



Of Neighbors and Strangers

Defining Our Universe of Moral Obligation

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the members of your nation, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Adonai. לֹא-תִקֹּם וְלֹא-תִטּוֹר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ, וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ: אֲנִי, יְהוָה.

Leviticus 19:33-34

And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger that dwells with you shall be to you as the citizens among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am Adonai your God. וְכִי-יָגוּר אִתְּךָ גֵר, בְּאַרְצְכֶם--לֹא תוֹנוּ, אֹתוֹ. כְּאֲזַרְחַת מִמֶּנּוּ יִהְיֶה לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם, וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךָ--כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

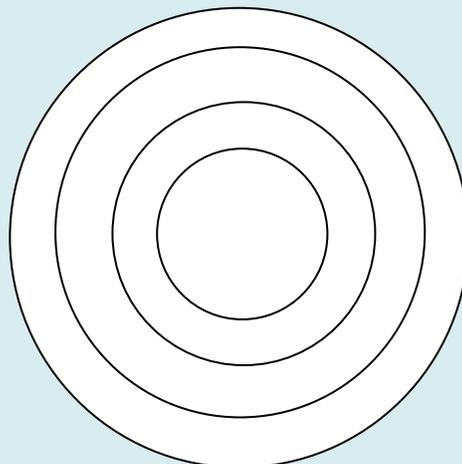
Questions:

- What does the Torah mean by “neighbor”? Who is included in that category? Who is excluded?
- What does the Torah mean by “stranger”? Who is included in that category? Who is excluded?
- Who isn’t covered by either of these categories?
- Is there a difference between loving your neighbor as yourself and loving the stranger as yourself? If so, what is the difference?
- Why are these two different commandments? Why not just say love everyone as yourself?
- Can you share a moment from your life when you felt like you were fulfilling either of these commandments?

Universe of Obligation

A circle of individuals and/or groups for whom you feel responsible, whose rights you seek to protect, and whose injuries call for amends.

Think about your own Universe of Obligation. The inner circle should include those people or groups of people for whom you feel a strong responsibility. As the circles move outward, the level of responsibility for these people decreases. What categories influence the way you prioritize your responsibilities?



Universalism and particularism are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary, and the ideal relationship between them is one of creative tension rather than head-on-head antagonism. – L Fein, *Smashing Idols*

Our Universe of Moral Obligation

Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 71a

R. Yosef expounded on the verse: "If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you..." (Exodus 22:24): [This teaches, that if the choice lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, the 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 have prior rights.

דתני רב יוסף אם כסף תלוה את עמי את העני עמך (שמות כב:כד) עמי ונכרי עמי קודם עני ועשיר עני קודם ענייך ועניי עירך ענייך קודמין עניי עירך ועניי עיר אחרת עניי עירך קודמין.

Babylonian Talmud Gittin 61a

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

ת"ר מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל ומבקרים חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל מפני דרכי שלום.

Questions

- How does each text define or shape the universe of obligation?
- The first text seems to provide a very clear set of rules for determining who should be helped first in any given circumstance. What happens when these categories come into conflict?
- In the second text, what might "for the sake of peace" mean?
- How can the two texts be reconciled if at all?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – The Dignity of Difference

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine, runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom? (p. 30)

Questions

- How does the globalization of economic forces and media now shape our universe of moral concern?
- How might the biblical and Talmudic texts above help us navigate this transformation?
- Do you agree that media exposure to people suffering far away has increased your feelings of empathy toward those people?
- Why is our moral sense simultaneously activated and frustrated? How might we respond?

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org