View PDF

By
Jonathan Arking

Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

by Jonathan Arking

IJII Summer Student Intern

Among the most universal values, dating back thousands of years to a myriad of ethical and religious traditions, is the “golden rule.” Stated positively, it is “treat others as you would have others treat you,” and negatively as “do not treat others in ways you would not want to be treated.” Yet while these maxims seem similar in content, there is a wide distinction in outlooks and obligations created by each one. The most notable difference between the two versions is in the approach toward passivity. While the positive formulation of the golden rule mandates that you apply yourself to help someone in need, the negative formulation does not--caring not whether you help, so long as you do no harm. These two differing attitudes can be succinctly termed social responsibility, having an obligation toward all others we interact with, and hyperindividualism, live and let live.

In this week’s parasha, Re’eh, we read a verse that reads “You shall not act at all as we now act here, every man as he pleases.” To those familiar with the book of Judges, the literary connection is immediate. It is an almost identical line that punctuates the book of Judges, a book characterized by anarchy, sin, and political strife. The book culminates in one of the most horrific stories in the entire Bible, the Pilegesh B’giva, and a civil war in which nearly the entire tribe of Benjamin is wiped out. The concluding verse of the book is “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased.” This phrase, “everyone did as he pleased” might be read as an extreme form of individualism. While some of the direct actions in the narratives may have violated the negative formulation of the golden rule, a society in which “everyone did as he pleased” is directly what it calls for. This is a clear warning about the perils of hyperindividualism.

Later in the parasha, we see the Torah’s insistence on social responsibility not just alluded to, but explicitly commanded. After relaying the command to remit all debts every seventh year, the Torah states: “There shall be no needy among you”-- in other words, it is incumbent upon you to create a society in which none are needy. This verse, along with the institution of the remission of debts, are

commands aimed at society more generally, not specifically at the individual. Yet, the individual, too, has a personal obligation: “If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman.”

It can be very easy to fall into the trap of the negative formation of the golden rule -- “I am not hurting anyone, so there is no element of moral obligation in my decisions.” In religious contexts, this can manifest in prioritizing one’s own religious experience at the expense of being involved in “yishuvo shel olam”, the building of society. But Judaism rebukes this approach, both through the tragic narratives of Judges, and the Torah's commands to both establish an economically just system, and to directly aid those in need. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes, “The message of the Hebrew Bible is that serving God and serving our fellow human beings are inseparably linked.” We are obligated not just to worry about ourselves, but to do our part in improving society and working to create a world in which “there shall be no needy among you.”

Angel for Shabbat