



**Introduction**

So often when Jews sit down to study texts about responding to poverty they read two popular texts. The first is Hillel’s famous call to action (Mishnah *Avot* 1.14):

He used to say: if I am not for myself,	הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי.
who is for me? But when I am [only]	וְכִשְׁאַנִּי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁוֹ,
for myself, what am I? And if not	אימתי:
now, when?	

The other is Moses Maimonides’ 8-rung ladder of *tzeddakah* that ranks different ways of giving to the poor by the degree it embarrasses or empowers the needy (MT *Matanot Aniyim* 10.7-14). Such popular texts deserve ongoing study and widespread debate, as they encourage us to reconsider our complacency in the face of poverty.

The texts selected for this ONE Sabbath, however, are less popular (except the first one). I offer them to you to illustrate that concern for the less fortunate is prevalent in the Judaic textual tradition beyond the popular texts. These texts also raise critical questions about the nature of Jewish responses to poverty that the more popular texts do not. Perhaps these ‘marginal’ texts speak more loudly for our global society’s marginalized than do our mainstream texts. They urge us to critique our understanding of responsibility, to set for ourselves minimum standards of behavior, to keep our zealotry to help within reasonable limits, to not dilly dally, and to act sufficiently to make a difference for those in need.

**Briefly about these texts...**

- 1) **Leviticus 19:9-19.** This section comes from the Holiness Code - a listing of ancient ethics enjoined upon the whole Israelite community.
- 2) **BT *Baba Batra* 10a.** Found in the Babylonian Talmud, this *sugya* (section of teaching) comes in a lengthy discussion about the benefits of doing *tzedakah*.
- 3) **BT *Ketubot* 50a.** This *sugya* is embedded in a debate about how to ensure that children do not fall into poverty.
- 4) **BT *Ta’anit* 21a.** This *sugya* is among a series of stories about crumbling walls.
- 5) **SA *Choshen Mishpat* 426.** This is from Joseph Karo’s major law code, the *Shulchan Arukh*.



**Text 1. Leviticus 19:9-19**

9) When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10) You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord and your God. 11) You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. 12) You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. 13) You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of the laborer shall not remain with you until morning. 14) You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 15) You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly. 16) Do not deal basely with you countrymen. Do not stand upon the blood of your fellow: I am the Lord. 17) You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. 18) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord. 19) You shall observe My laws...

ט וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֵךְ לְקֶצֶר וּלְקֹט קִצִּירֶךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט: י וּבְרִמּוֹךְ לֹא תַעֲוִלֵּל וּפְרֹט כְּרִמּוֹךְ לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעַנִּי וְלַגֵּר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: יא לֹא תִגְנְבוּ וְלֹא־תִכְחֲשׂוּ וְלֹא־תִשְׁקְרוּ אִישׁ בְּעַמִּיתוֹ: יב וְלֹא־תִשְׁבְּעוּ בִשְׁמִי לְשָׁקֵר וְחָלַלְתָּ אֶת־שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: יג לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק אֶת־רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִגְזֹל לֹא־תִלְוִין פְּעֻלַּת שְׂכִיר אֹתָךְ עַד־בֹּקֶר: יד לֹא־תִקַּל חֵרֶשׁ וּלְפָנַי עֹזֵר לֹא תִתֵּן מִכָּשָׁל וְיִרְאֵת מִמֵּאֲלֵהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: טו לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ עֹל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פְּנֵי־דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גְדוֹל בְּצַדִּיק תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ: טז לֹא־תִלְוֶה רֵכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל־דָּם רֵעֶךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: יז לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹלִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטֵא: יח לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטֹּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֵּת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: יט אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ...

**Questions for Text 1.**

- 1) Look at the first four couplets: 9-10; 11-12; 13-14; 15-16. What are their themes? What logic guides their sequence? What principle might be behind the concluding phrase, “I am the Lord”?
- 2) Examine verses 17-18. Compare it with Hillel’s statement “What is hateful to you do not do unto your neighbor” (BT *Shabbat* 31a) and Jesus’ teaching “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). What ethical principle can be derived from these teachings of the “Golden Rule”?
- 3) Taking all these verses together, what conception of Jewish responsibility emerges?



**Text 2. BT *Baba Batra* 10a.** (See also BT *Ketubot* 68a; MT *Matanat Aniyim* 10.3)

As Rabbi Pappa was climbing a ladder, his foot slipped but he did not fall. He said, “Had that happened, my enemies [would have thought I deserved to] be obliged [to be punished] like Sabbath-breakers and idolaters.” Hiyah son of Rabbi of Dafti said to Rabbi Pappa, “Perhaps a begger came to you but you did not assist him. For it has been taught, Rabbi Joshua son of Korha said, “Whoever closes (*hama’alim*) his eyes against *tzedakah* is like one who worships idols. For it is written, “Beware, lest there be a wicked (*b’li’al*) thing in your heart” (Deuteronomy 15:9); and it is written, “Sons of worthlessness (*b’li’al*) have gone out” (Deuteronomy 13:14). Just as in the second case it speaks of idolatry, so in the first it also speaks of idolatry.

רב פפא הוה סליק בדרגא, אישתמיט כרעיה בעי למיפל, אמר: השתא כן איחייב מאן דסני לן, כמחללי שבתות וכעובדי עבודת כוכבים. א"ל חייא בר רב מדפתי לרב פפא: שמא עני בא לידך ולא פרנסתו? דתניא, רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: כל המעלים עיניו מן הצדקה - כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים, כתיב הכא: השמר לך פן יהיה דבר עם לבבך בליעל, וכתיב התם: יצאו אנשים בני בליעל, מה להלן עבודת כוכבים, אף כאן עבודת כוכבים.

**Questions for Text 2.**

- 1) The disagreement here is about interpreting the fact that Rabbi Pappa was miraculously saved from falling to his death. Rabbi Pappa, a wealthy and obese man, argues that had he actually fallen, he would have been perceived as wicked as those who break the Sabbath or engage in idolatry. For him, avoiding this punishment saved his reputation. Hiya, however, looks at the fact that Rabbi Pappa slipped in the first place. Hiya suggests that the slip illustrates that Rabbi Pappa - however righteous he may think himself to be - has faltered in regard to helping the poor. Indeed, elsewhere (BT *Baba Batra* 9a) Rabbi Pappa turned a beggar away from his door; a colleague observes that others will follow his lead and ignore the beggar who then will die. The tension, then, is between saving face and saving people. Which trumps?
- 2) Consider this logic:
  - A. Ignoring the plight of the impoverished is tantamount to idolatry
  - B. Idolatry is a great sin and is worthy of severe punishment in Judaism
  - C. Given (A) and (B), ignoring the poor is criminal.

This logic sets a minimum standard: Jews shall *at least* not ignore the plight of the poor. How does this proscription against being indifferent to others’ suffering spur action? Does this line of reasoning convince you; why or why not?
- 3) What is the *least* you can do to fulfill this obligation? Is there a maximum that you can do to fulfill this obligation?



**Text 3. BT Ketubot 50a.**

Rabbi Elai said, “It was ordained in Usha that if a man [wishing to] spend liberally [on the poor, according to Rashi] he should not spend more than a fifth [of his wealth].” So it has been taught: A man [wishing to] spend liberally should not spend more than a fifth, lest he require [the assistance] of [fellow] creatures [people]. It once happened that a man [wished] to spend more than a fifth but was restrained by his friend. Who was that? Rabbi Yeshevav. Others say [the man who wished to spend was] Rabbi Yeshevav, but he was restrained by his friend. Who was that? Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Nahman - or some say Rabbi Aha son of Jacob - said, “What is the scriptural proof-text? ‘And of all that you shall give me I will surely give a tenth to you’ (Genesis 28:22).”

א"ר אילעא: באושא התקינן, המבזבז - אל יבזבז יותר מחומש. תניא נמי הכי: המבזבז - אל יבזבז יותר מחומש, שמא יצטרך לבריות; ומעשה באחד שבקש לבזבז [יותר מחומש] ולא הניח לו חבירו, ומנו? רבי ישבב, ואמרי לה רבי ישבב, ולא הניחו חבירו, ומנו? רבי עקיבא. אמר רב נחמן, ואיתימא רב אחא בר יעקב: מאי קרא? וכל אשר נתן לי עשר אעשרנו לך.

**Questions for Text 3.**

- 1) The reason a person should not spend more than a fifth of his or her assets to help the poor is that if one did, one risks becoming impoverished and thus might become a burden upon others. What do you think about this reason of limiting what one gives to the poor?
- 2) The rabbis disagree about who it was that wanted to spend liberally and who restrained him. What is the significance of this disagreement? Why should it matter (if it does at all) who wanted to give more and who suggested otherwise?
- 3) Notice that the text points to a percentage (20%) and not to a hard number. Explore reasons for this. What if this text were not talking only about monetary assets but also about other things that you can give to help the impoverished, things like your time, energy, ideas, networks - would a fifth still be a reasonable upper limit? Why or why not?



**Text 4. BT Ta'anit 21a.**

It was said of Nahum the man of Gim-Zu that he was blind in both eyes, crippled in both hands, both of whose legs were crushed and whose whole body was covered with sores, and was lying on a bed the feet of which stood in buckets of water so as to prevent worms from reaching his body. While his bed stood in a decrepid house, his disciples came to ask to remove his bed from that house and then remove all the other household containers. He said to them: "My children! First take out everything contained in this house and then remove my bed; for be assured that as long as I am in this house it will not fall." They did so, and after removing his bed the house fell in. Said the disciples to him: "As we can perceive, Master, you are a true *tzaddik*. Why, then, are you in such a state?" He replied: "My children, I myself am the cause of it. Once I was on my way to the house of my father-in-law and had with me three asses, one laden with food, another with drink, and the third with delicacies. In the course of my journey a poor man came to me and said: 'Master, give me some food,' and I answered: 'Wait until I can unload my asses.' But before I had done so, the poor man expired. So I fell on his face and said: 'My eyes, which had no compassion for your eyes, may they become blind! My hands, which had no compassion for your hands, may they become crippled! My feet, which had no compassion for your feet, may they be crushed!' And I could not assuage my grief until I had said 'May my whole body become covered with sores.'" Said the disciples to him: "Woe unto us that we must see you in this condition." And he replied: "Woe would be unto me if you did not see me in this condition."

אמרו עליו על נחום איש גם זו שהיה סומא משתי עיניו, גדם משתי ידיו, קיטע משתי רגליו, וכל גופו מלא שחין, והיה מוטל בבית רעוע ורגלי מטתו מונחין בספלין של מים כדי שלא יעלו עליו נמלים. פעם אחת [היתה מטתו מונחת בבית רעוע]. בקשו תלמידיו לפנות מטתו ואחר כך לפנות את הכלים. אמר להם: בניי, פנו את הכלים ואחר כך פנו את מטתי. שמובטח לכם שכל זמן שאני בבית - אין הבית נופל. פינו את הכלים ואחר כך פנו את מטתו, ונפל הבית. אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי! וכי מאחר שצדיק גמור אתה, למה עלתה לך כך? - אמר להם: בניי, אני גרמתי לעצמי. שפעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך לבית חמי, והיה עמי משוי שלשה חמורים, אחד של מאכל ואחד של משתה ואחד של מיני מגדים. בא עני אחד ועמד לי בדרך, ואמר לי: רבי פרנסני. - אמרתי לו: המתן עד שאפרוק מן החמור. לא הספקתי לפרוק מן החמור עד שיצתה נשמתו. הלכתי ונפלתני על פניו, ואמרתי: עיני שלא חסו על עיניך - יסומו, ידי שלא חסו על ידיך - יתגדמו, רגלי שלא חסו על רגליך - יתקטעו. ולא נתקררה דעתי עד שאמרתי: כל גופי יהא מלא שחין. אמרו לו: אוי לנו שראינוך בכך! - אמר להם: אוי לי אם לא ראיתוני בכך.

**Questions for Text 4.**

- 1) It seems Nahum of Gimzu is a relatively wealthy man, as evidenced by his house full of containers and the gifts he brought for his in-laws. But he cannot enjoy his wealth because he is afflicted by guilt. When given the opportunity to help a poor person, he failed to act fast enough to meet the man's needs. What does it mean 'to act fast enough' when responding to poverty? What are the reasons we so often use to delay helping others? Do these - should these - reasons spark guilt in you? What is reason enough to act fast enough?
- 2) Why does Nahum of Gimzu think it important for his students see him so afflicted?
- 3) What is the significance of the poor man approaching Nahum of Gimzu to ask for assistance?



**Text 5. SA Choshen Mishpat 426.** (See also BT *Sanhedrin* 73a; MT *Rotzeach Ushmirat Nefesh* 1.13)

One who sees a friend drowning at sea, or bandits coming against him, or being attacked by a wild beast, and he could save him by himself or hire others to save him - but he does not; or if he hears of idolaters or informers plotting evil against him or concealing a weapon [to harm] him - but he does not disclose this to his friend and inform him; or if he knows of idolaters or a violent person who is coming against his friend, and he could appease [that person] on account of his friend and remove what [evil] there is in his heart - but he does not appease him; and in similar situations - this person transgresses [the principle “do not stand upon the blood of your fellow” (Leviticus 19:16)].

הרואה את חברו טובע בים, או לסטים באין עליו, או חיה רעה באה עליו, ויכול להצילו הוא בעצמו או שישכור אחרים להציל, ולא הציל; או ששמע עובדי כוכבים או מוסרים מחשבים עליו רעה או טומנים לו פח ולא גילה אוזן חברו והודיעו; או שידע בעובד כוכבים או באנס שהוא בא על חברו, ויכול לפייסו בגלל חברו ולהסיר מה שבלבו ולא פייסו, וכיוצא בדברים אלו, עובר על לא תעמוד על דם רעך.

**Questions for Text 5.**

- 1) This text identifies three categories of victims who could be saved: (a) those being overpowered by natural forces; (b) those who will be harmed by the plotting or policies of other groups; and (c) those who will be attacked by a specific malicious individual. The text says that when it is possible to save each victim and one fails to do so, one has transgressed a biblical principle or commandment. Spell out this logic.
- 2) Consider these categories of victims in light of poverty, HIV/AIDS, water access, and the like. In which category would you put today’s poor, the mortally ill, those denied access to clean water or reasonable health care or basic education?
- 3) While this law stresses personal action to save another, this is not the only option available. What do you make of the detail about hiring others to save victims of harmful policies? What might this mean in today’s complex world wherein we definitely see the plight of others but cannot personally intervene to assist them?
- 4) So what will you do?