

Lifeboat Ethics

Parshiyot Behar Bechukotai - 5781¹

One of the great moral and ethical scenarios debated by philosophers, ethicists and spiritual leaders alike is a category of decision making known as “lifeboat ethics,” a term coined by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in a 1968 article titled “Tragedy of the Commons.” In this article, he described the following scenario:

A lifeboat that can hold 60 passengers has room for 10 more people, but 100 people are waiting to be saved. If the lifeboat takes on everyone, all the passengers will drown; if the boat takes on no one, the current passengers will live; if it takes on an additional ten passengers, they will survive as well, but the journey will become more risky, and difficult decisions will have to be made as to who should be saved.

These questions are not merely thought experiments. During last week’s catastrophe in Meron, Hatzalah workers and helpful civilians had to make similar decisions, electing- in the midst of the raging chaos- to dedicate their energies toward saving certain lives, by definition preventing them from saving others.

¹ Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

After introducing the prohibition of Ribbit, charging interest to one's fellow Jew, the Torah concludes the mandate with the following statement:

אַל־תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ גִּשְׁף וְתַרְבִּית וְנִרְאֶתָּה מְאַלְקִיף וְתָי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ:

do not exact from him advance or accrued interest, but fear your God. Let him live by your side as your kinsman.

The last three words in this verse seem superfluous, and so our sages used them to teach us an important principle in the apportioning of scarce resources. It is a debate recorded in the Talmud in Bava Metzia (62b), regarding a scenario that should sound familiar to you by now. You and your friend Berel are traveling through the desert and are woefully unprepared. You only have one bottle of water between the two of you; while it contains enough to sustain one of you through the journey's end, if you split it, you and Berel will both surely perish. The bottle of water happens to be yours. Who gets the water? Should you give it to Berel, drink it yourself, or drink it together?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף סב עמוד א

ורבי יוחנן, האי וחי אחיך עמך מאי עביד ליה? - מבעי ליה לכדתניא: שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך, וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים, אם שותין שניהם - מתים, ואם שותה אחד מהן - מגיע לישוב. דרש בן פטורא: מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו, ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חברו. עד שבא רבי עקיבא ולימד: וחי אחיך עמך - חייך קודמים לחיי חברך.

Ben Petura is of the view that both should drink the water, and both should die- so no one will have to witness the death of the other, or be responsible for it. Each surviving party would be riddled with guilt, not to mention the unthinkable task of explaining to the loved ones of the other party why they are dead and you are not. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, offers a simple rule: your life takes precedence. If it is your bottle of water, you can and must drink it- put the oxygen on yourself first, and take the final life vest.

Let us analyze this debate a little further. The implication in this passage is that if Rabbi Akiva had not come along and taught us his principle, the halacha would have followed Ben Petura- that two people should die rather than one person surviving. *וְתִי אֶחָיִךְ עִמָּךְ* means you should live *with* your brother, and not without him. How can that be? Should we really assume that one person should die unnecessarily? Additionally, the opinion of Rabbi Akiva is somewhat surprising. Elsewhere, he is the one who famously asserted that the most important principle in the Torah is *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ*, love your friend as you would yourself. Taken to its logical conclusion, surely Rabbi Akiva would advocate for you saving Berel, and would never encourage saving yourself over another!

Ben Petura's position is based on a statement in the Talmud in Sanhedrin (74a)- *מֵאִי חֲזִית דְּדַמָּךְ*- טוֹמֵק טַפִּי meaning, "who says that your blood is redder than his?" In other words, your life is not inherently more valuable than anyone else's. Perhaps, though, the underlying issue here is one of attitude. Most of us are not confronted on a regular basis with the kinds of life and death issues for which this debate is immediately relevant. But in weighing the degree to

which we must privilege our own considerations and needs over those of others, the two viewpoints are exceedingly relevant. Who do we privilege when we decide how to allocate precious personal resources like time, money and emotional bandwidth? It is in the space between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Petura that life is lived, and that all conscientious Jews must seek balance. The decision to attend an evening minyan means that there will be 30 minutes in which you are unavailable for a family movie night. The decision to lend money to a relative in desperate need is a complicated one as well; It may be that the needs are longer term than that one ask, and maybe what I would do with the money- like going out to eat once or twice, is more trivial than his ability to pay his rent. For many of us, attending a wedding is a special occasion that doesn't happen every day- certainly since COVID.

However, in much more saturated Jewish communities, such as New York, it is not uncommon to be invited to several weddings throughout the week, and sometimes several on a given Sunday. The great Dayan and Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yechezkel Abramsky was known for his diligence in Torah studies, and his austere demeanor. In his later years, he remarked that as a young man, he refused to attend weddings, as he felt he could spend it better in Torah study. He then said that "*Ober ven ich hob a chasseneh gehat,*" when I got married, "*keyner nisht gekummen*"- nobody attended. Rav Abramsky realized, perhaps too late, that there was a cost to his diligence. In last week's catastrophe in Meron, one of the 45 killed was a young father named Shragee Gestetner. At one time, Shragee was a rising star in the world of Jewish music. He was sought after as a performer and recorded his own original songs with other great Jewish musicians like the legendary Yossi Green. His wife Tzippy enthusiastically supported his musical career- and then he left it completely, opting instead

to build a successful business. Why did he drop out of a promising career path doing what he loved? Because he knew that performing at weddings, while enjoyable, meant being absent from his family every single night².

Not only is this the difference between Ben Petura and Rabbi Akiva; it also explains how Rabbi Akiva can advocate for two seemingly contradictory ideas- loving your neighbor as yourself, while placing your own needs above hers. While there are clearly many areas in which halacha tells us how to act, there are many areas- major and minor- that will forever exist in these grey areas. And so many other major decisions are animated by these two poles of decision making. It is clearly a virtuous and selfless act to donate a kidney; as they say, God gave us one to live, and one to give- but not everyone can or should do it . The decision to make aliyah, join the IDF, volunteer for a communal project or organization, and the prospect of taking an aging parent into your home - all these are important and laudable, but may be unsuitable for now and come at the expense of other relationships and opportunities.

What better time in the calendar to consider such weighty and consequential matters than this month, May, which has recently been designated as National Mental Health Month. Mental health is often manifested in the balance between these two objectives- *חי אהיך עמך* meaning charity and kindness to others, and *חייך קודמין*, known otherwise as “self care.” Whether we choose ourselves or others, may all our choices be noble and healthy ones.

² <https://forward.com/news/469019/shragi-gestetner-mtmeron-lag-bomer/>

