



What Does It Mean to *Feel* Responsible for the Hostages?

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1. Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 8b

אמר ליה רבא לרבא בר מרי: מנא הא מילתא דאמור רבנן דפדיון שבויים מצוה רבה היא? אמר ליה, דכתיב: "והיה כי יאמרו אלך אנה נצא, ואמרת אליהם כה אמר ה', אשר למות – למות, ואשר לחרב – לחרב, ואשר לרעב – לרעב, ואשר לשבי – לשבי". ואמר רבי יוחנן: כל המאוחר בפסוק זה קשה מתבירו.

חרב קשה ממות – אי בעית אימא קרא, ואי בעית אימא סברא. אי בעית אימא סברא – האי קא מינוול, והאי לא קא מינוול. ואיבעית אימא קרא – "יקר בעיני ה' המותה לחסידיו". רעב קשה מחרב – איבעית אימא סברא: האי קא מצטער, והאי לא קא מצטער. איבעית אימא קרא: "טובים היו חללי חרב מחללי רעב". שבי [קשה מכולם] – דכולהו איתנהו ביה.

Rava said to Rabba bar Mari: Concerning this matter that the Sages stated, that redeeming captives is a great mitzva, from where is it derived? Rabba bar Mari said to him: As it is written: "And it shall come to pass, when they say to you: To where shall we depart? Then you shall tell them: So says the Lord: Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for famine, to famine; and such as are for captivity, to captivity" (Jeremiah 15:2). And Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Whichever punishment is written later in this verse is more severe than the one before it.

Rabbi Yoḥanan explains: **The sword is worse than death. If you wish, say** that this is learned from **a verse; if you wish, say** instead that it is derived by way of **logical reasoning. If you wish, say** that this is derived by way of **logical reasoning: This** punishment, i.e., death by sword, **mutilates** the body, **but that** punishment, i.e., natural death, **does not mutilate** it. **And if you wish, say** that the fact that the sword is worse than death is learned from **a verse: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His pious ones"** (Psalms 116:15). **Famine is worse than the sword. If you wish, say** that this is derived by way of **logical reasoning: This one**, who dies of famine, **suffers** greatly before departing from this world, **but that one**, who dies by the sword, **does not suffer. If you wish, say** instead that the fact that famine is worse than the sword is learned from **a verse: "More fortunate were the victims of the sword than the victims of famine"** (Lamentations 4:9). **And captivity is worse than all of them, as it includes all of them**, i.e., famine, the sword, and death.

2. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3, Spring 1972, pp. 229-43, 231-32

[I]f it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. ...

The uncontroversial appearance of the principle just stated is deceptive. If it were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed. For the principle takes, firstly, no account of proximity or distance. It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. Secondly, the principle makes no distinction between cases in which I am the only person who could possibly do anything and cases in which I am just one among millions in the same position.

I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account. The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him).

3. Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 251:3

הנותן לבניו ובנותיו הגדולים שאיננו חייב במזונותיהם כדי ללמד את הבנים תורה ולהנהיג הבנות בדרך ישרה וכן הנותן מתנות לאביו והם צריכים להם הרי זה בכלל צדקה ולא עוד אלא שצריך להקדימו לאחרים ואפילו אינו בנו ולא אביו אלא קרובו צריך להקדימו לכל אדם ואחיו מאביו קודם לאחיו מאמו ועניי ביתו קודמין לעניי עירו ועניי עירו קודמין. ויושבי ארץ ישראל קודמין ליושבי חוצה לארץ

Helping one's grown up sons or daughters in need when he is not obliged to—in order to give his sons an opportunity of studying the Law, or to keep his daughters in the right path—and presenting gifts to one's father in need, —all this comes under the general head of Charity. In fact, such charity is to be preferred to other forms. Not only a father or child, but any relative should be given preference to a stranger; a brother of one's father, to a brother of one's mother; the poor of his own house to the poor of the city at large; the poor of his own city to the poor of other cities; and the poor that dwell in the Holy Land to those that dwell in other lands.

4. **Arukh HaShulchan, Yoreh De'ah 251:4**

האמנם בעיקרי הדברים ק"ל טובא דאם נאמר דברים כפשוטן דאלו קודמין לאלו ואלו לאלו דהכוונה שא"צ ליתן כלל למדרגה שאחר זה ולפ"ז הא הדבר ידוע שלכל עשיר יש הרבה קרובים עניים וכ"ש לבעה"ב שהצדקה שלו מועטת וא"כ לפ"ז אותם העניים שאין להם קרובים עשירים ימותו ברעב ואיך אפשר לומר כן. ולכן נלע"ד דבירור הדברים כך הם דבוודאי כל בע"ב או עשיר הנותן צדקה מחוייב ליתן חלק לעניים הרחוקים אלא דלקרוביו יתן יותר מלשאינו קרוביו וכן כולם כמדרגה זו.

Now there is something fundamental about the details of the laws above that troubles me deeply. For if we explain the texts that I have cited according to their simple meaning—that certain groups are prior to others—they imply that [one may distribute the entirety of one's tzedakah money to one group within the established hierarchy] and need not give at all to those who fall outside of that specific group. But it is well known that every wealthy person has many more relatives who are poor, and how much more is that true for people whose charity funds are scant! And if this is the case, poor people without wealthy relatives will die of starvation. Now how is it possible to say this? Therefore, in my humble opinion, the explanation of [charity priorities] is as follows: Certainly, every person, whether of modest or significant means, is obligated to give a portion of their charity money to needy people who are not relatives. But to their poor relatives, they should give a greater amount than is given to those who are not related. And so on along the ladder of priorities.

5. **Nel Noddings, "Caring," [Counterpoints](#) 70, "Contemporary Curriculum Discourses: Twenty Years of JCT," 1999, pp. 42-55, 44**

To touch me, to arouse in me something that will disturb my ethical reality, I must see the other's reality as a possibility for my own...When we see the other's reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream.

6. Nel Noddings, [*Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*](#), 2013, p. 112

"Caring about" always involves a certain benign neglect. One is attentive just so far. One assents with just so much enthusiasm. One acknowledges. One affirms. One contributes five dollars and goes on to other things. I am not condemning "caring about." We-all of us-give here and there and hope that others who care for will be enabled by our caring about. One might say that we should, occasionally, care about, but we should not suppose that in doing so we are caring for. Caring requires engrossment, commitment, displacement of motivation.

7. Rabbi Sarah Krinsky, Facebook Post, September 3, 2024

Rachel Goldberg-Polin is anyone who's ever been a parent. She's anyone who's ever wondered "is he cold?" "Is she hungry?" "Are they safe?" She's anyone who's never stopped worrying if he's okay, yet never stopped to worry if she is.

She's anyone who has dutifully learned the names of players, the stats of teams, the pitfalls of plays she doesn't (or at least didn't) really care about. Anyone who's ever hugged too long, squeezed too tight, not wanting to let go.

She's anyone who's been braver than she ever thought she could be, braver than she ever should have needed to be. She's anyone who's put one foot in front of the other, who's strung together day after endless, disorienting day. She's anyone who's lied awake with body here, heart in some faraway, undefined there.

She's anyone who has loved beyond logic. Who has stared down the barrel of impossible odds and dared to defy them with an indefatigable, stubborn hope.

If she's not you, then you're lucky. If she is, then you're shattered.

For her. With her. As her.

8. R. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, 2003, pp. 55-58

There is a difference, all too often ignored, between absoluteness and universality. I have an absolute obligation to my child, but it is not a universal one. Indeed it is precisely this non-universality, this particularity, that constitutes parenthood – the ability to feel a bond with this child, not to all children indiscriminately. That is what makes love, love: not a generalized affection for persons of such-and-such a type, but a particular attachment to this person in his or her uniqueness... Because we know what it is to be a parent, loving our children, not children in general, we understand what it is for someone else, somewhere else, to be a parent, loving his or her children, not ours. There is no road to human solidarity that does not begin with moral particularity – by coming to know what it means to be a child, a parent, a neighbor, a friend. We learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings.

9. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor* 8:10

פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים קוֹדֵם לְפִרְנִסַּת עֲנִיִּים וְלִכְסוּתָן. וְאִין לָךְ מִצְוָה גְדוֹלָה כְּפְדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים שֶׁהַשְּׁבוּיָה הַרִי הוּא בְּכָלֵל הָרַעֲבִים וְהַצְּמֵאִים וְעָרוּמִים וְעוֹמֵד בְּסַכְּנַת נַפְשׁוֹת. וְהַמַּעֲלִים עֵינָיו מִפְּדִיּוֹנוֹ הַרִי זֶה עוֹבֵר עַל (דְּבָרִים טו ז) "לֹא תֵאֱמָץ אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקַּפֵּץ אֶת יָדְךָ" וְעַל (וִיקְרָא יט טז) "לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ" וְעַל (וִיקְרָא כה נג) "לֹא יִרְדְּנוּ בְּפִרְךָ לְעֵינֶיךָ". וּבִטֵּל מִצְוֹת (דְּבָרִים טו ח) (דְּבָרִים טו יא) "פְּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ לֹ"ו. וּמִצְוֹת (וִיקְרָא כה לו) "יַחֲסֵי אַחֲיֶךָ עִמָּךְ". (וִיקְרָא יט יח) (וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ". (מִשְׁלֵי כד יא) "וְהִצַּל לְקַחֲחִים לְמוֹת" וְהִרְבֵּה דְבָרִים כְּאֵלוֹ. וְאִין לָךְ מִצְוָה רַבָּה כְּפְדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים :

The redemption of captives receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. [Indeed,] there is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives. For a captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, and unclothed and he is in mortal peril. If someone pays no attention to his redemption, he violates the negative commandments: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand" (Deuteronomy 15:7), "Do not stand by when the blood of your neighbor is in danger" (Leviticus 19:16), and "He shall not oppress him with exhausting work in your presence" (*ibid.* 25:53). And he has negated the observance of the positive commandments: "You shall certainly open up your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:8), "And your brother shall live with you" (*ibid.* 19:18), "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), "Save those who are taken for death" (Proverbs 24:11), and many other decrees of this nature. There is no mitzvah as great as the redemption of captives.

10. Rabbi Elianna Yolcut, Facebook Post, September 3, 2024

Since the middle of the night Saturday night into Sunday (EST) when the horrific news was confirmed of Hersh's murder along with 5 other hostages I keep returning to the way Rachel, Hersh's (z"l) mom ended each and every talk she gave. "We Love You. Stay Strong. Survive."

I awoke that night around 2:45 am with my youngest curled up next to me whispering, "Imma I am scared I can't fall asleep". I gently kissed his forehead, reminded him to simply rest and not try and fall asleep and very shortly I heard his breath deepen and his body relax. As he drifted off, I hesitantly opened my phone. I have been trying to sleep without my phone in the room to work on my technology dependence but last night I went to bed with it, too lazy to return it to its' spot on my kitchen counter. I opened a browser and saw the news immediately. Bereft, I lay there tears and panic filling my body.

On a very simple level to be a people, to be part of a people, is to feel in the most visceral way the pain of circles upon circles in that group. It isn't your trauma and it is all at the same time. You know the pain and you don't completely understand it. The same is true of joy but at this moment and in this year, it is the pain, grief, fear and loss that links us.

11. "As the Families of Murdered Hostages, Our Message to People in Power Is Simple: Act." *Time Magazine*, September 25, 2024

It was Hamas that took our loved ones, tortured them, and pulled the triggers that murdered them. But many others failed to save them. ...

This is our clarion call now: There are still 101 hostages in horrific conditions in Gaza, and the time to save them is running out. Sympathetic words alone will not spare them the same fate as Almog, Alexander, Carmel, Eden, Hersh, and Ori. Now is the time for decisive, deliberate, meaningful action. ...

Why are the names of the 101 hostages who remain in captivity not on the nightly news in countries around the world? Where is the global outcry calling for their release?