

Other People's Business

Kol Nidre 5781

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Israelis do not have a reputation for politeness. Still, Jerusalem's Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum says that the pandemic has made her "less polite." Now, she finds herself asking intrusive questions. Questions about money—How are they managing during the economic crisis? Questions about health. About loneliness. Even about domestic violence.ⁱ

Americans by contrast, tend to mind our own business. Rugged individualism is the American way—bred by the Protestant work ethic, attitudes about individual responsibility, and tales of the frontier. We ask one another, "How are you?" But we aren't asking a question to which we expect a real response. "How are you?" is little more than our way of saying "hello." Outside of the most intimate interactions, an elaborate answer, cataloguing one's troubles, our *tzuris*, is considered as rude as asking how much money another person makes. "Are you safe at home?" is a question that doctors are now advised to ask, and we understand the good intention—but still, the inquiry feels intrusive.

Israelis come by their nosiness honestly. After all, minding other people's business is a Jewish tradition as old as the Torah. "Finders keepers, losers weepers" was a phrase that flew naturally of our tongues as children. The Torah, though, disagrees. If we find something that isn't ours, we are obliged to return it. In Deuteronomy, that commandment ends with the overriding injunction: "You must not remain indifferent."ⁱⁱ

Indifference is forbidden by the Torah.

Indifference can also be deadly. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it ought to be that we are **all** responsible for the health of **everyone** in our community. Wearing a mask is a potent symbol of minding other people's business. An ordinary mask does little to protect **me** from contracting the virus from a person exhaling it nearby. That same mask, though, does protect **other people** from an illness that I may unknowingly spread. Sadly, too many of our fellow citizens claim that not wearing a mask is their right in a free country. That attitude is characteristic of the American emphasis on individual responsibility, minding our own business.

Our sages knew of a place where people minded their own business: The city of Sodom.

Torah tells us that God destroys Sodom because of its inhabitants' wickedness. However, Torah doesn't explain the nature of the sin that piques God's destructive wrath. The rabbis have an idea.

In *Pirkei Avot*, Sayings of the Sages, our rabbis categorize the sin of Sodom as saying, “‘what’s mine is mine, and yours is yours.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Wait. What? How can a “commonplace”^{iv} notion, the very idea that what belongs to me is mine and what belongs to you is yours, be sinful? Isn't each of us entitled to our own personal property?

Not entirely. Consider ancient Israelite farmers. The corners of fields, part of farmers' own personal property, actually belong to the poor. Farmers must plant and tend to those corners, assuring a good crop, despite knowing that the produce will not be theirs.^v They must mind other people's business, namely the welfare of the poor, treating some of what's “theirs” as if it did not belong to them.

The Sodomites, by contrast, minded only their own business.

“Rabbi Judah said: ‘They made a proclamation in Sodom, (saying): “‘Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt at the stake.’” Lot's daughter [—that is, our patriarch Abraham's great-niece—] saw a very poor man in the city streets, and her soul was grieved on his account... What did she do? Every day, when she went out to draw water, she put in her bucket all sorts of provisions from her home, and she fed that poor man. The elders of Sodom asked, “How does this poor man live?” When they ascertained the facts, they brought her forth to be burnt at the stake.’”^{vi}

Indifference toward our fellow citizens leads to death and destruction, as we learn from the Torah and our ancient rabbis, no less than minding our own business is deadly during a pandemic.

The good news is that minding other people's business can make a difference.

Rabbi Elad-Appelbaum tells of being stuck in what seemed like a typical Jerusalem traffic jam...until she saw the cause. A man and a woman, clearly well acquainted, were in the street, blocking cars, as the man berated and ultimately became violent with the woman. Drivers were screaming at them, honking their horns, but doing nothing about the crime they witnessed. The rabbi, accompanied by one other person who got out of his car, approached the couple. They distracted the man, giving the woman an opportunity to flee. Rabbi Elad-Appelbaum reported the matter to police, who took her concern seriously. She asks, “Who am I to intervene?” And she answers, “The real question is: Who am I **not** to intervene?”^{vii}

On this Kol Nidre night, we have asked God to absolve our unfulfilled vows. Now, let us take a new vow: To mind other people's business.

We vow to will wear our masks and physically distance whenever possible. But our obligation only starts there.

We vow not to mind our own business when we know a person whose livelihood may be threatened by the economic hardships brought on by the pandemic. Instead, we must reach out, ask a question we might not normally ask about their financial wellbeing. If you're uncomfortable, call me. I'll ask.

We vow not to mind our own business when somebody in our circle lives alone and is vulnerable to loneliness at this time of social distancing. We mustn't be afraid to ask, "Are you lonely?" Our task is to dispel the loneliness, to make regular phone calls, to suggest a distanced visit on a pleasant day. If you're uncomfortable, send me an email. I'll reach out—again, if I already have.

We vow to pay attention to people stuck at home with an abusive parent or partner. If we have even the slightest hint, we must stick our nose where it wouldn't normally belong: in other people's business.

And let us submit to more complicated vows. Our responsibility to mind other people's business extends beyond the individual and personal to millions we may not even know. Low-income Americans and people of color, in Arkansas and across the country, have been hardest hit by Covid-19. Join me in communicating to our Governor and to our representatives in Washington: Our society as a whole must mind the business of the most vulnerable among us. Calling for racial and economic justice throughout the land, we vow do our part to relieve the suffering.

Kol Nidre: Let us **fulfill all** these vows in 5781, each to the best of our ability.

Kol Nidre: And let us pray, with faith, that God vows alongside us, to mind **our** business, to hear us, to inspire us, and to motivate us to mind each other's business and to heal this troubled world.

Amen.

ⁱ Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, "Intervention in Times of Crisis: On Moral and Spiritual Leadership," *HartmanSummer@Home*, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 13, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 22:1,3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pirkei Avot 5:10. Text taught in this context by Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Leviticus 19:9-10, Tractate Peah, etc.

^{vi} Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 25. Text taught in this context by Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum.

^{vii} Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, "Intervention in Times of Crisis: On Moral and Spiritual Leadership,"