



FROM THE SOURCES

Texts on Jewish Social Justice

Accounting for Ourselves and Our Society

Cheshbon Hanefesh and Public Policy

The period from the beginning of Elul to the close of Yom Kippur is a time of reflection and personal accounting. We ask, “Who have I been this year?” and “Who do I want to be?” The *mussar* tradition—a discipline of ethical behavior—calls this reflection *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the self or the soul in order to catalogue and change our character traits.

This personal accounting can be expanded to society as well. How can we take stock of where we are as a country, so we know what needs to change? This fall, around the Jewish High Holidays, our legislators in Washington, D.C. will be debating the federal budget, which we can view as a moral statement of our nation’s priorities and values. How our country spends its funds is a reflection of what—and whom—our leaders care about. This year, Congress will be addressing one of the starkest presidential budget proposals we’ve ever seen that virtually turns its back on the most vulnerable in our country—and in the world.

Below are a set of sources and questions that can open up conversation about this issue and prompt us to grapple with who we are as a society and who we would like to be.

Accounting for Ourselves

Duties of the Heart, Tenth Treatise on Devotion to God 3:10-12 חובות הלבבות, שער עשירי - שער אהבת ה' ג:י-י"ב

The two types of spiritual accountings: 1) To make a spiritual accounting with oneself on what one owes God in return for God’s continuous benefits; 2) To make a spiritual accounting with oneself for hiding one’s sins, and God’s [withholding punishment] for a long time, and God’s forgiveness.

אבל שני החשבונות. אחד מהם חשבוננו עם נפשו על מה שהייב לאלקים להתמדת טובותיו. והשני חשבוננו עם נפשו על הסתירו עונותיו והאריכו לו ומחילתו.

Questions:

- What is the difference between these two kinds of spiritual accounting?
- How might the first encourage us to look at our privilege?
- What do we “owe” God or society on account of the beneficence in our lives?
- How might the second kind of accounting encourage us to look at our own deficiencies?
- Why do we focus on forgiveness when we look at our deficiencies?

Rosh Hashanah 32b

ראש השנה ל"ב

Rabbi Abbahu said: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, for what [reason] don’t the Jewish people recite songs [of praise, i.e., *Hallel*] before You on Rosh Hashana and on Yom Kippur? He said to them: [Is it] possible that [while] the King is sitting on the throne of judgment and the books of life and the books of

אמר רבי אבהו אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע מפני מה אין ישראל אומרים שירה לפניך בר"ה וביום הכפורים אמר להם אפשר מלך יושב על כסא דין וספרי חיים וספרי

Questions:

- Why don't we say *Hallel*, Songs of Praise, on Rosh Hashanah?
- When we evaluate our own lives, what might a "book of life" and a "book of death" stand for? In what ways we do consign ourselves to each book every year?
- Imagine the feeling of standing before a judge like this. Do you find that feeling to be motivating or inhibiting?
- What is this text conveying about the "seriousness" of moral evaluation?

Accounting for Our Community

Exodus 32:31-34

שמות ל"ב:ל"א-ל"ד

(31) Moses went back to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. (32) Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written!" (33) But the LORD said to Moses, "He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. (34) Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins."

(לא) ויָשָׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אָנֹכִי חַטָּא הָעָם הַזֶּה חָטְאוּהָ גְדֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהִי זָהָב: (לב) וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשְׂאָא חַטֹּאתֵם וְאִם־אֵין מַחְנִי נָא מִסִּפְרֵי אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ: (לג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטְא־לִי אֶמְחִנוּ מִסִּפְרֵי: (לד) וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְנָתַתָּ אֶת־הָעָם אֶל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ הַנֶּה מִלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ וּבְיוֹם פְּקֻדֵי וּפְקֻדְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם חֲטֹאתֵם:

Questions:

- Why is God promising to "make an account" of the children of Israel?
- If you were to design that accounting, what would it entail?
- How do we make an accounting of our entire society today? Would that be desirable?

Genesis 18:23-32

בראשית י"ח:כ"ג-ל"ב

(23) Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? (24) What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? (25) Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the Earth deal justly?" (26) And the LORD answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." (27) Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: (28) What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?" And He answered, "I will not destroy if I find forty-five there." (29) But he spoke to Him again, and said, "What if

(כג) וַיֵּגֶשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע: (כד) אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא לְמַקֹּום לְמַעַן חַמְשִׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּה: (כה) חֲלִלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת וְכַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כַּצְדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כֹּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט: (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אִם־אֶמְצָא בְּסֹדֶם חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׂאתִי לְכָל־הַמָּקוֹם בַּעֲבוּרָם: (כז) וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי וְאַנְכִי עֹפָר וְאֵפֶר: (כח) אוֹלֵי יִחְסְרוּן חַמְשִׁים הַצְדִּיקִים חַמְשָׁה הַתְּשִׁית בְּחַמְשָׁה אֶת־כֹּל־הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית אִם־אֶמְצָא שָׁם אַרְבָּעִים וְחַמְשָׁה: (כט) וַיִּסָּף עוֹד לְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שָׁם

forty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not do it, for the sake of the forty.” (30) And he said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” (31) And he said, “I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty.” (32) And he said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten.”

אַרְבָּעִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֶעֱשֶׂה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאַרְבָּעִים:
(ל) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא יְחַר לֵאדֹנָי וְאִדְבָּרָה אוֹלָמִי
מִצָּאוֹן שָׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֶעֱשֶׂה אִם־
אֶמְצֵא שָׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים: (לא) וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא
הוֹאֲלֹתִי לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי אוֹלָמִי מִצָּאוֹן שָׁם
עֶשְׂרִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחֵית בְּעִבּוֹר הָעֶשְׂרִים:
(לב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא יְחַר לֵאדֹנָי וְאִדְבָּרָה אֶדְ־
הַפְּעַם אוֹלָמִי מִצָּאוֹן שָׁם עֶשְׂרֵה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא
אֲשַׁחֵית בְּעִבּוֹר הָעֶשְׂרֵה:

Questions

- On what basis are God and Abraham evaluating Sodom?
- What should be the basis for our evaluation of our own society?

The Budget is a Moral Document

*Jim Wallis - Truth That Bears Repeating: A Budget Is a Moral Document**

Any budget is a moral statement of priorities, whether it's a budget created by an individual, a family, a school, a city, or a nation. It tells us, mathematically, what areas, issues, things, or people are most important to the creators of that budget, and which are least important.

Jim Wallis - The Missing Religious Principle in Our Budget Debates†

Indeed, the phrase “a budget is a moral document” originated in the faith community, and has entered the debate. But those always most in jeopardy during Washington’s debates and decisions are precisely the persons the Bible instructs us clearly to protect and care for—the poorest and most vulnerable. They have virtually none of the lobbyists that all the other players do in these hugely important discussions about how public resources will be allocated.

Questions

- How does a budget serve as a statement of our moral priorities?
- What might be the use of thinking about a budget as a moral document?

The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961‡

The Congress declares that the individual liberties, economic prosperity, and security of the people of the United States are best sustained and enhanced in a community of nations which respect individual civil and economic rights and freedoms and which work together to use wisely the world’s limited resources in an open and equitable international economic system. Furthermore, the Congress reaffirms the traditional humanitarian ideals of the American people and renews its commitment to assist people in developing countries to eliminate hunger, poverty, illness, and ignorance.

* <https://sojo.net/articles/truth-bears-repeating-budget-moral-document>

† <https://sojo.net/articles/missing-religious-principle-our-budget-debates>

‡ The Foreign Assistance Act is the law that established USAID – the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Questions

- What terms does this law use to justify U.S. participation in international development?
- How does the act balance national interest and humanitarian ideals?

Nick Kristoff - 'That Food Saved My Life,' and Trump Wants to Cut It Off[§]

In the United States, humanitarian aid has been a bipartisan tradition, and the champion among recent presidents was George W. Bush, who started programs to fight AIDS and malaria that saved millions of lives. Bush and other presidents recognized that the reasons to help involve not only our values, but also our interests... Trump's vision of a security threat is a Chinese submarine or perhaps an unauthorized immigrant, and that's the vision his budget reflects. But in 2017 some of the gravest threats we face are from diseases or narcotics that can't be flattened by a tank but that can be addressed with diplomacy, scientific research, and social programs inside and outside our borders... Consider Thomas Awiapo, whose parents died when he was a child growing up in northern Ghana... I asked him what he thought of the Trump budget cutting foreign assistance. "When I hear that aid has been cut, I'm so sad," he answered. "That food saved my life."

Questions

- According to Kristoff, what is different about Trump's approach to international aid?
- Why, according to Kristoff, is that a problem?

*AJWS Budget Analysis***

The Trump Administration's proposal reduces funding for the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) by 32 percent—from \$59.1 billion in 2016 to \$40 billion next fiscal year. At 1 percent of the federal budget, this fund is not only critical to our national security, but to the expansion of human rights and reduction of poverty abroad. The President's proposed budget:

- Eliminates annual funding to the Green Climate Funds and all other U.N. climate change programs from \$3 billion to zero.
 - Phases out annual funding for family planning and reproductive health from approximately \$400 million to zero.
 - Reduces spending on global health by 23 percent, including programs aimed at promoting sexual health such as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).
 - Eliminates all funding for Development Assistance by creating an "Economic Support and Development Fund" that will shift funding from long-term, sustainable programs abroad to those that meet the short term, political aspirations of the new administration.
 - Reduces funding to the U.N., including institutions critical to upholding human rights standards like UN Women, UNAIDS and UNICEF.
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Questions

- What values do you see expressed in the proposed federal budget?
- Are these values in line with your values?
- What does the proposed budget say about our place in the global community?

[§] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/18/opinion/sunday/that-food-saved-my-life-and-trump-wants-to-cut-it-off.html>

** For more details on specific programs impacted by the budget, please see the U.S. Global Leadership Campaign's Budget Resource Center (<http://www.usglc.org/international-affairs-budget-resources/fy-2018-budget-materials/>).
