killing 225,000 people. This time, the international response is overwhelming. More humanitarian aid was committed by governments and individual citizens in response to the 2004 tsunami than has ever been for any other natural disaster in human history.

The disasters were nearly identical, but the world's responses were radically different. Why?

We watched the 2004 tsunami on television. As the giant waves struck Phuket, Thailand, wealthy European and American tourists, video cameras in hand, stood on hotel room balconies, filmed the waves washing

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[1] Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 46.

over the beaches and sweeping people away, and transmitted those images almost instantaneously to viewers around the world. You can still watch the videos on YouTube.

A skeptic might argue that we could empathize with the mostly white and relatively affluent tourist-filmers, that their similarity to us accounts for the difference in response. But we think it was something else. The first time, the area hit was a poor one and didn't support a tourist industry. No tourists = no video cameras = no images on the evening news = limited access for an international audience = little humanitarian aid. The second time, we watched what happened nearly in real time. And in watching, we were brought into the lives of people halfway around the world; we could see their humanity, if only for a moment. But in that moment, we became obligated to them as fellow human beings. The essence of the distinction rests on this shift: these people, so dissimilar from us, so foreign, had entered our universe of obligation.

The Universe of Obligation

The universe of obligation is a way of understanding how we decide which people in the world we feel responsible for and what we owe them.

The specific term gained currency in the aftermath of the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964. On her way home from waiting tables late one night, Kitty Genovese was killed outside her apartment in Queens, despite repeatedly calling for help. The next day, when police canvassed the neighborhood to see whether anyone had witnessed the crime, thirty-eight people indicated that they had watched the attack take place and had chosen, essentially, to do nothing.

The public uproar that followed the news reports on the thirty-eight witnesses prompted Abe Rosenthal, then a reporter for the *New York Times*, to write, "How far away do you have to be to forgive yourself for not doing whatever is in your power to do?... How far is silence from a place of safety acceptable without detesting yourself as we detest the thirty-eight?"[2] How far, in other words, do you have to be from someone who is in need for that person to be outside your responsibility? Or, conversely, to what extent does seeing, witnessing, or having clear knowledge of suffering or injustice bring those affected inside our universe of obligation?

Expanding Our Universe of Obligation: Jewish Perspectives

Judaism has a broad, deep, and detailed tradition of social justice and social responsibility, ranging from *tzedakah* to *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick) to *pikuakh nefesh* (saving a human life). What is less clear in Jewish teaching and tradition is how to prioritize among the seemingly infinite needs that surround us. That process of prioritizing is the process of constructing our universe of obligation.

There are a variety of Jewish sources that speak to this endeavor. There are voices in our tradition that, informed by Jewish historical experiences of persecution, construct the universe of obligation narrowly, in ways that prioritize the needs of Jews—serving the Jewish poor, providing aid and succor to Israel, supporting Jewish education. There are perspectives that recommend that we cast our net of responsibility more widely, but only to serve the narrower Jewish interest: giving to non-Jews as a way of building up a reservoir of goodwill in order, ultimately, to protect and defend Jewish interests. And there are some voices in the Jewish tradition that suggest we should prioritize based solely on need, regardless of the ethnic, religious, or national identification of the beneficiaries. None of these traditions is sufficient to the task at hand: balancing the sense of obligation that comes from seeing the needs of the developing world with both the limitations of our ability to address those needs and the competing demands on our fixed resources.

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[2] A.M. Rosenthal, *Thirty-Eight Witnesses* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

Fortunately, Judaism demands of us to continuously apply ancient concepts to contemporary problems. In Pirkei Avot 1:1, we read:

> Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: "Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah."

This seminal Mishnaic passage acknowledges the evolutionary nature of the Halachic process, that the law is passed from generation to generation and that each generation is bound to apply the law deliberately. This sentiment is echoed, albeit nontraditionally, in a review of Israeli Supreme Court Justice Menahem Elon's four-volume work on Jewish law, the second volume of which "studies the legal sources of Jewish law, namely, exegesis and interpretation, legislation, custom, precedent, and legal reasoning. These are the creative processes and modes of growth that enable the law to take account of changing circumstances and adapt to changing needs."[3]

This adaptive flexibility of the law is one of the great challenges and responsibilities of Jewish life. The Torah, the Talmudic Rabbis, and the writers of the medieval codes of Jewish law could never have anticipated the Internet or the 747, but the traditions they bequeathed us are living ones, meant to be adapted and renewed. Making this responsibility explicit, the Rabbis interpreted the line in Leviticus 18:5, "Keep my laws and my judgments, and you shall live by them, I am God," to mean, "You should live by them, and not die by them."[4] As our world changes and the moral and ethical demands on us shift, we must be willing to revisit the old "laws and judgments" and apply their underlying principles to the challenges we confront.

The values that underlie Jewish traditional rules offer us a powerful set of motivations and guidelines for how to respond to the new circumstances wrought by globalization. In Deuteronomy is a series of esoteric rules with surprising salience in the context of the universe of obligation. Chapter 21 spells out the laws governing the *met mitzvah*—a term for the body of a murder victim found in the wilderness. According to the Torah's teaching, the authorities should measure the distance from the body to the nearest town. Then the elders of whichever town is nearest must attend to the body, sacrifice a heifer near the scene of the crime, and recite a particular formula: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done."[5]

At first blush, it's an unusual statement. Why would the community's elders be asked to declare their innocence of a crime that we would never have suspected them of committing? It's as if we expected the mayor of New York City to tend to the body of a murder victim found floating in the Hudson and publicly declare, "I didn't do it." Early Rabbinic authorities also noted this peculiarity and commented on it in the Mishnah: "But could it be that the elders of a Court were shedders of blood?"[6]

Instead, the Rabbis explain, the Torah is demanding that the town elders proclaim publicly that they did not *know* that the victim was out there, in the wilderness, lacking sustenance or protection: "He came not into our hands that we should have dismissed him without sustenance, and we did not see him and leave him without escort!"[7] *We did not know*, the town elders must swear. The implication is that, had they known, the person would have entered their universe of obligation, and they would have taken care of him. In other words, knowing that people are suffering thrusts those people into our universe of obligation.

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[3] www.logos.com/products/prepub/details/3048.
[4] *Sanhedrin* 74a.
[5] Deuteronomy 21:7.
[6] Mishnah *Sotah* 9:6.
[7] Ibid.

Acting Based on Our Expanded Universe of Obligation

What do we do if we accept the notion that our universe of obligation includes people who live far away and whose plight we have come to know?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, poses this question eloquently:

> 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 the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion 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?[8]

As Sacks correctly notes, it is easy to experience what social psychologists call "compassion fatigue," the reduction in our capacity for empathy that results from oversaturation with images of suffering. The need is indeed overwhelming, but we cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed. As we read in *Pirkei Avot*, "It is not necessary for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."[9]

What, then, can we do?

Responsible Consumption

Any idea where the coffee you drank this morning was grown? Did your orange juice come from Latin America? Were your clothes manufactured in a developing country? All of us are global consumers, purchasing items that have arrived in our stores as a result of transnational economic interconnectedness. And most of us are also global investors: anyone who owns a share of a mutual fund is likely a part owner of some multinational corporation.

These economic interconnections create specific responsibilities for us as consumers. According to Maimonides, the great twelfth-century scholar and codifier of Jewish law:

> One may not buy from a thief the goods he has stolen, and to do so is a great transgression because it strengthens the hands of those who violate the law and causes the thief to continue to steal, for if the thief would find no buyer he would not steal, as it says, "He who shares with a thief is his own enemy." (Prov. 2:24)[10]

As Maimonides articulates, when we pay for a product whose origins are unjust, we enable the injustice to continue and become tainted by the injustice. In a world in which our purchases may go through many hands before reaching ours, we are tainted not only when the seller acquires the goods in an unjust way, but also when any part of the chain of production perpetuates an injustice. For example, if a commercial coffee plantation abuses its workers, our purchase of that coffee represents a form of doing business with a thief. We ought not to be let off the hook because the thief happens to be operating behind a retailer, a domestic distributor, an importer, and an exporter. Intentionally or not, our purchase of unjustly produced goods enables the injustice to continue. And, of course, the opposite is also true: underlying this contention

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[8] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 30.
[9] Pirke Avot 2:19.
[10] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Theft* 5:1.

is that every economic transaction is an opportunity to pursue justice and, in the process, to become more just ourselves.

This means that we need to investigate the origins of the goods we buy and not buy things that were produced unethically. It means that we must ensure that the products we buy are produced using fair and safe labor practices. And it means that we must invest in companies whose practices meet our standards of ethical and responsible businesses, and when appropriate, invest in the companies we criticize in order to help change their policies through shareholder activism.
In practical terms, if the diamonds that sparkle in our jewelry are "conflict diamonds" whose international trade fuels many of Africa's wars, we have an obligation not to buy them and instead to support conflict-free diamonds. If Central American farmers work to produce the coffee that we consume, we have an obligation to ensure that they receive sufficient income to support themselves and their families and that their worksites meet basic standards of health and safety. And if we own shares of stock in a company that funds a regime that is violating human rights, we have an obligation to pressure that company to change, and if necessary, divest from that company as a way of signaling our disapproval until such a time that the regime is no longer in violation or the company has distanced itself from the regime.

By refraining from purchasing items that fuel strife, by committing to purchase fair-trade goods, and by making socially responsible investments, we can move along a continuum toward responsible consumption.[11] Furthermore, the very act of making these commitments enhances both our own awareness of the consequences of our economic decisions and models socially responsible consumption to friends and peers.

Finally, we must exercise our power as consumers and investors not only through purchasing and investment decisions, but also through direct pressure on corporations. As corporations invest incredible sums of money in their brand names, activists have grown ever more effective in changing corporate policies by raising the profile of unjust corporate policies. For example, in 2002 students from around the country transformed the paper industry when they convinced Staples to multiply its recycled product offerings tenfold.[12] In 2004, Rainforest Action Network pressured Citigroup not to invest in logging projects involving the destruction of ancient rainforests.[13] In 2006, in collaboration with worker efforts nationwide, religious groups from coast to coast used their consumer power to boycott hotels with poor labor practices, which helped lead to victories in wages and benefits for hotel workers around the country.[14]

Responsible *Tzedakah*

The commitment to *tzedakah* is prevalent throughout Jewish tradition. As Maimonides writes:

> We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the mitzvah of *tzedakah* than any other positive mitzvah, because *tzedakah* is the sign of the righteous person, the seed of Abraham our ancestor, as it is said, "For I know him that he will command his children to do *tzedakah*." (Gen. 18:19)[15]

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[11] For more information on where to find fair trade goods, see www.transfairusa.org. For more information about socially responsible investing, see www.socialinvest.org.
[12] www.dogwoodalliance.org/content/view/52/113/#staplevictory.
[13] www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=04/01/23/0453233.
[14] See, for example, www.cluela.org/victories.html and www.thejewishadvocate.com/this_weeks_issue/news/?content_id=2765.
[15] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:1.

According to Maimonides, *tzedakah* is far more than just one of the mitzvot; it is the sine qua non of membership in the Jewish people and the very act that binds us to our forefather Abraham. In doing *tzedakah*, we reconnect ourselves to the very essence of what makes us Jewish.

But for those of us committed to giving *tzedakah*, how do we prioritize where to give? Most of us live in a world of zero-sum charitable dollars. Contributions to the developing world compete with requests from local Jewish organizations, domestic charities, and entities working with Israel. Given that we have to make choices, why should we use our precious *tzedakah* dollars to support people in the Global South?

The Talmud in *Gittin* speaks directly to this challenge:

> 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 [literally: for the ways of peace].[16]

The Talmud directs us to treat the non-Jews who have entered our universe of obligation just as we do the Jews.[17] By committing at least some of our *tzedakah* resources to international development, humanitarian relief, and the expansion of human rights around the world, we are both embracing the fundamental Jewish social justice value of *tzedakah* and applying it in a way most consonant with its original formulation—to both Jews and non-Jews. Peace itself depends on it. And while the phrase "for the sake of peace" is often read as selfserving—that we, a distinct minority, should care for the majority in order to keep them from having reason to hate us—there are valid alternate readings of the line. The first is that providing aid and succor to people suffering from poverty, illness, and death is a way of filling the world with goodness and peace. The second, and the reading preferred by the Rambam, is that the traditional equating of Torah with peace implies that "for the sake of peace" is simply a poetic way of saying, "for the sake of Torah." In other words, we must care for the non-Jewish poor, the non-Jewish sick, and the non-Jewish dead because the Torah itself demands it.

Responsible Exercise of Political Power

Deuteronomy teaches: "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it."[18] The rule is simple—a flat roof, where people might congregate, can be a dangerous place, so we must build a railing so that no one falls off.

Maimonides reads the principle more metaphorically: first, by including not just the homeowner but all who encounter a threat, and second, by expanding the idea of the rooftop to any danger we might come across. "Not just the owner," he writes, "has a positive commandment to remove it.... If one does not remove [the obstacle] but leaves it while it is still a potential danger, one transgresses a positive commandment and negates a negative commandment, 'Thou shall not spill blood.'"[19]

Where the dangers are contained and easy to address, personal action, like building a parapet, is sufficient. There are some dangers, however, that individual actions cannot remedy. Responsible consumerism and generosity of *tzedakah* and deed are two critical ways to realize our obligation to the developing world. But

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[16] Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 61a.
[17] The Talimud seems to be making this argument out of self-interest: because it's useful to us to have peace with non-Jews, we should bury their dead and feed their poor. But Maimonides rereads this text to say that the use of the term *for the sake of peace* is meant to be read as "for the sake of Torah." Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Kings* 10:12.
[18] Deuteronomy 22:8.
[19] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of the Murderer and Protecting Life* 11:4.

effecting change at the scale necessary to solve the complex and systemic problems of the Global South requires not just individual acts but the will and participation of governments.

Too often, though, the task of moving governments feels insurmountable.

Lots and lots of dots in blue water. We opened the essay with that image as a way of capturing the prevailing view of the distant, anonymous, and overwhelming need of the developing world. But in the context of the responsibility of our political power, it takes on another meaning. Sometimes, we, too, feel like lots of dots in a sea of political inertia. With so many potential voters, one ballot doesn't matter, we say. With so much noise, our elected officials won't notice whether we send another letter or make another phone call.

The Deuteronomy text doesn't permit us to indulge our sense of apathy or frustration. And, as it turns out, we shouldn't feel so powerless. After the genocide in Rwanda, the late Senator Paul Simon said, "If every member of the House of Representatives and Senate had received 100 letters from people back home saying we have to do something about Rwanda, when the crisis was first developing, then I think the response would have been different."[20]

Senator Simon's ruminations confirm what we hope, as citizens still committed to the democratic enterprise, to be true: every voice matters. But our obligation goes beyond the personal duty of active citizenship. We, American Jews, have enormous power and political voice not just as individuals, but as a community. And with that power and voice comes equally great obligation. As the Babylonian Talmud explains, anticipating by thousands of years John F. Kennedy's admonition that "of those to whom much is given, much is required":

> 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 the whole world, he is responsible for the sins of the whole world.[21]

The Talmud teaches us that the greater our power, the greater our responsibility to exercise that power. And the realpolitik of American democracy teaches us that if we choose to use that power, we can affect policy. When the American public has focused its attention on the genocide in Darfur— for example, at the April 2006 Save Darfur Rally to Stop Genocide that AJWS spearheaded—the Bush Administration has consistently stepped up diplomatic pressure on the government of Sudan. When public pressure has waned, so has the Administration's attention.

The universe of obligation, then, comprises three pillars: responsible consumption, responsible *tzedakah*, and the responsible exercise of political power. On these three responsibilities the world rests.

Moving Past Pity

As we continue to expand our universe of obligation to include our neighbors in the developing world, we will continue to confront the enormous suffering that resides there. Faced with the images of endemic poverty and disease, it is easy to feel overcome by pity for those people and their plight.

But pity is a dangerous response.

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[20] Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 377.

[21] Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 54b.

"Pity," Hannah Arendt explains in *On Revolution*, "can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others."[22] In other words, feeling pity feels good, and if it feels good, we're inclined to perpetuate the circumstances that engendered the feeling. Susan Sontag takes the criticism a step further. "So far as we feel sympathy," a word which is used as Arendt used pity, "we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response."[23]
Pity, or sympathy, as Sontag so eloquently lays bare, has a palliative effect on our conscience. It lets us feel our humanity. As Sontag understands, when we view images of people in pain, we are moved, even anguished, by their suffering. But even as we are anguished, we are also comforted by our own sympathetic response: if we feel pained by suffering in the developing world, we must be people of conscience. Our discomfort, as Sontag intuits, feels like the best evidence of our goodness.

Our tradition offers a model for responding to the people of the developing world without the pity that Sontag and Arendt teach us is ultimately self-serving. The central command of the Passover seder is to see ourselves as if we have been freed from Egypt. We don't sympathize with the experience of slavery or pity the Hebrew slaves; we find ways to relive their oppression. And we don't just imagine freedom; we're told to embody it. Some Haggadot even include mirrors on the page where this text is found.

The message of the seder, then, is to see ourselves as intimately connected to our own history of oppression and liberation, and to connect our narrative with the struggles for liberation of other oppressed peoples. This becomes a recurring theme in the Bible—take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, we are commanded, because you once were slaves in Egypt.

But the message is deeper. When we become aware of the suffering of others, they enter our universe of obligation. And when they enter our universe of obligation, our own moral identity becomes inextricably tied up in their fate. Acting from a place of that awareness minimizes the possibility of pity and enhances our ability to act. As Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal activist, puts it, "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together."

[22] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 89.
[23] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 102.