

'Are There Any Jews in Ghana?' -- Hierarchies of Obligation and the Jewish Community



'Are there any Jews in Ghana?' I was asked this question numerous times after my return from Sub-Saharan Africa in January, 2008. I had participated in a service trip with the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) through which 25 rabbinical students from across the denominational spectrum, together with group leaders and a scholar-in-residence (Rabbi Rolando Matalon of Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in New York,) had visited a village in Ghana to work with the local community and to learn about the challenges facing people there. We mixed cement, carried water, learned the local language, visited a herbal doctor, trekked through a jungle, met people of all ages and occupations, spoke to doctors, visited a refugee camp and had discussions for hours on end. But we did not meet any Jews. There are Jews in Ghana, but hundreds of miles from Gbi-Atabu, our host village in the North Eastern region of Ghana. I would love to meet them one day but the short duration of the trip meant that we did not have time to visit them on this occasion.

'Are there any Jews in Ghana?' What is the assumption behind this question? I was on a trip, to help and to learn, with rabbinical students. It was led by the American Jewish World Service. For many, an obvious inference is that our hosts must have been Jewish. At first, this conclusion was baffling to me, or even offensive. Just because I am Jewish does not mean that I am only interested in other Jews. And AJWS, which is dedicated to the goal of alleviating poverty, hunger and disease in the developing world, is Jewish because it is run, funded and supported largely by Jews who believe in the Jewish principle of pursuing justice for all people, whatever their religion. The assumption that I could only have been in Ghana to visit the Jewish community pushed the same buttons in me as another question I am also sometimes asked: 'How many people live in your building?', by which the (inevitably Orthodox) questioner means 'Are there any Jews in your building,' but has overlooked the fact that there are people in the world who are not Jewish. There is, however, an argument behind these assumptions that does deserve to be addressed. They represent a serious and challenging set of questions about charity and public policy in the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States and elsewhere. What are the concerns of Orthodox Jews? At home, there is anxiety over the cost of kosher food and Jewish education, supporting the Jewish poor and elderly. Abroad there is the matter of Israel and its relationship with other countries, and the plight of vulnerable Jews the world over. And there is ongoing fear of anti-Semitism and unease over inter-marriage. That is a lot to deal with. So where does Ghana (or El Salvador, Thailand, or any other developing country) fit into this picture? Once it has dealt with its own issues, can the Orthodox Jewish community really spare the financial or organizational resources to dedicate to infant mortality across the globe? Do we care more about someone dying in Vietnam than someone being shelled in Sderot? And isn't the Jewish community small enough that it has to look after itself first and foremost? We are limited by our size and besides, there are plenty of non-Jews in the world who can deal with the problems of other non-Jews. Gbi-Atabu is a village of a few hundred people. Its inhabitants live in small single-story houses with dirt floors, no running water and intermittent electricity. Some recent technology

has made its way into the village - some villagers have cell phones, for example - but it has not made any significant difference to the way of life there. Water has to be drawn daily from the river or a well. Goats and chickens roam freely along the dirt tracks. Trash is burnt, not collected. People wash themselves outdoors behind partitions made out of cinderblocks. Employment is scarce and the village has been in the process of constructing a small community building for several years as it is dependent on foreign aid and the physical labor of the community itself (and visiting rabbinical students.) Despite these challenging circumstances, people seem happy, at least at first sight. Children, though often shoeless, laugh and play in the fields. Family structures are very tightly knit which creates a sense of belonging. There are frequent sessions of drumming, dancing and singing, often in connection with the local church. Indeed, my initial impression was that despite the physical hardship of everyday life, the people of Gbi-Atabu are free of the anxieties and stresses of the typical New Yorker. Perhaps they are even happier than we are. But this impression was short lived. A number of factors contribute to placing the typical life in Gbi-Atabu in perpetual crisis. The public health situation in the entire region is dismal. The local hospital has three doctors treating 50,000 people (that number of people in the USA would on average be served by 275 doctors) and even these facilities are difficult to access because transport to the hospital is often more than people can afford. (As a result, the local 'clinic' treats anything from headaches - a symptom of hypertension which is very common there - to broken bones, often with herbs and a hacksaw on a dirt floor in the proximity of free roaming farm animals.) The water supply carries a number of lethal diseases that have been eradicated in many other parts of the world such as polio, meningitis and TB. Most of the population is unable to afford mosquito nets, leaving them vulnerable to yellow fever and malaria. The food supply is severely deficient in calories and both children and adults are perpetually malnourished. Many suffer from respiratory problems resulting from the clouds of red dust carried by the dry season winds from the Sahara Desert. Women especially suffer from spinal problems as a result of carrying water in huge containers on their heads, often for miles every day. And then there is HIV-AIDS which has infected 7.5% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa (compared with 0.6% in the USA). In the absence of easy access to affordable drugs and the option of caesarian births which help to avoid infants receiving the infections from their mothers (there is one obstetrician in all of Ghana), HIV-AIDS often passes onto children through childbirth. The average life expectancy in the region is about 57 years (in the US it is about 77). Children die daily from diseases that could be cured with cheap, easily administered drugs if only there was the infrastructure to distribute them. Other deficiencies in the local strated and pessimistic about their future. One of the villagers that I met, Mamata, has made her way through high school thanks to the recent innovation of free schooling throughout Ghana. She is intelligent and energetic and she wants to be a nurse. But here is where the road stops for this 18-year-old woman. She lacks the funds to buy the textbooks she needs to complete her high school exams. Her extended family depends on her labor to support them. Transportation to the nearest university is also unaffordable. So she remains unemployed, drawing water, cooking and washing for her family. She is frustrated at her lack of options. Another child that I met, Eric, was orphaned at an early age and has come to live with Mamata's family in the absence of anyone else who could support him. On the day I met him he was upbeat and optimistic and told me of his hopes to become a doctor. But one evening he spent hours with another member of our group. He had been drinking - alcoholism is a common side effect of the frustrations in the community - and cried about his lack of future prospects, his loneliness and his poverty. He literally begged to be taken to America. This is only a glimpse into the endemic crisis that Ghanaians need to endure. But what does this have to do with us, Orthodox Jews in wealthier countries? There are also people in crisis in the Bronx, Sderot and elsewhere who are closer to us by virtue of geographical proximity or their being Jewish. As I am frequently asked when I teach or speak about Ghana, surely we need to prioritize? I first need to make clear that I do not advocate an approach to tzedaka or social action that requires a total dedication to one cause only. 'One should only study what he or she finds fulfilling' and the same thing goes for tzedaka. It is important that every individual identify the goals and causes that speak

to him or her. But what about the community as a whole? Considering the multiple concerns of the Jewish community that I outlined at the beginning of this article, some feel that the plight of the developing world, however severe, simply is not a cause for Jews. It is this argument that I resist. In today's world, Jews have a moral obligation to concern themselves with vulnerable people who are outside their religious community. And beyond the moral obligation, an orientation outward, as well as inward, is ultimately essential for the wellbeing of the Jewish community itself in the long-term. On a simple level, it is a fallacy that because our community has other concerns, the developing world lies outside of our sphere of obligation. Even if we could identify the single most important issue, it should not monopolize community funds or other energies. That is why governments fund theaters and parks even though hospitals and schools are short of money. It is a mistake often made in the Orthodox community that because we have pressing concerns of our own, there is no room in our over-anxious minds and no further we can thrust our hands into over-stretched pockets in the service of other needs. This is a dangerous line of thinking. Notwithstanding the pragmatic necessity to prioritize in the allocation of resources, a moral obligation is a moral obligation irrespective of other obligations that may compete with it. I also want to go beyond this logical and ethical argument and to point out that even within traditional schemes of hierarchies of charitable priorities, it is not at all obvious that causes outside of the Jewish community come last. One key Talmudic text that outlines a hierarchy is found in Bava Metziah 71a where Rav Yosef considers who should be lent money first:

'A Jew and a non-Jew - a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich - the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town - your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town - the poor of your own town take priority.'

Rav Yosef's text ostensibly supports the conventional view of the hierarchy of obligation. Jews come first, gentiles second. Relatives first, strangers second, and so on. And yet, his statement also implicitly challenges this same hierarchy, not by what is said but by what is not. Who comes first if you face a choice between a Gentile in your town and a Jew in another town? A rich local Jew and a poor foreign Gentile? By maintaining a silence on most of the permutations of these factors, Rav Yosef invites us to question the comprehensiveness of his system. The same challenge is implicit in the formulation of R Yosef Karo in the section of his Shulhan Arukh dedicated to charity:

'Relatives take priority over everyone else...and the poor of one's own household over the poor of one's city, the poor of one's city over the poor of another city, and the inhabitants of the Land of Israel over those who live outside it.' (Yoreh Deah 251:3)

Again we are invited to explore the gaps in the hierarchy. This challenge is taken up by a number of poskim who explore the ambiguities in the approach of a strict hierarchy of priorities. R Moshe Sofer, for example, maintains that a very great need overrides the hierarchy altogether (see Hatam Sofer on Yoreh Deah 234). Someone in immediate danger of death demands our help irrespective of whether he/she is our relative or not. It could certainly be argued that the plight of many in the developing world is more urgent than any other issue in the world today. Quantitatively (in terms of the vast number of people affected) and qualitatively (the alternative to intervention is nothing short of death on a massive scale) the situation in Congo, Sudan, Thailand, El Salvador and many other places dwarfs the urgency of other demands for aid. Although I am not advocating the priority of one charity over others for every individual, I do believe that this question of urgency should at least be seriously considered in our own decisions about charitable priorities. Another great posek, R Yehiel Michel Epstein also questions the hierarchy:

'There is something about this that is very difficult for me because if we understand these words literally - that some groups take priority over others - that implies that there is no requirement to give to groups lower on the hierarchy. And it is well known that every wealthy person has many

poor relatives (and all the more so every poor person) so it will happen that a poor person without any rich relatives will die of hunger. And how could this possibly be? So it seems clear to me that the correct interpretation is that everyone, whether rich or poor, must also give to poor people who are not relatives, and give more to those who are relatives. And the same would apply to all the other groups on the hierarchy.' (Arukh ha-Shulhan Yoreh Deah 151:4)

If everyone takes care only of their own, points out R Epstein, many people will go without. His insight is evinced by a cursory look at the distribution of worldwide wealth. Massive disparities in global income mean that 85% of the world's wealth is held by the wealthiest 10%. Almost all of this 10% (about 90% of it) lives in the US, Europe and in high-income areas of Asia and Oceania. If everyone takes care of their own first and foremost, countries like Ghana with very limited resources and a halting national infrastructure, will get very little. And this is what happens today. Mamata's relatives cannot help her to finish school and neither can her religious community or her government. If she does not receive attention from outside of the conventional charitable hierarchies, she will not receive any attention at all. These insights, then, are challenges to the hierarchy even on its own terms. Another complication is that in today's world the categories within the hierarchy have also become very ambiguous. At the time when the R Karo was writing, Jews lived in self-contained autonomous communities within larger Gentile societies. The Jewish community (like Christian and Muslim communities) supported their own poor who almost always came from nearby. Although there were business and social relations with people outside the Jewish community, nobody expected the Jews to provide support, charitable or otherwise, to those living outside of the community, and the Jews did not expect to be supported either. Besides, it was unusual for Jews to encounter people outside of their community, and certainly outside of their own towns, who needed their assistance. All aspects of this picture have changed today. In the modern world, neither Jews nor any other group lives in a self-contained community. The state builds roads and utilities which are used by Jews. It contributes to Jewish charities and helps to support the Jewish poor through social security and (one would hope) national health insurance. And not only are Jews in a strong mutual relationship with the countries in which they live; we are also integrally linked with the social and economic realities in the developing world. Most of the clothes that we wear and the toys we buy for our children have been made by some of the 3 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day. The Jewish community (like all people) today is socially and economically enmeshed with the rest of the world to a far greater degree than in the middle ages. This is not to say that Jewish communal ties are not important - I of course believe they are - nor that it is inappropriate for us to feel closer to those in the Jewish community than to others. It is, however, wrongheaded to continue to construct a hierarchy of charitable priorities as if nothing has changed in the past 500 years. And that is not all. We now know more than ever before about the state of vulnerable human beings all over the world. We participate in service trips, see live pictures, read statistics and meet immigrants. The fact that from our own houses we can see live pictures of people all around the globe seriously challenges a paradigm that is based on a difference between the local and the distant needy. Indeed, the philosopher Peter Singer makes a powerful case that in today's world our obligation to someone dying in Africa is no different from our obligation to someone dying right in front of us, because with today's communications, everyone is essentially right in front of us. The nearly 30,000 children who die every day because of poverty may have lived in remote villages we have never been to; but they also breathe their last in our own homes. Furthermore, the status of Jews in today's world is different than at any other period. Notwithstanding anti-Semitism, attacks on Israel and all our other concerns, Jews in America are, on the whole, wealthier, more secure and more influential than ever before. This position brings with it a responsibility to use our wealth and our influence for the good of all. And this is not an exhortation only for the very wealthy. In the democracy we live under, lobbying and organized campaigns can really make a difference. We have the responsibility not just to give money to charity but also to volunteer our time and to contact our representatives to voice our concern for

the world's poor. I have tried to argue on halakhic, moral and pragmatic grounds that as a community we need to take very seriously our responsibility to those outside of our geographical and religious communities. But I want to make an even more fundamental argument, which is that doing so is not a diversion from our communal goals, however necessary, but a fulfillment of them. Judaism has a very fine balance between particularism and universalism. Our mission as a people is, literally, to save the world. God promised Abraham that 'all the families on earth will be blessed through you.' But this promise was also a demand. We are charged to bring about blessing for all other peoples. To do this, we need to be a strongly constituted people ourselves. And by the same token we become a strong people by reasserting our divine mission. We are to be a 'mamlechet kohanim' - a nation which is a conduit of God's message into the world. Both sides of this description are vital. To achieve our divine mission we need to be a people, just as we need to be a people in order to fulfill our divine mission. All of this means that we treat with the utmost importance our responsibility to the physical and spiritual wellbeing of our own community. But that is not all; the goal of our community is to go outside of itself, to improve and perfect the world. And this goal is not external to the existence of the community, but constitutive of it. We simply are not the Jewish people properly conceived if we cannot see beyond our own noses.

This is true from a very pragmatic point of view. As I learnt serving in Ghana with Jews from many other denominations, worldwide social justice is a cause that can strengthen the bonds within the wider Jewish community. Jews who cannot pray together can still do justice together. This solidarity across the Jewish community will help us all, and in turn help us do more good in the wider world. Furthermore, the formulation of a strong vision of the divine Jewish mission in the world that goes beyond self-preservation is an essential step in the strengthening of the Orthodox community itself. 'To continue your tradition', or 'because of the Holocaust' are not compelling arguments to those considering marrying out of the Jewish community. But a very compelling argument can be: 'Because part of being Jewish is to bring blessing to all people in the world'. Our dedication to those outside of our own community as well as those within it will result not in a distraction from our community but a strengthening of it. 'Are there Jews in Ghana?' There certainly are, and I feel a special bond with them. But there are also many others who need my attention in Ghana and beyond and I have the obligation to dedicate myself to them. Not despite being, but because I am, a Jew.

Byline:

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