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

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

'Arethere any Jews in Ghana?'What is the assumption behind this question? I was on a trip, to help and tolearn, with rabbinical students. It was led by the American Jewish WorldService. For many, an obvious inference is that our hosts must have beenJewish. At first, this conclusion was baffling to me, or even offensive. Justbecause I am Jewish does not mean that I am only interested in other Jews. AndAJWS, which is dedicated to the goal of alleviating poverty, hunger and

diseasein the developing world, is Jewish because it is run, funded and supportedlargely by Jews who believe in the Jewish principle of pursuing justice for allpeople, whatever their religion. The assumption that I could only have been inGhana to visit the Jewish community pushed the same buttons in me as another questionI am also sometimes asked: 'How many people live in your building?', by whichthe (inevitably Orthodox) questioner means 'Are there any Jews in yourbuilding,' but has overlooked the fact that there are people in the world whoare 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 andpublic policy in the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States and elsewhere. What are the concerns of Orthodox Jews? Athome, 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 plightof vulnerable Jews the world over. And there is ongoing fear of anti-Semitismand 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 reallyspare the financial or organizational resources to dedicate to infant mortalityacross the globe? Do we care more about someone dying in Vietnam than someone being shelled in Sderot? And isn't the Jewishcommunity small enough that it has to look after itself first and foremost? Weare limited by our size and besides, there are plenty of non-Jews in the worldwho can deal with the problems of other non-Jews.Gbi-Atabuis a village of a few hundred people. Its inhabitants live in smallsingle-story houses with dirt floors, no running water and intermittentelectricity. Some recent technology has made its way into the village - somevillagers have cell phones, for example - but it has not made any significant differenceto 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, notcollected. People wash themselves outdoors behind partitions made out of cinderblocks. Employment is scarce and the village has been in the process ofconstructing a small community building for several years as it is dependent onforeign aid and the physical labor of the community itself (and visitingrabbinical students.)Despitethese challenging circumstances, people seem happy, at least at first sight.Children, though often shoeless, laugh and play in the fields. Familystructures are very tightly knit which creates a sense of belonging. There arefrequent sessions of drumming, dancing and singing, often in connection withthe local church. Indeed, my initial impression was that despite the physicalhardship of everyday life, the people of Gbi-Atabu are free of the anxietiesand stresses of the typical New Yorker. Perhaps they are even happier

than weare.Butthis impression was short lived. A number of factors contribute to placing thetypical life in Gbi-Atabu in perpetual crisis. The public health situation inthe entire region is dismal. The local hospital has three doctors treating 50,000people (that number of people in the USA would on average be served by 275 doctors) and even thesefacilities are difficult to access because transport to the hospital is oftenmore than people can afford. (As a result, the local 'clinic' treats anythingfrom headaches - a symptom of hypertension which is very common there - tobroken bones, often with herbs and a hacksaw on a dirt floor in the proximityof free roaming farm animals.) The water supply carries a number of lethaldiseases that have been eradicated in many other parts of the world such aspolio, meningitis and TB. Most of the population is unable to afford mosquitonets, leaving them vulnerable to yellow fever and malaria. The food supply isseverely deficient in calories and both children and adults are perpetuallymalnourished. Many suffer from respiratory problems resulting from the cloudsof red dust carried by the dry season winds from the Sahara Desert. Women especially suffer from spinal problems as a resultof 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 ofSub-Saharan Africa (compared with 0.6% in the USA). In the absence of easy access to affordable drugs andthe option of caesarian births which help to avoid infants receiving theinfections 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 thatcould be cured with cheap, easily administered drugs if only there was theinfrastructure to distribute them.Otherdeficiencies in the local strated and pessimistic about their future. One ofthe villagers that I met, Mamata, has made her way through high school thanksto the recent innovation of free schooling throughout Ghana. She is intelligent and energetic and she wants to be anurse. But here is where the road stops for this 18-year-old woman. She lacksthe funds to buy the textbooks she needs to complete her high school exams. Herextended family depends on her labor to support them. Transportation to the nearestuniversity 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 tolive 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 tobecome a doctor. But one evening he spent hours with another member of ourgroup. He had been drinking - alcoholism is a common side effect of thefrustrations 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 isonly a glimpse into the endemic crisis that Ghanaians need to endure. But whatdoes this have to do with us, Orthodox Jews in wealthier countries? There arealso people in crisis in the Bronx, Sderot and elsewhere who are closer to us by virtue ofgeographical proximity or their being Jewish. As I am frequently asked when Iteach or speak about Ghana, surely we need to prioritize? I first need to make clearthat I do not advocate an approach to tzedaka or social action that requires atotal dedication to one cause only. 'One should only study what he or she findsfulfilling' and the same thing goes for tzedaka. It is important that everyindividual identify the goals and causes that speak to him or her. But whatabout the community as a whole? Considering the multiple concerns of the Jewishcommunity that I outlined at the beginning of this article, some feel that theplight 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 moralobligation to concern themselves with vulnerable people who are outside theirreligious community. And beyond the moral obligation, an orientation outward,as well as inward, is ultimately essential for the wellbeing of the Jewishcommunity itself in the long-term.On asimple 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 couldidentify the single most important issue, it should not monopolize communityfunds or other energies. That is why governments fund theaters and parks eventhough hospitals and schools are short of money. It is a mistake often made inthe Orthodox community that because we have pressing concerns of our own, thereis no room in our over-anxious minds and no further we can thrust our handsinto over-stretched pockets in the service of other needs. This is a dangerousline of thinking. Notwithstanding the pragmatic necessity to prioritize in theallocation of resources, a moral obligation is a moral obligation irrespectiveof other obligations that may compete with it.I alsowant to go beyond this logical and ethical argument and to point out that evenwithin traditional schemes of hierarchies of charitable priorities, it is notat all obvious that causes outside of the Jewish community come last. One keyTalmudic text that outlines a hierarchy is found in Bava Metzia 71a where RavYosef considers who should be lent money first:

'A Jew and a non-Jew – a Jew has preference; the poor or therich – the poor takes precedence; yourpoor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town — your poor comefirst; the poor of your city and the poor of another town — the poor of yourown town take priority.'

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

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

Againwe are invited to explore the gaps in the hierarchy. This challenge is taken upby a number of poskim who explore the ambiguities in the approach of a stricthierarchy of priorities. R Moshe Sofer, for example, maintains that a verygreat need overrides the hierarchy altogether (see Hatam Sofer on Yoreh Deah234). Someone in immediate danger of death demands our help irrespective ofwhether he/she is our relative or not. It could certainly be argued that theplight of many in the developing world is more urgent than any other issue inthe world today. Quantitatively (in terms of the vast number of peopleaffected) and qualitatively (the alternative to intervention is nothing shortof death on a massive scale) the situation in Congo, Sudan, Thailand, ElSalvador 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 everyindividual, I do believe that this question of urgency should at least beseriously considered in our own decisions about charitable priorities.Anothergreat posek, R Yehiel Michel Epstein also questions the hierarchy:

'There is something about this that is very difficult for mebecause if we understand these words literally – that some groups take priorityover others – that implies that there is no requirement to give to groups loweron 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 personwithout 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, andgive more to those who are relatives. And the same would apply to all the othergroups on the hierarchy.'

(Arukh ha-Shulhan Yoreh Deah 151:4)

Ifeveryone takes care only of their own, points out R Epstein, many people willgo without. His insight is evinced by a cursory look at the distribution ofworldwide wealth. Massive disparities in global income mean that 85% of theworld'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 andOceana. If everyone takes care of their own first and foremost, countries like Ghana with very limited resources and a halting nationalinfrastructure, will get very little. And this is what happens today. Mamata'srelatives cannot help her to finish school and neither can her religiouscommunity or her government. If she does not receive attention from outside ofthe conventional charitable hierarchies, she will not receive any attention atall.Theseinsights, then, are challenges to the hierarchy even on its own terms. Anothercomplication in is that in today's world the categories within the hierarchyhave also become very ambiguous. At the time when the R Karo was writing, Jewslived in self-contained autonomous communities within larger Gentile societies.The Jewish community (like Christian and Muslim communities) supported theirown poor who almost always came from nearby. Although there were business andsocial relations with people outside the Jewish community, nobody expected theJews to provide support, charitable or otherwise, to those living outside ofthe community, and the Jews did not expect to be supported either. Besides, itwas unusual for Jews to encounter people outside of their community, andcertainly outside of their own towns, who needed their assistance.Allaspects of this picture have changed today. In the modern world, neither Jewsnor any other group lives in a self-contained community. The state builds roadsand utilities which are used by Jews. It contributes to Jewish charities andhelps to support the Jewish poor through social security and (one would hope)national health insurance. And not only are Jews in a strong mutualrelationship with the countries in which they live; we are also integrallylinked with the social and economic realities in the developing world. Most ofthe clothes that we wear and the toys we buy for our children have been made bysome of the 3 billion people who live on less than $2 a day. The Jewishcommunity (like all people) today is socially and economically enmeshed withthe rest of the world to a far greater degree than in the middle ages. This isnot to say that Jewish communal ties are not important - I of course believe theyare - nor that it is inappropriate for us to feel closer to those in the Jewishcommunity than to others. It is, however, wrongheaded to continue to constructa hierarchy of charitable priorities as if nothing has changed in the past 500years.Andthat is not all. We now know more than ever before about the state ofvulnerable human beings all over the world. We participate in service trips,see

live pictures, read statistics and meet immigrants. The fact that from ourown houses we can see live pictures of people all around the globe seriouslychallenges a paradigm that is based on a difference between the local and thedistant needy. Indeed, the philosopher Peter Singer makes a powerful case thatin today's world our obligation to someone dying in Africa is nodifferent from our obligation to someone dying right in front of us, becausewith toady's communications, everyone is essentially right in front of us. Thenearly 30,000 children who die every day because of poverty may have lived inremote villages we have never been to; but they also breathe their last in ourown 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 moreinfluential than ever before. This position brings with it a responsibility touse our wealth and our influence for the good of all. And this is not anexhortation only for the very wealthy. In the democracy we live under, lobbyingand organized campaigns can really make a difference. We have theresponsibility not just to give money to charity but also to volunteer our timeand to contact our representatives to voice our concern for the world's poor.I havetried to argue on halakhic, moral and pragmatic grounds that as a community weneed to take very seriously our responsibility to those outside of ourgeographical and religious communities. But I want to make an even morefundamental argument, which is that doing so is not a diversion from ourcommunal goals, however necessary, but a fulfillment of them. Judaism has avery fine balance between particularism and universalism. Our mission as apeople is, literally, to save the world. God promised Abraham that 'all thefamilies on earth will be blessed through you.' But this promise was also ademand. We are charged to bring about blessing for all other peoples. To dothis, we need to be a strongly constituted people ourselves. And by the sametoken we become a strong people by reasserting our divine mission. We are to bea 'mamlekhet kohanim' - a nation which is a conduit of God's message into theworld. Both sides of this description are vital. To achieve our divine missionwe need to be a people, just as we need to be a people in order to fulfill ourdivine mission.All ofthis means that we treat with the utmost importance our responsibility to thephysical and spiritual wellbeing of our own community. But that is not all; thegoal of our community is to go outside of itself, to improve and perfect theworld. And this goal is not external to the existence of the community, butconstitutive of it. We simply are not the Jewish people properly conceived ifwe 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. Thissolidarity across the Jewish community will help us all, and in turn help us todo more good in the wider world. Furthermore, the formulation a strong visionof the divine Jewish mission in the world that goes beyond self-preservation isan essential step in the strengthening of the Orthodox community itself. 'To continue your tradition', or 'because of the Holocaust' are not compellingarguments 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 owncommunity as well as those within it will result not in a distraction from ou community but a strengthening of it. 'Are there Jews in Ghana?' There certainly are, and I feel a special bond withthem. 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.