

THE PARAMETERS OF RESPONSIBILITY

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COVID-19 has brought the issue of personal responsibility very much into the forefront recently. Certainly we know that Judaism places an emphasis on personal responsibility. Each one of us is responsible for our own actions. We have free will. No one is forcing us to do anything. We make our own decisions, and act accordingly. We know that all of those decisions will be subject to the rules of reward and punishment.

We also know that our responsibility does not extend only to ourselves, but also to our brethren. If our brother Jew needs physical help because his beast of burden is overloaded, we come to his aid. If he needs financial help, we provide *tzedakah*. For whatever problems he may have, we attempt to provide the appropriate *chesed*.

However, the level of responsibility which is brought down in Tractate Shabbos (75b) in the name of Bar Kappara is less familiar. "Anyone who knows how to calculate the progression of the seasons and the position of the constellations and he does not calculate them, Scripture states about him: *and the work of God they do not regard and the action of his hands they do not see* (Isaiah 5:12)."

The Gemara goes on to present a similar idea. It is brought down in the name of Rabbi Yochanon: "From where do we know that there is a mitzvah incumbent upon a person to calculate the progression of the seasons and the position of the constellations? For it is stated: *you shall safeguard and perform them for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations* (Deuteronomy 4:6). What wisdom and discernment is in the eyes of the nations? You have to say this is a calculation of the progression of the seasons and the position of the constellations."

Before embarking on a trip to Switzerland in the 1880's, the great Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch is reported to have said, "When I shall stand before God, the Eternal One will ask me with pride: Did you see my Alps?" Similarly, Bar Kappara is telling us that an individual who has at his disposal the scientific abilities and information to increase his appreciation of God's works has a responsibility to himself to do so. The more one investigates the details of God's creation, the greater his love of God. So says the Rambam.

For me personally, the opportunities presented to me in medical school to unravel the mysteries of the body's biochemistry, gross anatomy, and cellular biology provided me with a religious experience.

However, making the calculations described above is not only a responsibility to oneself. The calculations referred to include weather forecasting. Especially in an agrarian society, the ability to forecast an imminent storm may provide the opportunity to save fragile crops from

destruction and the farmers from financial ruin and famine. Thus, we see that if we are blessed to have the scientific abilities to help the society around us, we have a responsibility to the society to use those abilities.

Clearly the concept is not limited to astronomy, mathematics or weather prediction. Using whatever talents, training, education and favorable circumstance that we have for the benefit of society is not optional. The Talmud tells us it is a responsibility

Lastly, Rabbi Yochanon is telling us that what Jews achieve with the wisdom that Hashem has given them is recognized by the nations of the world. It is part of the responsibility of the Jewish people to be a "light unto the nations." It is also the part of our mission that includes: "This is my God and I will glorify Him."

Shavuot is a time for us to take stock of all of the intellectual blessings and wisdom that came with the Revelation at Sinai, and the responsibilities to ourselves, to our brethren, and to society to fully utilize all those gifts to the utmost of our abilities, and thereby glorify Hashem's name.