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# The Peoplehood Papers **6**

**Peoplehood - Between "Charity Begins at Home"  
and "Repair the World"**



November 2010/Cheshvan 5771

**The Peoplehood Papers 6: November 2010/Cheshvan 5771**

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**Peoplehood - Between "Charity Begins at Home" and "Repair the World"**

*Editor's introduction*

This issue of The Peoplehood Papers is dedicated to the topic of: **Peoplehood - Between "Charity Begins at Home" and "Repair the World"**. More precisely (it just sounds better in Hebrew) it explores the tension between the Talmudic imperative of "*Aniyei Ircha Kodmim*" (your town's poor come first) and the call to do "*Tikkun Olam Bemalchut Shadai*" (repair the world under God's sovereignty).

Our purpose is to grapple from a Peoplehood perspective with the tensions between local and global needs as well as between looking after our own (i.e. the Jewish People) juxtaposed with caring for any human being in need. Another way of framing the challenge is: how does one resolve the tension between what many see as a particularistic (some may even say parochial) approach and a universalistic perspective. These tensions seem to surface frequently in recent years, accompanied sometimes with confusion of terms and at others with a sincere search for new interpretations of our values. In either case we think that they merit our consideration.

Our contributors who represent a wide range of perspectives, institutions, age groups and backgrounds have provided us with a rich opening to an important conversation. Behind the specific ethical discussion a battle is waged on the future agenda and ethos of the Jewish People. Some are more concerned with being at the cutting edge of human philanthropy and fueling the Jewish passion for justice and humanism. Others are cautious and worried about sustaining the Jewish enterprise and seek to ensure that we keep "our house in order" first. And yet the keen eye cannot miss the sincere soul searching effort to offer meaningful interpretations of Jewish values as they confront today's challenges.

This essay collection is indeed but an opening of the conversation. If you would like to respond please write to [peoplehood@jafi.org](mailto:peoplehood@jafi.org). In our next issue we intend to further explore the tension between the internal demands of Jewish Peoplehood and its universalistic aspirations. We are looking forward to reading your contributions.

**Dr. Shlomi Ravid**

*Editor*

## Peoplehood, Universalism and Particularism: The tension that keeps it all together

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By Ari Hart

During a steamy Chicago August a few years back, I led a summer program called *Or Tzedek* that brought Jewish high schoolers to Chicago neighborhoods. Our goal was to explore Judaism and social justice. On the second day of the trip, I brought my students to Chicago's predominantly African-American South-West Side. Our project for the day was knocking on doors and distributing leaflets to people in the neighborhood about prenatal health opportunities available to pregnant women.

On the van-ride down, some personal doubts emerged. "Why am I bringing these kids to this neighborhood? We're about to engage with an area and an issue that seem far removed from the Jewish People's agenda," I thought. "Is this really *Jewish* service?" The tension between universal social needs and personal and communal Jewish goals felt almost too much for the program to bear.

These doubts lingered as our community partners described the health campaign. I deeply believed in the value of the project, but still I didn't see how the Jewish People had anything to do with it. I felt that perhaps as the Director, I had strayed too far towards universalism and neglected the Jewishness of the program. Once we hit the streets however, my thoughts began to change.

We walked past a Baptist Church. I noticed a carving above the doorway - the 10 commandments in Hebrew. Surprised, I looked closer, and saw in the doorway a space where a mezuzah had once been. It was an old shul, possibly the one my grandparents attended before they and the other thousands of Jews who lived on the South Side fled to the suburbs, 50 years ago. I pointed it out to some of the students, and a few of them shared that their grandparents too had lived in these neighborhoods, and perhaps had *davened* in this shul. Here, in an unlikely place, we found a deep connection to Jewish Peoplehood through history and family. My "us-them" mentality shattered, as we began to feel a personal connection to the people around us.

The event gave my students an amazing opportunity to reflect on how they related to the Jews who formerly lived in this neighborhood, and to the residents of today. Did our families cause poverty here when they left? Are we now responsible for that today? How are our actions here today "Jewish"?

Interacting with the "other" can greatly sharpen our own identity. I realized that actions which appear to be thoroughly "non-Jewish" can be sources of tremendous Jewish import, meaning, and connection to Jewish Peoplehood.

This is the challenge and opportunity of Jewish communal leaders today.

It will take "out of the box" applications of text, history, and values to forge the links between helping non Jews and connecting to the Jewish People. We must bring discussions of Jewish Peoplehood from conferences and boardrooms into the streets.

That's not to say that broad, social concerns don't dramatically affect our people already. The

economic crisis of the last two years has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of homeless Jews in America. In a globalized world, famine among wheat farmers in India will affect the price of *matzah* in Israel. US immigration policy affects the workers in Jewish slaughterhouses in Iowa. Government responsibility and disaster preparedness affects synagogues in New Orleans.

This challenge, to meaningfully fuse the universal with particular goes both ways. For those of us who tend towards the particularistic side, we must strive to make links to the larger world. How do these issues affect us, and how do we affect them? What wisdom do we have to offer to the world's most difficult challenges? In addition, we must think about how the Jewish issues vital to our survival - Jewish poverty, antisemitism, preservation of culture and tradition, encouraging Jewish education, are mirrored and affected by the rest of the world. What other peoples share our interests in preserving tradition and cultural norms? What other groups are fighting for return to homelands, or freedom of religious expression? How can we learn from them? *How can they teach us about ourselves?* Engaging deeply in these questions is not just a good thing to do – it thickens what Peoplehood is all about, making it more real, more meaningful, and more alive to millions of Jews.

For those of us who tend towards the universalistic, we must strive to find or create the ties back to the Jewish People in the issues and work we do in the world. What does the Talmud say about tenants' rights? How do Jewish farmers deal with modern environmental problems? How can we frame world issues using Jewish language, values, spiritual expression, and more? Who is the Jewish hero that inspires your work? How can we embed universalistic work inside a lifelong Jewish journey so it is not just another event, trip, not just another "experience"?

Tension usually connotes conflict and strife; tearing things and people apart. Tension can be constructive, however, even beautiful. Clever management of tension in bridges keeps gigantic structures aloft. The tension in violin strings produces the most beautiful melodies. The forces of universalism and particularism pulling at Jewish Peoplehood are real. If we pull too hard in either direction, the Jewish People might snap and fragment. Let us continue to find that strong, beautiful balance between the universal and the particular, pushing our community to find ways of harmonizing what seems on the surface to be at odds, enabling ourselves to make our beautiful Jewish music for generations to come.

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## Your Town's Poor take precedence over those from Other Towns

*By Bambi Sheleg*

We live in the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood in Jerusalem. It is a colorful place where many different kinds of people are gathered. There are Jews from the United States, from the former Soviet Union, from Islamic countries, and native Israeli Jews, religious, secular, traditional, rich and poor.

In the last few years I find myself thinking a lot about the neighborhood where I reside – and the gap that exists between me and the people who live here. On one hand, we have lived here for over twenty years. On the other, my life has not been particularly involved with my neighborhood. I am immersed in my journalistic work and my family, and these consume all of my time. It occurred to me that there may be a lot of things to do in this neighborhood, but I am not aware of them because my entire attention is concentrated on my work and family.

I have been thinking lately that the technological and value systems in which we live cut us off from our immediate surroundings in many ways. We spend too much time talking to people who are far away from us, with whom we have only superficial ties, and whose fate is not tied to ours, while we neglect the people that are close by, because their physical proximity is so taken for granted that it does not command our interest.

To me the precept, "Your city's poor come first" refers to poverty not only in monetary terms, but also in attention. Those closest to us - in our family, in our social circle, and among our people at large – often don't appear to need our attention. They are there, like the sky and the sun. It is as if they do not require nourishment and care, because they are already present. By contrast, those far away from us seem more challenging and intriguing, just because of their distance from us.

Comes the Jewish tradition and tells us: you are mistaken. Your poor, those close to you, are the ones that should interest you the most. The treasure is not under some far away bridge; it is close by. You should focus your interest on those close to you. Give them your attention. This will give you strength and a stronger anchor in life than investing your time in far-away people who do not share the same destiny.

And if we are talking about the destiny of the Jewish people, we can say, by extension, that we should take an interest in both Jews who are near, and those who are far away . And if they are far, let's bring them closer to our "town", i.e. to our consciousness. Too often our attention is given to correcting the situation of people that are far removed from us, and we fail to notice that so many Jews desperately need our attention. The economic situation of these Jews may be fine, but they are impoverished in the sense of lacking closeness to other Jews. They lack a sense of belonging, and the consciousness that their Judaism is significant to them and to us.

Even if we are not aware of it, the Jewish People needs a long process of rehabilitation. The essence of this process is our interest in ourselves. "Our town's poor come first", our own interconnections – their strength and vibrancy -- are what will strengthen our people anew.

*Bambi Sheleg is the founding editor of Eretz Acheret*

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## Israel: Where *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* Meets *Tikkun Olam*

By Dyonna Ginsburg

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the pursuit of *Tikkun Olam*, defined here as Jewish moral responsibility to the non-Jewish world,<sup>1</sup> both among young Jews and in Jewish philanthropic circles.

As more and more Jewish resources – time, manpower, and money – are being pumped into alleviating the suffering of non-Jews, the question of priorities is becoming more acute. Should our *Tzedakah* go to relief efforts in the developing world or to subsidies for low-income families at the local Jewish day school? Should our college kids spend spring break repairing churches in hurricane-ravished New Orleans or volunteering in the neighborhood’s Hebrew home for the aged?

Proponents of giving (almost) exclusively to the Jewish community cite the *Talmud’s* discussion of *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* (“the poor of your city take precedence”), which establishes a hierarchy of priorities in favor of local, Jewish needs: “If you lend money to... a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another city, the poor of your city have priority.”<sup>2</sup>

Alongside this Talmudic proof text, advocates of Jewish-directed giving invoke contemporary reality – i.e., dwindling numbers of affiliated Jews, the demise of traditional Jewish institutions, rising costs of Jewish education, the growing gulf between Jews in Israel and those elsewhere. A people hemorrhaging its next generation cannot afford to invest in others, they argue. What is the use of *Tikkun Olam*, if soon there will be no Jewish People to continue pursuing it?

In response, *Tikkun Olam* proponents cite their own Talmudic precedent – “We sustain non-Jewish poor with Jewish poor ... for the sake of peace”<sup>3</sup> – and explain that the circumstances underlying *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* have changed over time. Today, the lines between local and global are blurred. We live in a “flat” world in which the clothing we wear and food we eat were produced by sweatshops and slave labor in far-off countries and the internet enables us to see the suffering of people thousands of miles away.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the term *Tikkun Olam* assumed a variety of meanings: in the *Mishna* (*Gittin* 4), it was a rationale for rabbinic edicts in Jewish society; in the *Aleinu* prayer, it was linked to the messianic age in which the entire world will serve God; in neo-kabbalistic contexts, it referred to the act of bringing God into this world. While departing from more traditional definitions, this article’s use of *Tikkun Olam* as “Jewish moral responsibility to the non-Jewish world” is in line with the way the term has been increasingly used in common parlance over the past couple of decades.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 71a.

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Gittin* 61a

Regarding concerns about the future of the Jewish People, here too, *Tikkun Olam* proponents have a ready response. Social action has emerged as a portal into Jewish identity for countless young Jews alienated from the community. If we want a Jewish People, then *Tikkun Olam* is not a luxury. It's a necessity.

Faced with the *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* vs. *Tikkun Olam* dilemma, what are Jewish communal leaders and decision-makers to do? Allow "each person to do what is right in his own eyes"<sup>4</sup> and hope for the best? Or, demonstrate the courage, foresight, and wisdom to pool communal resources in a more concerted fashion and achieve greater impact?

A compelling, though overlooked, solution to the aforementioned dilemma is the State of Israel. With the founding of the state more than sixty years ago, the Jewish People gained the engines of statecraft – an army, legislature, judiciary, diplomatic corps, etc. – to implement *Tikkun Olam* on a scale impossible for individuals, NGOs, or isolated communities to achieve. Israel, as a modern nation state, has the potential to serve both as a laboratory for *Tikkun Olam* within its own borders, upholding the rights of its minority populations, and as a catalyst for social change in the international arena. We need look no further than the recent, overwhelmingly positive attention attracted by the IDF field hospital in earthquake-devastated Haiti to understand the tremendous potential the State of Israel has to be the vanguard for *Tikkun Olam* on the world stage.

With this in mind, imagine what the world would look like if the international Jewish community would issue a multimillion-dollar "challenge grant" to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' MASHAV division, which promotes sustainable development and social equity in the developing world, and thereby succeed in procuring a "dollar for dollar" match by the Israeli government to significantly ratchet up its efforts to alleviate poverty, provide food security, empower women and children, and upgrade basic health and education services around the world.

Imagine what the Jewish future would look like if the overwhelming majority of Jewish college kids doing an alternative spring break would do so in Israel, working with Bedouins in the Negev or African refugees in Tel Aviv, or would choose to volunteer alongside Israeli peers through initiatives like Tevel B'Tzedek in Nepal and Haiti.

We would be killing not two birds, but infinitely more, with just one stone. To name a few: increased social impact, greater Israel engagement, improved Jewish Peoplehood, a better Israel, a better world.

And, so the question is not whether we should fund relief efforts in developing countries, but *how* we should do so and *through whom*. Nor is it whether we should send our college kids to Jewish service learning experiences helping non-Jews, but *where* we should do so and *together with whom*.

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<sup>4</sup> Judges 25:21



The international Jewish community should be investing its resources in a massive, three-tiered plan to put the State of Israel at the forefront of *Tikkun Olam* by: 1) supporting Israel's efforts to meet the needs of its own minority populations, 2) bolstering Israel's aid to the developing world, 3) and

creating joint social action opportunities for young Israeli Jews and their peers from outside Israel, both in Israel and in the developing world.

Does this mean we should shut down the hundreds of non-Israeli, *Tikkun Olam* organizations and put an end to their blessed work? No. It would be naïve to assume that the State of Israel could understand and meet the needs of Chicago's urban communities better than the local Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. It would be a mistake to disregard the expertise and impressive array of partnerships the American Jewish World Service has cultivated in the developing world. And, it would be wishful thinking to believe that all North American Jewish college kids will come to Israel on spring break, at least in the near future.

But, if we are talking about priorities and where the lion's share of our precious resources should go, the answer is pretty clear: Israel, Israel, Israel. When Israel is thrown into the mix, the zero sum game of *Aniyei Ircha* **OR** *Tikkun Olam* is replaced by the win-win formula of *Aniyei Ircha* **AND** *Tikkun Olam*.

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## Strangers and kindness in Jewish Peoplehood: complement or conflict?

By Elana Maryles Sztokman

When humanitarian crisis strikes around the world, the ensuing dilemmas that Israel and the Jewish People face highlight a central issue in the discussion of Jewish Peoplehood. Social ills such as poverty and homelessness, as well as global crises such as the recent genocide in Darfur, challenge the Jewish community to stand up and assist fellow human beings. However, there are two competing responses to this humanitarian challenge: one is that the value of kindness is paramount, and should be extended to non-Jews, and the second is that kindness only belongs "in-house", based on the idea that "*ani'ei irkha kodmim*" (BT B. Metzia 71a) – loosely translated, that charity begins in one's own community.

This debate, which has occupied Jewish leaders – religious and political – for centuries if not millennia, reflects two competing notions about the Divine mission of the Jewish People. Although the precept of "*ani'ei irkha*" has widespread acceptance within the Jewish community, it is arguably a fallacious misrepresentation of core Jewish values, masking stronger historical support for a Jewish duty to engage in global humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup> The original usage of the phrase "*ani'ei irkha*" refers to a specific form of economic triage, when one only has enough money to lend a single person and has to make difficult choices. While acknowledging that life sometimes presents thorny problems, the original text was perhaps never intended to suggest that one should completely avoid assisting non-Jewish poor people. Unfortunately, that is how the precept is often interpreted today. This troubling interpretation has become an underlying if unspoken element of some versions of Jewish Peoplehood which view the goal of Peoplehood as bolstering an insular fortitude rather than exploring a moral-ethical stance vis a vis the rest of the world.

The Jewish heritage is in fact replete with mandates to convey compassion towards non-Jews as an expression of the Jewish People's mission from God. Perhaps the best illustration of the centrality of kindness towards gentiles in Jewish culture can be found in the Book of Ruth, where Boaz extends tremendous compassion towards Ruth the Moabite, a poor, unknown young woman who takes refuge in his fields. Boaz, rather than suggest that she is merely a "foreigner" and out of his purview, obliges his workers to give her the best treatment, including some of their own food and protection from humiliation and exploitation – all in the name of God. This attitude is taken to be quintessentially Jewish, standing in stark contrast to the attitude of Ruth's father-in-law Elimelech who chose to escape during difficult times rather than take responsibility for others. The interactions of kindness displayed between Boaz and Ruth are considered to be archetypically Jewish to such an extent that Ruth

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Yaakov Maoz (*Matnasim* 304, December 2007, pp. 16-17) cites a string of leading rabbinic commentators throughout the ages who have passionately advocated for a broad-based charitable approach. Menachem Meiri, for example (Provence 1249-1315), writes, "No matter what you have to help the non-Jew... This has elements of commandment and of morality, and as long as he stands before you, do not send him away empty-handed" (*Beit Habehira*, B. Metzia 71a). R' Yakov ben Asher (Toledo 1343-1269), better known as the Ba'al Haturim, actually reverses the Talmudic injunction, and argues that not only should non-Jews receive the same kindness as Jews, but that Jews from other cities should receive charity first "in order to preserve the peace" (*Tur, Yore De'ah*, 251). Many others agree with this and take it even further, such as R' Moshe Alshich (Saloniki-Safed 1507-1600), author of *Torat Moshe*, who writes that foreigners should receive charity first in order to maintain the recipient's privacy and anonymity and to protect him from shame.

becomes the icon of the convert to Judaism, and together Ruth and Boaz form the lineage of the Davidic dynasty, and with that the lineage of the messiah.

The message from both the narrative and the law is clear: *the essence of Jewish culture and tradition is a universal ethic of care and compassion. A Jewish Peoplehood that does not rest on this ethic is empty of purpose.*

Unfortunately, this message is so often lost in Jewish education. Jewish schools so often focus on the wrong aspects of our tradition, such as clothing or appearances. Tests and grades take over school culture so that our tradition becomes another subject to be memorized and returned back for a score. Individual achievement and attainment is held in the highest esteem while looking outward at the plight of the other is not practiced. If care and compassion are not the primary values transmitted through every activity and interaction, then one has to wonder what makes it Jewish education. The tradition that we should be transmitting is the one that teaches us to care about the other before ourselves.

There is an interesting debate between Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik about the purpose of the amidah prayer that I believe highlights this point. Both men separately and independently asked why the amidah, a prayer that is considered the most divine and transformative, revolves around seemingly earthly matters such as sustenance, health and physical safety. Heschel argues<sup>2</sup> that these prayers are ultimately insignificant, and that the ultimate goal is to transcend such mundane thoughts. "The focus of prayer is not the self," he writes. "A man may spend hours meditating about himself or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow man, and no prayer will come to pass." Soloveitchik, on the other hand, disagrees completely. He argues that the very purpose of prayer is in understanding hunger – in particular the hunger of the other. "Judaism," he writes<sup>3</sup>, "wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice or unfairness. For Judaism held that the individual who displays indifference to pain and suffering, who meekly reconciles himself to the ugly, disproportionate and unjust in life, is not capable of appreciating beauty and goodness.... God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality."

In other words, feeling the pain of the other is the essence of spiritual connection, and working toward alleviating the suffering of another human being – whether Jew or non-Jew – is the divine mission, the definition of Jewish Peoplehood.

In this Jewish mission, there is no difference between "your city" and "the other city". The Torah message is about seeing the other in his or her struggles, feeling the pain of the other, and striving to

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel (1954), "An invitation to God", in *Man's Quest for God*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons pp. 14-15

<sup>3</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, prayer, Talmud Torah", in *Tradition*, Vol 17 (2) 62-62, Spring 1978

correct injustice. Sometimes that other is in the opposite hemisphere, but sometimes that person is sitting right next to you. We often treat both as invisible. Living a compassionate life means seeing and feeling the suffering of that other person, internalizing it, and dedicating oneself to alleviating that suffering.

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## Giving Priority to the Jewish People\*

By Jack Wertheimer

At a time when Jewish communal institutions are failing to attend to the needs of Jews at home and abroad, the hot trend in Jewish philanthropic and organizational circles, incredibly, is to channel ever more of their resources to *nonsectarian causes*. Preachers in every corner of the Jewish community are intent on urging the faithful to drop their parochial concerns for the welfare of fellow Jews and instead think globally. How can Jews worry about their own, they ask, when so many unfortunates in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are suffering even worse afflictions? Last May, at my own institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the commencement speaker exhorted newly ordained rabbis and cantors, along with graduating educators and communal workers, to do nothing less than focus their energies on eliminating poverty and injustice from the world, even as she gave short-shrift to the impact of the economic downturn on Jewish needs.

“What is required, first,” declared Ruth Messinger of American Jewish World Service, “is that we embrace those with whom we do not share a faith or a neighborhood, a country, a language, or a political structure. We must bend our minds and our voices, our energies and our material resources, to help those most in need, both at home and abroad.” In today’s American Jewish community, this kind of talk is hardly an exception: representatives of every denomination have discovered a Jewish imperative to “repair the world” (*Tikkun Olam*), a commandment unknown to Jews for most of their history but that now, in the view of its most outspoken advocates, is preeminent.

Last spring, a partnership of Jewish foundations even saw fit to launch a new initiative, called “Repair the World,” with the self-declared “mission...to make service to others a defining element of American Jewish life.” Who are these “others”? The organization’s website helpfully points people to six domestic and international service opportunities—not a single one of which is under Jewish auspices or serves specifically Jewish populations. A bit more exploration of the website, in fact, did unearth a list of Jewish organizations offering Jewish service opportunities, which then raises the question of why yet another effort is needed to convince Jews to engage in “healing the world” when they do so already, and in vast disproportion to the contributions of other groups. Indeed, surveys regularly make clear that big Jewish givers channel the preponderant bulk of their philanthropic largess to nonsectarian causes—such as universities, museums, and hospitals—and only a small percentage of their philanthropy to aid fellow Jews. And hundreds of synagogues of all denominations sponsor social-action committees to spur volunteering at local soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other venues aiding the downtrodden.

No one in a position of responsibility in Jewish organizational life has suggested that Jews should be indifferent to the plight of their fellow human beings, and all the evidence suggests that American Jews engage actively in civic and philanthropic activities. Why, then, the incessant barrage of exhortations to do more for the world, even as Jewish needs go unmet?

The rationale for the latest push to involve Jews in universal causes now focuses specifically on young Jews, and goes something like this: Jews in their teens, 20s, and 30s are deeply invested in contributing to the world at large—a commitment, we might add, many have imbibed from their

parents. To get their attention, Jewish organizations must harness this idealism and teach young people that their quest to aid fellow human beings is in fact congruent with the deepest teachings of Judaism. In this way we can do good for the world, while simultaneously bringing together Jews of different backgrounds and educating them about their traditions.

One could ask, of course, why this effort to repair the world cannot also extend to aiding fellow Jews. Proponents of Jewish service learning express great confidence in the sufficiency of resources in the Jewish community to address all needs—a demonstrably incorrect assessment, as we have seen. Alternatively, they will say that young Jews do not want to be bothered with their fellow Jews. If we are to attract anyone outside the committed core, they argue, programs must direct young Jews to nonsectarian causes, bearing out the truth of Cynthia Ozick's dead-on observation that "universalism is the parochialism of the Jews." And so, based on these rationalizations, an entire set of organizations under Jewish auspices now seeks to rally Jews to help everyone except their own co-religionists.

But even this is no longer good enough for those marching under the banner of universalism. Under the headline "Not Only for Ourselves," the *Forward*, the country's only national Jewish newspaper, editorialized in November 2009 against "elevating Jewish identity to a goal of [Jewish service programs, for it] undermines their very purpose." The argument seems to be that the cause of social justice is perverted if it is motivated even partly by the desire to connect Jewish volunteers to each other and to Jewish teachings. Lest we miss the point, David Rosenn, a rabbi in the forefront of such efforts, adds, "The last thing we want the Jewish community to do is use communities in distress as a vehicle to build identity." The measure of *Tikkun Olam's* authenticity, it would seem, is that it be solely a Jewish mission to the Gentiles.

Before they invest even more funding and direct still more volunteers to nonsectarian causes, Jewish philanthropists should consider a different path. Think of what they could do for the cause of Jewish literacy by creating a Jewish Teach for America. Such a program would serve the dual purpose of deepening the Judaic knowledge of volunteers, while simultaneously directing much needed personnel to the understaffed field of Jewish education. Philanthropists could also create a Jewish Service Corps with the mission of sending volunteers to Jewish communities in the United States and around the world where poverty, inadequate Jewish education, and social problems exist. Imagine what several thousand dedicated volunteers serving in Jewish educational and social-service institutions for two years might do to lessen the two-fold crises of affordability faced by families and understaffing afflicting most major agencies.

New initiatives might also strive self-consciously to teach Jews what they need to know, not only what they want to hear. They could begin by explaining that Jews, too, suffer from poverty and illiteracy. Remarkably, this obvious point is not widely understood. After working in a service program aiding Jews in the former Soviet Union, a volunteer expressed amazement that in all her years in a Jewish day school, she had never heard about poor Jews who require help. With some knowledge, idealistic young Jews who have grown up in the suburbs of the large American cities will discover that they do not have to trek around the globe to find human beings living in poverty; all they have to do is look in their own communities to find Jews trying to make ends meet and who could benefit from their help.



A program of serious Jewish education could also open some eyes about the unique perspectives offered by traditional Judaism. There is, for example, a rabbinic injunction proclaiming that “all of Israel is responsible one for the other.” Another fundamental teaching regards the study of Torah—deep Jewish knowledge—as equal in value to all the other commandments combined; the corollary is that helping people learn Torah by offering them scholarships is a communal value, and ignorance of Jewish tradition is woeful.

To cite but one more example, we might broadcast the fundamental Jewish belief, widely understood until the day before yesterday, that when Jews guide their lives in accord with the religious commandments, they fulfill God’s will. Jewish values are expressed through a lifetime of observing specific religious rituals and active participation in a sacred community, not through episodic service activities. Something quite important and enduring could come from spreading such basic Jewish teachings: not only would many more Jews be enriched by exposure to authentic Jewish values, but they might also enlist to address the physical and spiritual poverty afflicting their own people.

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## The Boundaries of our City in the Age of Globalization\*

By Micha Odenheimer

Should the Jewish People and Israel actively care and become urgently involved with issues of extreme poverty in the developing world? Don't we have enough on our plate already?

As the founder of a Jewish-Israeli NGO whose *raison d'être* is to create just such involvement, I often encounter people who argue that we should not. "The poor of your own city take precedence," they say, quoting a Talmudic dictum, usually with some degree of indignation. If they are from the political left, they will add "There are plenty of Palestinians you should be helping first." If they are from the right, replace the word Palestinians with Jews; the rest of the formula can remain.

The use of this quotation would be problematic even if our reality were the same as in the days of the Talmudic sages. The Talmud says to give precedence to the local population only when all else is equal, not if the poor of your city, for example, are hungry, but the foreign poor are starving.

In today's world, moreover, the notion of the local—of what constitutes "your own city"—has itself been transformed. During Talmudic times, cities and their surrounding agricultural lands formed an economic unit, with their own markets, prices, values, and regulations. The precedence of the local poor was rooted in the notion that we are responsible for those who live within the economic and legal system that we have created and in which we participate.

The globalization of the economy, a process which has accelerated over the past three decades since the fall of the Soviet bloc, has created very different conditions. Today, the economy of all the world's nations are inextricably entwined and interconnected to a degree that even 20 years ago would have been hard to imagine. In Israel, as elsewhere, globalization takes myriad forms: Most of the food being grown in Israel is exported to Europe, while the workers on these farms are from Thailand or China. Our elderly and sick are being taken care of by Nepalese, Sri Lankan or Philippino caregivers. Many of Israel's largest companies are now subsidiaries of multi-national corporations—Osem, for example, was bought 7 years ago by Frito-Lay—while Israeli corporations have themselves gone multinational, and own companies in Europe, Asia or South America. And of course most of the products and resources we use are farmed or mined or manufactured or assembled in the developing world—often in places whose lack of human, labor, or political rights means are part of what makes them so attractive as production sites. All this without even mentioning environmental issues, which are by their nature borderless and trans-regional.

As full participants in the contemporary economic system, which is global in every respect, we cannot make ethics the single exception. Instead, it behooves us to become active participants in shaping the moral contours of our world. The capitalist system that has pushed globalization forward—creating much prosperity and also much suffering—often presents itself as the natural result of the free market. Yet the unification of all the world's markets into a single global system has been the result of laws and treaties that have been advanced through a concerted strategy based on specific ideas about human nature that has identified a certain form of economic growth as its supreme value.

If we are to reinvigorate Judaism, we must allow Jewish tradition and values to become part of the crucial discussion taking place about how to insure a more just and beautiful future for humanity. This means, first of all, experiencing first hand the lives and struggles of the 2 billion people who struggle every day to feed themselves, and who often lack access to clean water, sanitation, and basic education and health care. It means understanding the often hidden consequences of the way the world is being run today. I often think about the day when our volunteers in Nepal woke up to discover the whole city paralyzed by a massive strike when, as a result of commodities speculation in the United States and the globalization of the food market, the price of basic necessities shot up so high that the majority of Nepalese would no longer be able to afford even two meals a day.

Once the realities of life in the developing world have been felt and understood, we can begin to appreciate the 3000 year old discussion of economic justice that is a central spine of the Jewish tradition. Certainly, there is much to ponder, and room for many legitimate viewpoints in reading this tradition. Yet many of the basic principles seem clear and relevant. Rather than assume that economic growth will lead to prosperity for all, we are taught the opposite: create a just society that cares for the poor and the marginalized and prosperity will follow. Specifically, the Torah commands us to create a system in which the poor have access to interest free loans, and benefit from the periodic forgiving of debts as well as ongoing cycles of land reform. The price of basic foods (*ochel nephesh*), according to the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch, should not be subject to financial speculation. Others examining the tradition might place more emphasis on the Torah's respect for private property or belief in markets—what is important at this stage are not the specifics, but participation in the discourse—putting the subject of global economic justice on the Jewish agenda.

As Israelis and Jews we have much to gain from a renewed engagement with the most urgent ethical challenges in our world today. Renewed, because Israel was deeply involved in aiding the developing world during the 50's and 60's and still has a deserved reputation in Africa and Asia as possessing game changing ideas and technologies in fields such as agriculture, education and health. I've seen first hand the enthusiasm with which Israeli volunteers and technical experts are greeted in the developing world, and the change in Israel's image that sharing knowledge and skills can bring. But skills alone are not enough: we have to add our ethical wisdom, based on the Torah, a foundational text for billions of people across the world, and honed through the Talmud and contemporary thinkers right up through Ashlag, Buber and Levinas.

I was inspired to create Tevel b'Tzedek after witnessing first hand another form of Israeli involvement in the developing world: the huge phenomenon of post-army travel to India, Nepal, South East Asia and South America. Along with the desire to unwind after years of difficult and fraught army service, it was clear to me that young Israelis, who travel more per capita by far than any other group, have a deep need to seek out an answer to the following question: What does it mean to be an Israeli and a Jew in the contemporary world? We have the right and the duty to answer: it means engaging, with all the wisdom and empathy we can muster, in creating a more just and beautiful world.

\* A version of this article originally appeared in *Havruta: A Journal of Jewish Conversation*, published by the Shalom Hartman Institute.

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## "Aniyei Ircha Kodmim"- Where does it end? The Israeli case

By Nir Sarig

As long as the value of *tikkun olam* does not make aliyah, we cannot view it as a central feature of Jewish Peoplehood. I belong to the group within the Jewish People that is interested in it happening. We are not yet there.

The use of the term *tikkun olam* is spreading in the new Jewish narrative. From my perspective, it means applying the Jewish concept of *chesed* beyond the borders of the Jewish People. According to the Rambam, *chesed* is a deed done for another human being, not based on any legal obligation. "True *chesed*, or *gmilut chasadim* in the Jewish tradition happen only when the doer does not gain any profit from the deed. One can see in the modern aspiration for *tikkun olam* an adaptation of the universal humanistic principle articulated in the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, which claimed that every human being should be seen as an end in himself and never merely as a means to an end. Like Kant's "man as an end in himself", *tikkun olam* should not be the sole consideration when we seek to help the other, but it ought to weigh heavily in the desire to help. Tikkun olam expands the willingness to help someone who is not part of our people, beyond political, social and economic considerations. Tikkun olam is an attempt to build a better world as part of human solidarity and empathy to human suffering.

Many Israelis remember the Israeli military hospital mobilized to Haiti as one of last year's highlights. Israel was ahead of the rest of the developed world in providing emergency medical assistance to the worst crisis in our times. For a moment one could think that finally we, the State of the Jewish People, take part in *tikkun olam*.

When the IDF soldiers returned home, they were greeted by Prime Minister Netanyahu who congratulated them on their professional and efficient work, and then added, "You uplifted the human spirit, the name of the State of Israel and the IDF. Especially in these days, when there are those who distort and blemish the name of the IDF and the State of Israel, you have shown the world the true IDF spirit."

In my opinion, the words of the Prime Minister represent well the spirit in the country. The humanitarian act in Haiti was justified by the need to counter negative positions against Israel and the IDF in the world. The main argument for funding the military hospital in Haiti was the need to gain the world's support. It can be seen as a continuation of Israel's policy in Africa in the 1960s. Then the reasoning was more specific: to gain pro-Israel votes in the United Nations.

The world is changing. The "advanced" countries recognized long ago the moral responsibility to support and aid the underdeveloped countries. According to the OECD which Israel joined recently, member organizations are required to dedicate 0.3% of their GNP to foreign aid. In Israeli terms it comes to \$600,000,000 a year. The budget of Israel's foreign aid department comes to less than \$25,000,000. Even if we were to add to it the absorption cost of Ethiopian Jewry and aid to foreign

workers and all of the government foreign aid we are still very far from the required international standard.

Back to Haiti. Next to the IDF hospital and in the months following the return of the soldiers, Israeli social organizations such as Latet, Natan, Tevel B'tzedek and Magen David Adom operated in Haiti. Those organizations went to Haiti and simultaneously launched campaigns to fund their activities there. Funding came from world Jewry and non-governmental sources in Israel.

As the one responsible for fundraising for Natan during that period, I remember the frustration from the poor response of the Israeli public. No less frustrating was the response of the public to the appeal for contribution. On the January 18, 2010, a few days after the earthquake, Walla news reported the following headline: "Israelis are not opening their pockets for Haiti". The item reported the poor achievements in raising contributions from the Israeli public. On the bottom of the news item one could read a record number of 296 talkbacks. The majority expressed negative attitudes towards contribution to the disaster's victims. A talk backer named "Daphna" seemed to represent the general sense: "With all due sadness, your town's poor come first, and sadly there are many of them". Another response, by "Nice citizen", reiterated the same overall outlook: "Who will contribute to us?" Or as "Yona" responded: "Your town's poor come first and in two months we will be forgotten anyway and two days after we get out of there all will be forgotten and they will vote against us in the UN." The business sector also disappointed. Most appeals to business firms received the laconic response along the following lines: "Our company is committed to fighting poverty throughout the year so your request is being denied."

While fundraising from world Jewry was built around the ethos of tikkun olam the concept of "your town's poor come first" typified the response of the Israeli public. Do we have to accept the fact that the value of tikkun olam will not be accepted by Israeli society? I do not think so.

Fifteen years ago concepts such as: "corporate responsibility", "sustainable development" and "handicap access" were strange to most Israeli ears. Today, thanks to NGOs such as Ma'ale, Israel's Nature Society and Israel Access those concepts have become a substantial component of the Israeli narrative. Those organizations were helped by significant resources from Diaspora Jewry to promote their goals.

As the infrastructure of Israeli humanitarian organizations grows stronger, more Israeli volunteers will become involved in tikkun olam projects which, in return, will increase the chance of making the concept more acceptable in the wider public and its elected officials.

There are also encouraging signs. The mobilization of wide sectors of the Israeli public for the foreign workers' children and the African refugees, the exceptional work of the Israeli social organizations in Haiti and the increase in volunteerism for humanistic causes, create hope that the desired change is doable.

There is also room for creative thinking and innovative ideas such as recruiting Israelis to volunteer during trips to the East or Latin America (an existing activity that can be expanded), the creation of a national service track alongside the American Peace Corps, the export of Israeli social



entrepreneurships and the opening of professional training tracks for Israeli students abroad. All these ideas can be implemented in joint frameworks for Israelis and Diaspora Jews, thus paving the way for making the notion of tikkun olam a substantial component of Jewish Peoplehood.

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**"Seek the Peace and Prosperity of Your City":  
Towards an expanded interpretation of Jeremiah's Call**

*By Rachel Liel*

The seeming contradiction between parochial and universal concerns in Jewish philanthropy and social action need not pose, in reality, any contradiction at all. Charity, as we know, begins at home -- but it cannot end there. Caring for our own, and caring for the other, is not just a question of balance, but needs to be a question of definition and interpretation as well.

The sage Hillel, in perhaps Judaism's most widely-quoted aphorism, first stated what now strikes us as obvious: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" And of course he continued, "and if I am only for myself, what am I?" This expresses exactly the balance needed between the Talmudic injunction to care for "the poor of your city first" and the Rabbinic commandment of *tikkun olam*, to repair the world. The prophet Jeremiah (29:7) synthesized it best, with a ringing clarion call to "seek the peace and prosperity of your city...for if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Though they contain much wisdom, these ancient sayings do not necessarily provide specific guidance for how Jews today should make tough policy decisions. And in fact, Jewish funders and communal activists struggle daily to find the balance between local and overseas needs, and between Jewish and general concerns.

Jewish Federations in North America, for example – though caring for overseas needs as well – have increasingly prioritized local Jewish concerns. Yet Jewish funders are also channeling more resources to non-Jewish causes, as organizations strive to harness the idealism of young Jews by providing opportunities for them, as Jews and with Jews, to engage in universal social action.

So on the one hand, the traditionalists are right that there are never enough resources available for Jewish causes. On the other hand, *tikkun olam* activities are a promising and Jewish way to keep disaffected young Jews from opting out of Jewish life – and in fact, there are never enough resources available for non-Jewish causes either.

Is a synthesis of these two paths possible? Some three decades ago, the New Israel Fund was created in the United States with an approach that was then both radical and unique, and is still somewhat novel in global Jewish life: we expanded the Talmudic injunction to "care for the poor of your city first" to include the non-Jews of the Jewish city, the State of Israel.

At seven and a half million people, roughly the size of the population of New York, Israel functions in many ways like a diverse modern metropolis. When Jeremiah exhorts us to seek the peace and prosperity of our city, we take that admonition literally. For Israel to truly prosper, all its residents -- Jew and non-Jew, secular and ultra-Orthodox, citizen and migrant worker – must feel they belong; they must be included as equals in a shared society. The civil and human rights of Palestinian Israelis and foreign laborers must be insured; they must suffer no institutional discrimination and enjoy fair distribution of resources.

And only when all Israelis truly prosper - when the social justice so forcefully espoused by our prophets and echoed in Israel's Declaration of Independence is the law and reality of the Land -- can Jews everywhere truly prosper. By living according to our Jewish values, we can insure an Israel whose environment is safeguarded; an Israel where the citizens enjoy freedom of religion and suffer no religious coercion; an Israel where all groups -- immigrants, non-Jews, Reform and Conservative Jews, the gay community, the poor, the disabled, everyone -- are truly free and empowered.

Striving towards this vision of a shared society in Israel accomplishes several goals at once. In supporting and working towards *this* vision of Israel, Jews abroad integrate their particular and universal concerns, causing the ostensible tension between the two to dissipate. By enlarging the definition of "the poor of your city" to include all vulnerable populations in Israel, Jew and non-Jew alike, the New Israel Fund has provided world Jewry with an effective vehicle for implementing the vision of the prophets.

Within Israel, the vision of a just and shared society is not just Jewish, it exemplifies as well the best intentions of the founders of the state, who enshrined these values in our Declaration of Independence. In living in this Israel, and striving each day to ensure the flourishing of this vision, Israeli Jews become a living, breathing testament to that fact that it *is* possible, on an individual and societal level, to integrate in a meaningful way our concern for fellow Jews and our concern for all people.

Hillel, it will be recalled, asked "If I am only for myself, *what am i?*" Our sage posed for us the question, that is, not "what should we do?" but "who do we want to be?" Israel is still a young state; we are still wrestling with the question of who we in fact are.

Together with Jews all over the world, we can be a model for a society and a people who are succeeding in finding that balance, that equilibrium, between global and local, between universal and particular. Moreover, we will have expanded the definition of who in fact constitute "the poor of our city." When this happens, we will in fact be the citizens of Jeremiah's shining city-state; the residents of a global Jewish village of peace and justice, within our borders and without.

*Rachel Liel is the Executive Director of the New Israel Fund in Israel. On the eve of Rosh Hashana this year, she was chosen by The Marker, Ha'aretz's business and technology magazine, as one of the 101 Israelis who have most influenced the country for the better in 5770.*

**Towards a new understanding of Jewish Peoplehood:  
Undoing the false tension of Particularism and Universalism  
[or between *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* and *Tikkun Olam*]**

By Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi

On every level, modernity both challenges and expands our understanding of Jewish identity and Jewish values. While some may decry the decreased commitment and tribalism inherent in a modern or postmodern Jewish identity, here I want to explore not only the root of the challenge of modernity to Jewish identity, but also what opportunities for the evolution of Judaism it offers us.

While our contemporary realities may often appear to create a conflict between our particularist Jewish values and universal values, I argue that in fact modernity affords us the opportunity to live out a truer and fuller expression of Judaism's ethics and can stimulate and inspire us to develop a more balanced and accurate set of Jewish values and identity. Modernity, while it certainly challenges our particular identity, also allows for a more complete evolution of Judaism because it allows us to fully express the core ideas of our system of ethics, which insists on a concern for the world and all its inhabitants, as well as a particular love of self and the Jewish people.

Because in the pre-modern context Jewish values were primarily lived out in closed or limited Jewish contexts, the particularist elements naturally deepened and thrived. Perhaps the best examples of these particularist values are the value and practice of *tzedakkah* within the Jewish community and the value of the precedence of self-protection/defense over a concern for non-Jews and their welfare. Without a doubt, given the often hostile environments in which we lived we were necessarily and primarily concerned about ourselves, our welfare, our security. Even if, as we shall see, our tradition might have embedded deeply within it universal ethics and a profound concern for all peoples and for the world as a whole, our collective experience often made the expression of those ethics impossible and even unethical given our ethical responsibility to love and care for ourselves, especially when, as our experience taught us, no one else would.

Because Jews, now living and loving in the larger world for several generations, enjoy fully the gifts of universal values such as pluralism and equality, the hyper-particularist and self-protective modes of identity that had characterized the Jewish people and contributed to our survival and flourishing in the pre-modern context are now questioned and –we should emphasize– positively forced to develop in the modern context.

Indeed if we can now live out our universal values more fully because most of the world's societies accept these same values, some Jews understandably ask why we even need our particularist Jewish values. Put another way, if we are living in a world where the universalist values of ethical monotheism are largely accepted, at least in the West, and we are fully accepted, what role should our particularist Jewish values play?

Should we primarily live out the obligation to put the poor of our own community first ("*Aniyei ircha kodmin*") and the needs of our own people first? Or should we primarily be concerned with the larger

world, the sufferings and needs of others in order to better engage in Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world? Given new understandings of Jewish identity and Jewish Peoplehood, which should take precedence?

But the fact that we ask this question actually points to a misunderstanding of Judaism itself. Often a false dichotomy emerges between the particularism of such and identity and the universalism of modern sensibilities. It is a false dichotomy or rather a false tension in my mind because, in fact, it is through the particular identity of Judaism that we learn about our obligation to the universal. In other words I need the particular identity of Judaism in order be able to fully understand and perhaps even to fulfill my obligations to the universal. Often a false dichotomy emerges between the particularism of such and identity and the universalism of modern sensibilities. It is a false dichotomy or rather a false tension in my mind because, in fact, it is through the particular identity of Judaism that we learn about our obligation to the universal. In other words I need the particular identity of Judaism in order be able to fully understand and perhaps even to fulfill my obligations to the universal.

The choice is a false and unnecessary according to Jewish tradition itself. In fact, what both Judaism at its core and the contemporary reality demand of us is a deeper understanding of the value of both and the necessity of integrating both sets of values. In fact, once Judaism can more fully express itself freely, it can now also evolve and allow us to live out all our values. What then emerges, or what can emerge, is the possibility of a more balanced identity, based on a fuller integration of the values of Judaism and the values of modernity many of which are also Jewish values but which were not fully developed or expressed.

One need look no further than the book of Genesis for the textual foundations of the combination of the universalist and particularist values of our tradition. While God is interested in the creation and potential of us as a particular people and how we live in covenant with God, our character and potential to fulfill that covenant are based on who we are as human beings, created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim*, (Genesis 1:27) responsible to be as godly in the world as we can, in part through fulfilling our responsibility to perfect God's imperfect world (Gen. 1-2ff). Only thereafter does God turn to create the Jewish People, carriers of additional responsibilities to fulfill humanity through our unique system of ethics and relationship with God. Thus our Jewishness is based on our humanness, and in our humanness we have a primal commitment to the value and equality of all human beings. Similarly our humanness is in fact expressed through our Jewishness, precisely because of the powerful combination of both the particularist and universalist ethics which are at the core of our tradition.

Jewish tradition developed a system of how to act in the world, which at its inception included a myriad of practices aimed at ensuring the ethical behavior both of the individual Jew but it was simultaneously never blind to the larger world, repeating as if a chorus or mantra of universal responsibility our commitment to the stranger, to the other, to the world.

In other words, the apparent tension between the particularist values and the universalist values of Judaism is in fact a false dichotomy and forces upon the souls of many Jews a false and often self-destructive choice between the two. While the tension does exist, Judaism's notion of ethics does not

demand that we choose, but rather ensures that we constantly engage in and balance both. We should understand our present context as a new opportunity both to return to our core and more complete ethical instincts which allow for and demand both, as well as the possibility of further developing ways of living out and reaching a more positive balance of both aspects of what it means to be a human being.

Recent decades, however, have shown that this ideal evolution of a balanced or more integrated Jewish identity is not a simple one, and the apparent although false conflict between universal values and particularist identity has stymied our necessary evolution. This necessary evolution, or rather the capacity to return to a more balanced identity and system of value is, in my view, not only a more accurate representation of Jewish tradition but also another gift of modernity.

For the Jewish People as a people to survive and thrive in the modern world, and for Judaism to both fully express its core and evolve in this context, we must not seek to resolve the tension between the particular and the universal, but enjoy the ways in which the tension can be sustained and even intensified for it lies at the center of who we are as people and as Jews. A full understanding and integration of the tension will, I believe, make us both better Jews and better human beings. We will be better Jews because we will be more deeply connected to the vision that God had for us as a people, and we will be better human beings because we will be better able to live out what God intended for us at the beginning.

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**Peoplehood is with People**

By Rachel Farbiarz &amp; Ruth W. Messinger

In parsing our Peoplehood along the axes of particularism and universalism, our thoughts inevitably turn to actual, real people: to our grandparents and great-grandparents and those unknown before them. Our people were not from around here and did not live as we are privileged to live. They made their way walking, carrying, sailing, stowing, clawing and running. They came hopeful and gutted; brave, determined and scared from Russia, Romania, Turkey, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Germany, Uzbekistan and Poland. In places often of poverty, hunger and slum; rail, jail and camp they paused to catch their breath.

It is these people whom we encounter as we step through the abstract maze of our Peoplehood and look more deeply. Their thick voices ring in our ears: *“And you? In this place to which we struggled to bring you—with its food and its wealth, its power and its peace—What are you doing here?”*

We are a people pursued by our history. In celebration and lament, longing and horror, we turn to our past. Indeed, we are told, we must. We command ourselves to do so with the twin *Nevers* of our more recent past: *Never Forget. Never Again*. But it is not only the Holocaust’s reverberating impact that has rendered these *Nevers* into contemporary Jewry’s steadfast refrain. The implied normative charge behind this refrain—wrench from your history its ethical imperative so as to give deeper meaning to your present—is as old and well-worn as we are as a nation.

Scarcely had we left Egypt when God began tutoring us in the necessity of looking backward. As we wandered the desert, God instructed us to sit in booths in the autumn, destroy our leaven in the spring, wrap *tefillin* daily and redeem our first sons upon their birth—all in commemoration of the Exodus. But one command among the myriad rooted in our liberation is repeated more than any other. We are to love; heed the feelings of; and protect the stranger because, God explains: “You know the soul of a stranger; You were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

Beside the distinction of its relentless repetition, God’s admonition to deal kindly with the stranger operates differently than the many other *mitzvot* whose origins are rooted in the Exodus. *Sukkah*, *matzah* and *tefillin* are performed *l’zekher*—as eternal witnesses to—the Exodus. Proper treatment of the stranger captures instead a causative relationship between shared history and necessary action. God’s admonitions concerning the stranger are less a blueprint for specific deeds than a framework for moral reasoning and work.

Through this framework, we are to look backward and inward, and then act forward and outward. As children of the Exodus we are to interrogate our past so as to make our present and future accountable to it. And critically, our accountability is not limited by the coordinates of time, place and known, familiar persons. It is specifically those strange to us for whom we must wring out the lessons of our own experience with oppression, otherness and strangerhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 23:9.

The idea, then, that our obligations to our own people stand somehow in opposition to those that we owe people globally is specious. The two, rather, are deeply intertwined. It is precisely our sense of ourselves as a people—as Jews, with a particular relationship to a particular history—that gives rise to our outward-facing obligations. The Torah establishes this tight nexus between self and stranger, between our very existence as a people and how we translate that existence to others. We are not at liberty to sever it.

This is not to say, of course, that we are not obligated to serve those in need within our own communities. Our obligation to support our fellow Jews is as binding as is our obligation to the desperately poor around the globe. Both are *mitzvot*—non-negotiable imperatives whose mantle rests upon each of us.

But we do not encounter our obligations as Jews as if they were chits in a zero-sum game, dedicating our resources to only one category of *mitzvot*. We teach our children to at once keep the *shabbat* and *kashrut*; to respect their parents and themselves; to learn Torah and still make time to practice it.

Indeed, as our children first begin to assume responsibility for the Torah's obligations, we instruct—and comfort—them with the sage Ben Azzai's words: "A *mitzvah* induces another *mitzvah*."<sup>2</sup> His words provide rabbinic anchor to something we know from experience. When individuals commit themselves to justice, *tzedakah* and compassionate action globally; and when they are given the framework for understanding these endeavors as part of their essential obligation as Jews, something else happens as well. The satisfaction of *mitzvah* is contagious. And thus do compassionate global works expand the soul, deepen one's sense of responsibility and bring into sharper focus the Divinity resident within the world. Such are the ingredients for binding people to their fellow humans and fellow Jews alike.

We see this time and again in our work with American Jewish World Service: from the committed individuals who labor and learn on our rabbinical students' service delegations throughout the Global South; to the young and old who, in fighting the genocide in Darfur, discover a new entry point to their own faith; to those *bnai mitzvah* who, coming of age in an irrevocably globalized world, reject the neat division of their new burdens between Jew and "other." And most powerfully, we see it in ourselves: how this hard, expansive work has made us more serious and devoted, more committed to and compelled by the project of our Peoplehood.

We therefore urge ourselves and others to be the boundary-crossers that our people have long been: to find a deeper sense of our own selves and our people by traversing boundaries of place, tongue, race, creed and time. It is thus that we will fulfill God's ancient promise to Abraham that through his seed "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ethics of Our Fathers 4:2.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:3.

*Rachel Farbiarz is a graduate of Harvard and Yale. She clerked for the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, after which her practice focused on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners.*

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## "Charity begins at home" but should not end there

By Shlomi Ravid

In a witty 1903 article titled "Tikkun Haolam and Zionism" Ahad Ha'am makes the following statement: "Our youths are so used to dwelling on and dealing with the questions of "Tikkun Haolam", until too many of them this question became their spiritual focus, and unknowingly the center of all questions that engage them, including the question of Zionism (Hashelach, vol. 11, booklet 4; my translation, SR)". This article which sounds as if written today exposes a seeming contradiction: Ahad Ha'am, mostly known for raising the flag of the Jewish ethical mission in the world, expresses criticism of the Jewish search for a universal solution to the world's problems. What becomes apparent later in the article is that what Ahad Ha'am is critical of is the perception that if the world will be "fixed" (in his days through socialism), the problems of the Jews will go away by themselves.

A hundred years later, though much has changed the debate between caring for "your own" and *Tikkun Olam* is heating up again. It could be interpreted as a healthy reflection of Jewish ethical sensitivity: How, with scarcity of resources, does one balance the responsibility for one's own with the need to address the pain of others in remote places of the world? Underneath the surface of this ethical dilemma, however, lie a few challenges worth clarifying. I will try and raise two of them, offer a short analysis and propose an alternative approach.

A few years ago I attended the launching by Koldor of a Jewish Social Action Month at the Knesset. After a very inspiring description of rescue efforts performed by an Israeli NGO throughout the globe, a prominent Knesset member asked: "but don't you think that *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* (your city's poor come first)?". The politician was expressing a view widely held both in Israel and the Jewish establishment that Israel and its needs should receive first (if not absolute) priority. This approach proved to be relevant and effective for the first five decades of the State, but more recently Israel is not seen by world Jews (nor, one should add, by Israelis) as "our town's poor". This new reality however does not stop Israeli politicians and public from employing the Talmudic expression for justifying continuous philanthropic priority on Israel coupled with permission to ignore the suffering of others. The majority of Israelis, for example, unlike fellow Jews in the US, are too preoccupied with their own national issues to address the challenge of the Darfur genocide.

The above example represents an abuse of a dictate that was created in order to refine Jewish ethical sensitivity but seems to be having just the opposite effect. You are not permitted, in ethical terms, to go save the world, and overlook the injustice in your own back yard. However, this dictum is not meant by any means to release you from your responsibility to the world. The outcome of this approach is that young Jews are raised in Israel without commitment to *Tikkun Olam* in the broader sense, and the vision of creating a more sensitive and just Jewish state seems long forgotten.

On the other side of the ocean some of the expressions of *Tikkun Olam* imply that giving any preference to members of one's own people reflects a sense of parochialism which undermines the ethical foundations of these philanthropic acts altogether. In direct opposition to the "charity begins

at home" view, this approach questions if helping one's own qualifies as charity at all. True *Tzdaka*, it claims, should take place away from home and be free of any hint of sectarianism. Ethically speaking, if the act complies with the interest of the Jewish collective, it cannot be seen as a pure act of *Tikkun Olam*.

One way out of the dilemma created by the opposing approaches is to address the issue through a collective rather than an individualistic prism. According to Martin Buber, our individual identity is established at the meeting place with a concrete collective into which we are born and where we grow. Our collective sentiment is our moral obligation to the other and to the larger group we are part of. This is a sense of ethical love that expands through concentric circles. Starting from the most concrete and private one, directly present, all the way to the remote, amorphous and general, that can be related to only through the link between families to families, communities to communities and peoples to peoples. Through his or her family and community a person relates to their people, and through the people s/he relates to the entire human race.

Grappling with the tension between looking after one's own (broadly defined), and combating injustice throughout the world in the context of the collective Jewish value system does not solve the dilemma. It enables us to develop the framework for addressing the challenge. Two core Jewish values are in struggle here: one considers the survival of the people as a value in its own right. The other sees the Jewish mission of repairing the world as a central imperative. That tension cannot be eliminated, but ethical considerations of need, urgency and fairness can be used in order to reach equilibrium between the conflicting agendas. The challenge is not to rule that needy Jews are not really the responsibility of Jews, or that *Tikkun Olam* is but a trend for "spoiled wealthy Jews". The challenge is to address both demands and do it in accordance with a Jewish sense of justice.

Ten years ago I solicited on behalf of a Jewish Federation a very noble elderly Jew. He surprised me with the following question: "My daughter tells me that in Africa there are people starving to death. Tell me why I should give money to the Federation and not to them?" I told him that he should definitely give money to feed the hungry in Africa, but that if he also gave to Federation he may help raise a future generation of Jewish activists who will continue working to save Africa and fix the world.

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## Your Town's Poor come first in a Global World

By Yuval Cherlow

Many rulings in the Jewish world teach us about a special attitude towards those closer to us. The words of the Torah, "Let him (your brother, S.R) live by your side as your kinsman" (Leviticus 25: 36) and the words of the prophet, "Do not ignore your own kin" (Isaiah, 58: 7), were interpreted, as is often the case in rabbinic commentary, as guidelines for normative behavior: Giving charity to family members takes priority over giving to others.

"If a man has abundant provisions in his house and wishes to set some aside for the sustenance of the needy, what order is he to follow in providing for them? First, of course, he should take care of his father and his mother. If he has some provisions left, he should take care of his brother and his sister. If he still has some provisions left, he should take care of the members of his household. If he again has some provisions left, he should take care of the members of his family. Then, if he has some left, he should take care of the people in his immediate neighborhood. Next, if he has some left, he should take care of the people on his street. And finally [with what remains] he should provide charity freely throughout Israel" (Tanna debbi Eliyahu, 27).

Halacha actually prefers that family members fulfill these roles through inheritance, and public status pass from father to son: "He and his sons, if dead, his son was going under but it's not only me, where all the leaders of Israel whose children are below them in the Talmud say that he and his sons in Israel, all Israel is among us going under "(CM judges' X"ab). Halacha allows a man to pay exaggerated ransom amounts to free his relatives from captivity even if it hurts the public (Shach, Yore Dea 152, d). These are but a few examples of a very basic principle in the halacha..

In essence, this principle recognizes man's absolute self-autonomy, as expressed by the statement "Yours takes precedence over all others (Baba Metzia, 30: 72)." From here the circles expand to duties to one's family and the family's special rights, as stated above, then duties to one's immediate social circle, then duties to the entire Jewish People, and then to the world at large. Our obligation to the Jewish People finds expression in many commandments, especially those connected to agriculture. There is a very profound underlying rationale for this viewpoint. Although this may appear to be egotistical from an external perspective, the essence of these rulings teaches us that recognition of individuals' autonomy and existential state allows each person to expand his or her frame of reference, and give to "the other" in ever expanding circles. This is also the source of the well-known ruling of "*anieyei ircha kodmin*" (your city's poor come first). This is not just some practical policy that assumes that it would be better if every society would take care of itself, for the sake of efficient welfare and charity institutions, thus optimally implementing human solidarity. It also reflects a profound value statement whereby the halacha first creates solidarity with one's own self, then with one's family, and then, by extension, with the entire world.

However, just like any halachic principle, this principle may be wrongly applied. There are many reasons for this. The first is the technical reason: a person can continually convince himself that his or his family's needs have not been fulfilled, and he will therefore refrain from helping others and dedicate himself solely to his immediate surroundings. The second is that cultural modes can develop



that can make it seem legitimate for a person to ignore the needs of others. New ideologies can develop around a pseudo ethical conception that each person is required to look after him- or herself. If he or she is unfortunate, this is the will of G-d, and he or she is required to redeem him- or herself from his misery and not impose on others. Many times, the source of the greatest evil is an ethical principle that is basically just, but is abused. This is good example of such a case.

Beyond this, it is very difficult today to define "our town's poor". The global village has brought us all much closer, and the "geographic town" has become increasingly less significant. Furthermore, notwithstanding the principles mentioned above, there are circumstances that require breaking out of the traditional circles of giving to "the closest." A catastrophe of such dimensions sometimes occurs that requires both nations and individuals to reach out to offer aid, out of a deep commitment to the basic solidarity with all human beings who were created in the image of G-d.

It seems then, that it is possible to frame Judaism's position regarding the issue in light of these principles. There is primary preference to "your town's poor," and we are obligated first and foremost to take care of the basic needs of those closest to us. However, this rule does not close the door to our obligations to humanity as a whole and the duty to save human lives. The principle of "expanding circles" teaches that the larger world of humanity is not foreign to us. King Solomon, in his prayer at the inauguration of the Temple, speaks of the Temple as a place where the Lord hears the prayers of people who will come from "a far away country," thus expressing a connection to all mankind. In the face of a major catastrophe and the need for global mobilization to save the victims, we are required to break out of our insular world and reach out to aid the victims, out of our conviction that all humans are created in G-d's image, and saving human lives sustains the entire world.

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