

We and I
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On this Yom Kippur, I want to talk about the words “I” and “We” and I want to begin with a poem by Adreinne Rich called “In Those Years.”

In Those Years

*In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves reduced to I
and the whole thing became silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and, yes, that was the only life we could bear witness to*

*But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through rages of fog
where we stood, saying I*

We live in a world where people are used to focusing on “I” as opposed to “We.” It’s easy to share examples. I’ve been to the homes of friends where they seem to have a television in every room and at night, family members sit in separate rooms watching the specific program that they want to watch. Sometimes family members sit by themselves in separate rooms watching the same program. When I’m out running on Comm Ave, I will often see two friends running together and then see that each is listening to his/her own Ipod as they run. And this is much bigger, while Tufts is known for a commitment to active citizenship and public service, there are an awful lot of people on campus who don’t continue the volunteer work that they were so careful to list on their college applications once they actually arrive at school. I’m not saying these are bad people but university has a way to make us focus on the “I” and that often comes at the expense of our responsibility to others in society.

This plays out in the Jewish world as well. More and more Jews report that Jewish peoplehood, the sense of connection and responsibility they feel to Jews around the world, the gut feeling that connects Jews in the United States with Jews in Israel, is just not a part of their worldview. I'm not talking here about political support for any specific government or policy in Israel. I'm talking about the sense of "we-ness" that for so many years defined what it meant to be Jewish: peoplehood, a connection that bridges physical boundaries. The slogan for the Jewish Federation used to be "We are One," a sentiment that no longer has an immediate, visceral impact for many Jews.

A major theme of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is connection. The very word "atonement" can be broken down to "at-one-ment" being at-one, connected with ourselves, with God, with our families, friends and communities, with the Jewish people. This morning, I want to focus on our connections, and responsibilities to those around us, what the rabbis call our connections "ben adam l'havero," between us and our fellow human beings. Most people will agree that they aspire to be responsible adults, but what does it really mean to be responsible? Who are we responsible for and how do our responsibilities play out in our day to day lives? At this point, I want to give special acknowledgement to my friends and colleagues Sheila Katz and Rabbi Josh Feigelson who are developing a wonderful new program for International Hillel called "Ask Big Questions." They put together material for a discussion "What are we responsible for?" and I drew great material from their teaching for my words this morning.

So, sometimes it good to begin at the end and I want to stress that in this question, as in many questions, Jewish tradition ultimately comes out on the side of balance. You are all familiar with Hillel the Elder's words: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me. But if I am only for myself, what am I?" While we can applaud this call for balance, how do we think about responsibility to others in our day to day commitments and decisions as we build our lives?

So I want to begin by sharing a story written by Rabbi Hebert Friedman, a rabbi who passed away in 2008. It's a story about responsibility and I'm not completely sure who does the right thing in this story. I interested in what you think?

Friedman grew up during the great Depression and his family was poor. He tells how one night, his mother attended a meeting of her synagogue sisterhood in the late 1930s, where a representative of the U.S. National Refugee Service made an urgent plea for American Jewish families to take into their homes German-Jewish children whose parents were willing to let them emigrate to the United States, not knowing if they would ever see those children again. Of the more than 100 mothers at this sisterhood meeting, no more than a dozen raised their hand. Friedman tells the story, "My mother stood and announced that she would take three children. God had been good to her, she said, giving her three healthy sons; this was her opportunity to repay. She added without embarrassment that her family was living in a small apartment, with only two bedrooms, because their house had been foreclosed by the bank during the Depression. So, she could take only boys, who could sleep in the same room with her sons.

Friedman continued, "Mother came home with the affidavit forms, placed them under my father's nose at the kitchen table, and told him of her commitment. No one, including the Jewish community, was responding to the impending Holocaust. As far as she was concerned, signing the forms was only a formality. My father saw it differently, because of the legal obligations his signature would impose. The Depression had reduced his earnings to some pitifully small amount, and he could not envision for an instant how they could handle the additional expense for food, clothing, school, for three more children.

My mother answered him quietly, but with great passion. Even though we were poor, how could we refuse to save Jewish lives if we were given the chance to do so? She was ashamed of the other sisterhood members. All of them should have

volunteered, and she would not hesitate to tell them so at the next meeting. “But if we have enough food for five of us,” she asked, “why can’t we simply make it do for eight? If I have to wash shirts every day for six boys instead of three, what’s the difference?”

Friedman says, My parents argued all night — the only time I remember my parents raising their voices in anger and disagreement. My mother won. In the morning, my father signed the affidavits, and she proudly took them back to the synagogue. As I thought this over, I decided that my mother’s fight with my father symbolized the whole problem, and the only conclusion was to act according to moral Jewish values, without permitting rationalization or delay--“When history knocks, you answer!”

It’s a powerful story but I’ll ask you, what was the right thing to do in this situation? Friedman’s father was certainly thinking about his responsibilities, to his own children, to his wife and even if he could honestly provide for three more children? Yet, his mother is thinking on a different plane: what are our responsibilities to the Jewish people, to save a life when children are in imminent danger? What is the right thing to do? What would you do in this situation?

Let me throw a different story into the mix, one that I have struggled with over time. For many years, I’ve had a connection with a homeless man. Joseph (not his real name) started showing up at Hillel years ago. He’s a nice person and I don’t believe he is dangerous but he is schizophrenic and not the easiest person to deal with. Over the years I’ve tried to get him connected to social services, tried to help him find a place to live. But he doesn’t like shelters or half way houses and he prefers his freedom to a structured or controlled living environment. Usually, he would come to see me at Tufts and often he would show up at Shabbat but at one point, he got my home address and phone number and began to call me at home. Then one afternoon, when our son was about thirteen years old, and very idealistic, I came home to find Joseph sitting in our living room with my son, having a cup of tea. My son said, Dad,

he knocked on the door and said he knew you and needed a place to sleep. Of course I let him in. It's cold outside. We have a big house; there's more than enough room for him to stay.

So how do you explain to your son, who has just had his bar mitzvah and is thinking seriously about social justice and our responsibilities to society, that you don't want the homeless guy to move in with you or to set up a tent in your back yard? That yes, we have a big house and money and yes, I had known Joseph for many years but still, I said no. Was I being responsible or hypocritical? Was I teaching the right lessons to my children?

In the Talmud, the rabbis discuss how our responsibilities to others begin close and move out in concentric circles of responsibility. We are immediately responsible for the needs of our family, then our neighborhood, then our city or town. Because the Jewish community is a small community, and one that has been persecuted over the years, we are first responsible to the needs of the Jewish community but the rabbis are very clear that our responsibility doesn't end there and they teach that for the sake of peace, we have an obligation to help human beings in need regardless of their religion, ethnic or cultural background.

So let me return to the two stories that I told. I can't be so presumptuous to tell you the right thing to do in these situations but I'll share a little of how I struggled with these questions. In terms of Herbert Friedman's story, I think that if something was going to have an impact on a whole family, such as bringing in three new children, it seems right that the family would be engaged in this decision together. It's not the same situation but when our children were young, we involved them in our family discussions of where and even how much tzedukah (charity) we gave and their opinions did have an influence about where we gave our money. I also think it's important to realize that there is a middle ground between taking in refugee Jewish children and not taking them in. Certainly, the situation required that a responsible person, a responsible Jew, needed to do more than brush off the request to help. One

could commit to working actively to find them homes, educating and taking care of them. It didn't have to be all or nothing.

The situation with Joseph, the homeless man, is somewhat clearer to me. I was not prepared to take him into our home, even for a short time. We did, however make sure he had warm clothes and we drove him to a shelter. We helped him get his glasses fixed as well. But when it comes to defining our responsibility in such a situation, I think we should think more broadly and deeply about our responsibilities and obligations as we confront the broken parts of our communities, like the parts that leave people homeless and abandon people with mental illness to live untreated on the streets.

At Hillel, we have been in active partnership with an organization Repair the World, to get more students engaged in service. We teach, and apply, a strategic approach in this work that I think is meaningful. It's called CASES and has five components that I believe are important to consider when we work to figure out our responsibility to people, and issues, in our community. The C stands for Community Partnerships. Who else is doing this work, what can they teach us and how can we partner with them? The A is Advocacy: (continuing on the example of homelessness) it's not enough just to help someone who is homeless; we also have to be involved in changing the laws and social structures that leave people homeless and without adequate care for their physical and mental health. The S is direct Service. We should be in the trenches, in some way, volunteering in a homeless shelter or food pantry, actually meeting, talking to and helping the people who need our help. The E is education: we need to know and understand about the root causes of homelessness, how large is this problem, how is it being effectively addressed and where? And the final S is sustainability. How do we make sure that our efforts continue when we graduate or move on to working for another cause or in a different community? By approaching issues of social justice with the CASES methodology, we go deeper and make a more impactful contribution. We increase our effectiveness as change agents. There is nothing wrong with stopping at a table

on campus to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to deliver to a homeless shelter but we can, and we should, do more, becoming educated about these issues, come to know the people we're working with as human beings, partnering with others who are knowledgeable and devoted to the cause, working to change root causes and making sure our efforts continue into the future.

On this Yom Kippur, when we think about ourselves and our responsibility to people around us, when we think about "I" and "We," I want to suggest that we should push ourselves and honestly assess if we are doing enough to make a contribution to the communities, to the world, around us. It's our actions, not our intentions, that inscribe us for blessings in the book of life. Our tradition teaches that we don't have to finish this work but as Jews, we obligated to find a way to be engaged and involved.

May our actions in the year to come inscribe us for blessing in the book of life.