

## Morality Begins at Home: Obvious but Difficult

### *Shabbat Nitzavim 5778*

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If I ask you to imagine the modern American President you most admire, whether you're thinking of FDR or DJT, we would have to confess that the person of tremendous accomplishment may also be one of tremendous private failings. On Rosh Hashanah morning, I plan to discuss the consequences that impact an entire nation because of a leader's private sins. This evening, as a prelude for the hearty souls here to welcome Shabbat only 48 hours before we usher in the New Year – let's consider how the phenomenon can occur. The question is not only about well-known public figures, but includes each and every one of us. Why is private morality, the way that we conduct ourselves with the people closest to us, so much more difficult than doing the right thing out in the world?

This summer, at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I was blessed to consider the matter with Rabbi Dani Segal, an Orthodox rabbi who is one of the program directors of Hartman's pluralistic program to train men and women for rabbinic ordination. Rabbi Segal reminded us of the lyrics of "Easy to be Hard," from the 1960s Broadway musical, *Hair*:

"How can people be so heartless  
How can people be so cruel  
Easy to be hard  
Easy to be cold ...  
Especially people who care about strangers  
Who care about evil and social injustice  
Do you only care about being proud  
How about I need a friend, I need a friend"<sup>i</sup>

The songwriters ask a rhetorical question, very much like ours: How can the same people both work diligently for societal justice and neglect those who are closest?

Rabbi Segal teaches that our sages go to great lengths to insist that our most significant obligations are at home. He presented a text from the Tosefta, a Jewish legal compilation from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, about a community's well. The

question arises: If there's only enough water for the locals or for others, who gets to drink? The law requires that the townspeople drink first. But what if there's enough for the villagers and their flocks, but then not enough for visitors? Again, the law is on the side of local needs: The village's flocks drink before the neighboring humans. As if to put the finest possible point on the matter, the rabbis then ask: What if there's enough water for the town's people, flocks, and laundry, but then not enough for human consumers coming from another place? Even the local laundry comes before thirsty men, women, and children from another town."<sup>ii</sup>

I wonder if the rabbis meant for these laws to be taken literally. After all, we know that just about every Jewish law may be set aside to save a life. If any visitor were truly dying of thirst, the rabbis cannot have intended for laundry to take precedence over mortal danger.

Instead of being distracted by the particulars, let's consider the moral of the story. The rabbis are driving home a point: Our obligations begin closest to home. If that's true, then why do we often have the easiest time being hard at home? We needn't have engaged in the sexual misconduct of current and past American presidents to have faced the struggle. Some who give the most time or treasure to community organizations and needy individuals may also be short-changing their own families and closest friends. At least sometimes, each of us finds our work outside the home, for pay or as volunteers, to be more fulfilling, or less emotionally taxing, than tending to the needs of our families or intimate friends.

Rabbi Segal points to a Talmudic text that compares two people who fulfill the same praiseworthy act, namely honoring parents, the only difference between them being that one is obligated to perform that *mitzvah*, while the other is acting out of a kind instinct. Rabbi Hanina insists that "the one who is commanded and fulfills the commandment is greater than one who fulfills it though not commanded."<sup>iii</sup> How can that be? Even some of the sages are surprised.<sup>iv</sup>

Tosafot, a Medieval commentary on the Talmud, explains: "It seems that the reason that someone who is commanded and fulfills is greater is because that person worries and stresses more about the possibility of transgression than" those who can perform the praiseworthy act whenever convenient.<sup>v</sup>

Every now and then, I hear a complaint about how somebody else treats their own parents at a time of need. Sometimes, the people who are objecting are doing something about it, faithfully visiting the senior who is not their own parent, giving them rides, and otherwise being kind. Tosafot helps us understand that common phenomenon. The adult children, required to care for their parents in old age, may be struggling under the burden of obligation. Even if the relationship is not fraught with baggage, and it often is, the community member with no filial duty may have an easier time being kind to elders who are not their own parents.

Whether or not we're convinced that it's "easy to be hard" to one's own aging parents, Tosafot persuades us that being kind can be most challenging in our most intimate relationships. When my paternal grandmother was in her 90s, I was privileged to witness, up close and personal, an inspiring example of lovingly caring for one's own parent in old age. Still, fulfilling my limited and freely-chosen role, as a local adult grandson, was considerably easier than that my father's job of making and executing decisions for his mother.

Our words of Torah this Shabbat remind us that – from time to time, at least – fulfilling our obligations sometimes seems very difficult. Deuteronomy compares that rigor to ascending to heaven or crossing the sea.<sup>vi</sup> "No," we are taught, "the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it."<sup>vii</sup> The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra wonders why Torah insists that the *mitzvot* are both in our mouths and in our hearts. His theory is that our hearts know what's right, but we need to recite the actual words so that we get them right.<sup>viii</sup>

At this annual season of renewal, let each of us commit ourselves to reciting the words of our prayer book and Torah, and then let us heed us their teaching. Let us act with kindness, first at home, and then in the world around us. Let our pursuit of justice, our drive to heal the world, never distract us from fulfilling the demands closest to our homes and to our hearts.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gerome Ragni, James Rado, Galt MacDermot, "Easy to be Hard," from *Hair*, 1968.

<sup>ii</sup> Tosefta Bava Metzia 11:14. Hebrew and literal translation provided by Rabbi Dani Segal, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July, 2018. The English rendition here is mine.

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<sup>iii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a. Hebrew and literal translation provided by Rabbi Dani Segal, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July, 2018. English slightly altered here.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. Namely, R. Joseph.

<sup>v</sup> Tosafot, Kiddushin 31a. Hebrew and literal translation provided by Rabbi Dani Segal, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July, 2018.

<sup>vi</sup> Deuteronomy 30:12-13

<sup>vii</sup> Deuteronomy 30:14.

<sup>viii</sup> My take on Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 30:14:1.