

# Introduction to Social Justice: What do the rabbis say about our responsibility to the world?

# Part 1: What does study have to do with anything?

# Babylonian Talmud (BT) Kiddushin 40b

Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד, נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם: תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול? נענה רבי טרפון ואמר: מעשה גדול, נענה ר"ע ואמר: תלמוד גדול, נענו כולם ואמרו: תלמוד גדול, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

#### BT Brachot 17a

There was a famous saying of Rava: The purpose of learning is repentance and good deeds.

מרגלא בפומיה דרבא: תכלית חכמה תשובה ומעשים טובים.

- What are the two perspectives on why study is important? What are differences you can see between them?
- Why do you think the rabbis see Torah study as a requirement for enabling action?
- Can you think of any practical examples of times that study led to action in your life?

## Part 2: What is expected of us?

## Isaiah 1:17

Learn to do good. Devote yourself to justice; aid the wronged. Support the cause of the orphan; defend the right of the widow.

לָמְדוּ הֵיטֵב דּּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אַשְׁרוּ חָמוֹץ שִּׁפְּטוּ יָתוֹם רִיבוּ אַלְמָנָה

# Ramban on Leviticus 19:2

Speak to the people of Israel and tell them, you shall be holy for I, Hashem your God, am holy: Initially, God said that you should observe the laws and rules, which God had commanded you. Now God says that, even

דַּבֵּר אֶל כָּל עְדַת בְּנֵי יִשְרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קדֹשִׁים תִּהְיו כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: זה דרך התורה לפרוט ולכלול בכיוצא בזה, כי אחרי אזהרת פרטי הדינין בכל משא ומתן שבין בני אדם, לא תגנוב ולא תגזול ולא תונו ושאר האזהרות, אמר בכלל with things that God has not commanded, you should also try to do the good and the right in God's eyes, for God loves the good and the right. And this is a great matter, since it is impossible to mention in the Torah all of a person's actions toward his neighbors, all of his work activities, and all social and political institutions.

ועשית הישר והטוב )דברים ו יח(, שיכניס בעשה היושר וההשויה וכל לפנים משורת הדין לרצון חבריו, כאשר אפרש )שם( בהגיעי למקומו ברצון הקב"ה.

#### BT Sukkah 49b

Our Sages taught: Gemilut chasadim (acts of loving kindness) are greater than tzedakah in three ways: Acts of tzedakah involve only one's money – gemilut chasadim can involve both money, or one's personal service.

Tzedakah can be given only to the poor – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the rich and for the poor. Tzedakah can be given only to the living – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the living and the dead.

תנו רבנן: בשלשה דברים גדולה גמילות חסדים יותר מן הצדקה, צדקה - בממונו, גמילות חסדים -בין בגופו בין בממונו. צדקה - לעניים, גמילות חסדים - בין לעניים בין לעשירים. צדקה - לחיים, .גמילות חסדים - בין לחיים בין למתים

#### Rashi, Leviticus 25:35

You will strengthen him: Do not wait until he has gone down and fallen, because it will be difficult to raise him up. Instead, strengthen him at the time where his hand is slipping. What is this like? To a load upon a donkey. When it is still on the donkey, one can support it and make it stand. Once it falls to the ground, even five cannot make it stand.

והחזקת בו - אל תניחהו שירד ויפול ויהיה קשה להקימו, אלא חזקהו משעת מוטת היד. למה זה דומה, למשאוי שעל החמור, עודהו על החמור אחד תופס בו ומעמידו, נפל לארץ, חמשה אין מעמידין אותו

- What patterns do you notice throughout these texts? What are the distinctions drawn between preventative action and helping after the fact?
- Do any of these notions of social responsibility speak to you in particular? Which is your favorite?
- What do you make of Ramban's explanation of holiness, and its relationship to the ways we should be living life?
- Why does the Sukkah text make the distinction between acts of kindness and tzedakah? Can you think of practical applications of each of these two categories? Do you agree that one is superior to the other?

## Part 3: Do we encourage others to be ethical?

#### BT Shabbat 54b

Everyone who can protest the sin of his - היחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה - household and does not, is responsible for the people of his household. For the people of his city, he is responsible for the people of his

city. For the whole world, he is responsible for the whole world.

## Rambam, Laws of Temperament 6:7

If you see that someone committed a sin or walks in a way that is not good, it is your responsibility to bring the mistaken one back to the right path and point out that he is doing wrong to himself by this evil course, as it is said, "You must surely condemn your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17). One who condemns another, whether for offenses against people or לטובתו להביאו לחיי העולם הבא, אם קיבל ממנו for sins against God, should scold in private, speak to the offender gently and tenderly, and point out that the criticism is offered for the person's own good, to secure life in the World הוא נתפש בעון אלו כיון שאפשר לו למחות בהם. to Come. If the person accepts the rebuke, well and good. If not, the person should be rebuked a second, and a third time. And so one is obligated to continue the critiques, until the sinner attacks the rebuker and says, "I refuse to listen." Whoever is in a position to prevent wrongdoing and does not do so is responsible for the sins of all the wrongdoers whom that person might have stopped.

הרואה חבירו שחטא או שהלך בדרך לא טובה מצוה להחזירו למוטב ולהודיעו שהוא חוטא על עצמו במעשיו הרעים שנאמר הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך (ויקרא יט:יז), המוכיח את חבירו בין בדברים שבינו לבינו, בין בדברים שבינו לבין המקום, צריך להוכיחו בינו לבין עצמו, וידבר לו בנחת ובלשון רכה ויודיעו שאינו אומר לו אלא מוטב ואם לאו יוכיחנו פעם שניה ושלישית, וכן תמיד חייב אדם להוכיחו עד שיכהו החוטא ויאמר לו איני שומע, וכל שאפשר בידו למחות ואינו מוחה

- Why does protest play such a major role in this tradition?
- How do you know when to protest? What is the distinction between protest and tattling?
- Rambam clearly believes that we have to protest over and over. However, there is also a Jewish value that prohibits embarrassing another. How do you strike a balance between these two ideas?
- Why are we held responsible for other's actions? Are there limits to that responsibility?
- What do you think about the Rambam's insistence that you condemn somebody over and over? Do you agree? How would you draw the line?
- Why does Rambam assume that the sinner is doing something harmful to himself through sinning? Do you agree that this is always true?