

# Are Jews Responsible for One Another?

## Introduction

Today we discuss a Jew's responsibility towards other Jews. The Talmud says:

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה -- All Jews are responsible for one another.

How far does this responsibility extend?

In this week's Torah portion, *Matot*, the Israelites are at the gates of the Promised Land. All they need to do is cross the Jordan River. But some don't want to:

The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an abundance of livestock ... and they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock...

They [said to the leaders:] ... Let this land be given to [us and] do not take us across the Jordan...

Moses said "Shall your brothers go to war while you stay here?"

האחיהם יבאו למלחמה ואנחם תשובו פה

Why do you discourage the children of Israel from crossing over to the land which the Lord has given them? This is what your fathers did [in the incident of the spies and God was angry and made us wander in the desert for 40 years]... And behold, you have now risen in place of your fathers as a society of sinful people... If you turn away from following [God], He will leave you in the desert again, and you will destroy this entire people."

They approached [Moses] and said, "We will build here pens for our livestock and cities for our children. We will then arm ourselves quickly [and go] before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place. Our children will reside in the fortified cities [... but] we shall not return to our homes until each of the children of Israel has taken possession of his inheritance. We will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on the east bank of the Jordan."

Moses said to them, "If you do this... you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the Lord and from Israel, and this land will become your heritage before the Lord." [Numbers 32:1-32:22]

That's what was done in the end. The tribes of Gad and Reuben were given the land they wanted, on the east side of the Jordan.

This episode raises many questions.

## **Is it mandatory for Jews to live in Israel?**

Did God make entry in the Promised Land mandatory? Are all Jews today commanded to live in Israel?

Since the Talmud does not list the 613 mitzvot, there is no definitive list. The list of the Rambam (Maimonides) [[jewfaq.org/613.htm](http://jewfaq.org/613.htm)] is the most often quoted and used. It does not include a commandment to live in Eretz Yisrael. But the point is in dispute. The Ramban (Nachmanides) does list it as a commandment.

-Both Rambam and Ramban acted on their beliefs. When Rambam was forced out of Spain, he lived only very briefly in Israel, then moved to Egypt, did all his work there and died there. When Ramban was forced out of Catalonia, he went directly to Israel and worked and died there.

## **Did Gad and Reuben act properly in refusing to settle in Israel?**

Freedom of choice. Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuania:

Why do Jews [today] continue to live outside Israel - on the other side of the Jordan or the other side of the Atlantic? Because they have found good grazing lands for their cattle, and it's a shame to give it up.

Indeed, Moses did not say that their action was illegal -- only that they had a moral duty to help in the war.

## **Did Gad and Reuben have a responsibility to fight for the Promised Land if they didn't want to settle in it?**

Yes.

-Especially considering all Israelites helped them get the land they are in now.

-Otherwise, the Israelites would think that they did not trust God, that they just wanted to avoid war (as in matter of the spies), and that only material goods are important to them.

Many ask: Is it right that the State of Israel should fight “for us” while we live in comfort far away?

-Only 5% of *post-Holocaust* Jewry was in Israel when it became independent, 14 May 1948 – 600,000 out of 12 million.

## Responsibility toward other Jews

The Talmud says:

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה – *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh*

All Jews are responsible for one another.

[Shevuot 39a, Sanh. 27b; also Sifra Bechukotai 7:5; Mishneh Torah on Oaths 11:16; Or HaChaim on Deut. 29:9; Shaarei Teshuvah 3:72]

Literal translation: All Jews are *guarantors* for one another.

It is derived from the Torah:

And each man will stumble over his brother. וְכָשְׁלוֹ אִישׁ בְּאָחִיו [Lev. 26:37],

which the Talmud interprets as:

One Jew may suffer because of the sin of another Jew. [Sanh. 27b]

Traditionally, the line also means that a Jew may perform a mitzvah in the place of another Jew.

What does it mean? What does being “one people” entail?

First, collective responsibility, leading to collective punishment.

Demonstrated very early: During the battle of Jericho, one Israelite engages in looting, which was forbidden:

Achan ... of the tribe of Judah, took of that which was proscribed, and the Lord was incensed with the Israelites. [Joshua 7:1]

As a result, the Israelites lose the next battle, at Ai (אֵי) [Joshua 7:5]. Achan's action is discovered; he confesses, is tried and stoned to death.

Joshua said [to Achan], “What calamity you have brought upon us!” [Joshua 7:25]

Idea expressed in a midrash: A man with two heads claimed a double portion of his father's estate. King Solomon covered one of the heads and poured hot water over the other head. The covered head cried from the pain, proving that it was really one person. [Tosafot on Menachot 37a]

Fall of Temples due to collective sins – even though many did not commit them.

Logic behind collective punishment: When bad behavior is widespread and tolerated, it slowly becomes acceptable to all. The bad apple spoils the lot.

In spite of their forced dispersion, Jews feel united and interdependent. When a Jew suffers anywhere, fellow Jews throughout the world express concern and try to help. This is heartfelt and not simply obeying commandments.

Also, it is not a choice. The Midrash says:

The people of Israel are similar to a ship. If there is a hole in the lower hold, one does not say, "Only the lower hold has a hole in it." Rather they must immediately recognize that the ship is liable to sink and that they must repair the hole down below. [Tanna Debei Eliyahu Rabbah 11]

## Should Jews be quiet and avoid the limelight?

Especially for a persecuted minority, the actions of one reflect on the whole. In olden days, Jewish community leaders did not want Jews to become too prominent, because their mistakes would have repercussions on the whole community. Better to stay in the shadows.

-But being "prominent" is no sin. Should we accept this philosophy?

## Rebuking sinners

Torah tells us to rebuke sinners:

תוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא:

Rebuke your fellow and incur no guilt because of him. [Lev. 19:17]

Clear implication: If you don't rebuke him, you will be punished on his account.

-Not hate him, not avoid him, not harm him, not kill him, only rebuke him.

Talmud:

[Rava] said: [You must rebuke another] even 100 times... [Even] a student [must rebuke] a teacher [if necessary]. [Bava Metzia 31a]

-Rashi: Rebuke is done in private. [Rashi on Lev. 19:17]

How far does the notion of being punished when another person sins extend? To the whole world, if you don't *speak up* against the sins:

Rav, Rabbi Ḥanina, Rabbi Yoḥanan, and Rav Ḥaviva taught: ...

Anyone who can protest [the sinful conduct] of the members of his household and does not protest, [he himself is] apprehended [... and punished.  
If he can protest the sinful conduct of] the people of his town [and does not do so, he is] apprehended [and punished].  
If he can protest the sinful conduct of] the whole world [and does not do so], he is apprehended for [the sins of] the whole world. (גְּתָפָם עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלּוֹ) [Shabbat 54b]

## Who is Jewish?

To be responsible for other Jews, we must first know where they are. But we don't always know who is Jewish and who isn't. It is likely that the vast majority of halachic Jews today have no idea they are Jewish. A single Jewish woman who was forced to convert out a thousand years ago could have thousands of matrilineal descendents today, all halachically Jewish, all ignorant of the fact.

Do we have an obligation to conduct genealogical research to find out who is Jewish, inform them of the fact and instruct them? If not, why not? Isn't it a logical implication of the Talmudic phrase?

## What to do to keep peace in the house?

Jews are argumentative: Two Jews, three opinions.  
Jews are religiously divided, especially Ashkenazim.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests seven principles to enhance the feeling of “peoplehood”:

1-Keep talking to one another.

2-Listen to one another. *Shema Yisrael*.

3-Work to understand those with whom you disagree. The law follows Hillel, not Shammai, because Hillel's students were kind and humble, and always quoted the other side's opinions before their own:

Rav Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the first saying, ‘the halachah agrees with us’ and the second [also] saying, ‘the halachah agrees with us’.

Then a heavenly voice [bat kol] was heard saying,

“אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים -- *Ellu v'ellu divrei Elokim Chayyim* – These and these are the words of the living God, but the halachah agrees with Beth Hillel.”

However, since both are the words of the living God, what was it that entitled Beth Hillel to have the halachah agree with them? Because they were kind and modest, and studied both their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai and were even so [humble] as to mention the opinions of Beth Shammai before their own.

[Eruvin 13b]

4-Do not seek victory. Think first of the overall good of Jews and Judaism.

5-Give respect to get respect.

6-Even if you do not agree with fellow Jews, show that you care about them.

7-Remember that God chose us *as a people*. God did not choose only you, but me as well.

Anti-Semites do not make distinctions between Jews. We are united by shared memory, shared identity, shared fate, shared faith, even as we differ on the details. As Benjamin Franklin said, "We must hang together or, most assuredly, we will hang separately."

Shabbat shalom.