



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Responsibility: Our Household, Our Community, and Our World

You know how some houses, you walk in, and you can tell they are always immaculate; others seem clean, but you wonder what's been shoved in the closets? My house is the third kind, where you don't have to wonder. At five o'clock, there are often three backpacks on the floor of the kitchen; shoes everywhere, a Monopoly game and a deck of cards spread out on the carpet. There are missing baseball uniforms, and library books seldom get returned on time. We got Golda, the dog our kids begged for, but there are days when evening comes, and we don't know how many times she's been fed.

By the time the lights go out each night, the chaos might be under control, although a helpful neighbor occasionally has to wheel a bicycle onto our driveway. But the most interesting thing is what creative excuses will be invented to get out of being held accountable for all that needs to be done. Who's suddenly tired or hungry, who just then remembered their homework, or who never played that game that now needs to be put away, or maybe they did but they weren't the ones who took it out.

My kids didn't invent these avoidance techniques. They're just quick learners – from their peers, their parents, I'm sure, and just about everywhere. It's easier to spend our energy avoiding problems than it is to try to solve them. In our home, there are times when the clutter builds up for days, and it takes a few hours to sort it through. But there are times, too, when it goes the other way; when I hear no excuses, when I leave the room and come back, and I can see the clean carpet, cabinets and drawers closed, and it's moments like those that fill me with a restored affection for my children.

Yom Kippur is our most sacred day, of shofar blasts, majesty and reaching for a connection with the divine. But I think Yom Kippur is also a practical day, focused on solving real problems. As a teacher of mine has said, Judaism “doesn't let you off the hook by encouraging transcendence of this world, but instead takes you by the shoulders and turns you around so that you face squarely all the real or potential messes, breakage, or offenses you might have had a role in causing.” On Yom Kippur, we work on the Jewish soul trait of *Achrayut*, Responsibility.

First used in the *Mishnah*, the word *Achrayut* has two possible meanings. The first is from the word *Achar*, or after, referring to what follows *after* our actions or our failure to act. So, on this day, we look for those consequences. We join in the communal confession, reciting transgressions, many of which we personally have not committed. But through these prayers, we explore our own lives. We seek to identify ourselves in the confessions. We remember the responsibilities we are avoiding, and we turn our shoulders around and face them. Who is waiting for something from us – an acknowledgment, an apology, an expression of appreciation? What messes have we been a party to, that need action from us to repair or heal, and from which we have sought to run away? Yom Kippur calls us back.

The second possible meaning for *Achrayut*, responsibility, comes from a different understanding of the root – instead of *achar*, after, it might be *acher*, other: Judaism teaches us that we are responsible for the other. There's a requirement in Deuteronomy to make a guardrail for your roof. What's interesting about this commandment, though, is the reason given for it. It's not just for your own safety, but rather,

and I quote, “so that you do not bring bloodguilt upon your house if anyone should fall from it.”ⁱⁱ This commandment has an important implication. We might be held accountable for anything that happens on our roof, if we didn’t do what was necessary to make sure it was safe.

Maimonides, one of the leading authorities on Jewish law during the middle ages, takes this an important step further. In his commentary on that verse, he writes that *any person*, not just the owner, has a positive obligation to remove an obstacle that could cause mortal danger. If he does not, He has violated the commandment, “You shall not spill blood.”ⁱⁱⁱ Maimonides has widened our circle of accountability to include a layer we might call, “protective responsibility.” We are responsible for addressing even dangers we didn’t cause ourselves. We might ask, how far does this responsibility go? And the Talmud provides an answer: “Whoever can prevent his household from committing a sin but does not is responsible for the sins of his household; if he can prevent his fellow citizens, he is responsible for the sins of his fellow citizens; if the world, he is responsible for the sins of the world.”^{iv} This text challenges us, asking US to decide what WE can do. WE define our responsibility towards these three layers of influence, our household, our society and the world, based on our ability to prevent sin and protect others from danger.

Those of us who have been parents, aunts or uncles, know it is a journey of protective responsibility. We put up guardrails everywhere, from the physical ones around our household when they are babies, to other ways we try to keep them from getting into trouble, although we know we can’t. It takes a lifetime to find the right balance between protecting children and letting them become their own people. Judaism teaches that every soul trait must be treated with balance, and our goal is not to live our lives on either extreme. Today, all of us can take time to reflect on where we are on that spectrum, in looking out for others in our household or among our close circle of loved ones. Who are the people in our lives for whom we need to step up? Who needs our help; our guidance; our time; or needs us to listen to them?

And, are we taking care of ourselves in all of this? I have spoken to many members of our congregation in recent years and heard about their experiences of looking out for aging parents, ill partners or friends, children whose disabilities require exhausting measures of protective responsibility. *Achrayut* can be a heavy burden.

This work also happens within the “household” of our synagogue. Our tzedakah and caring community funds act as crucial stopgaps for members who need help at any given time, to ensure they can stay afloat financially. Members of the temple step up to provide home-cooked meals after a surgery, or some support after a loved one’s death. These are not only deeds of caring – at times, they are acts of defense that keep a person or a family grounded. We’ve had moments that require the donation of a car, expert legal help, an emergency move, and other situations in which someone was safeguarded from one danger or another. It strengthens us when we receive that kind of support, and it deepens us when we can be the one who delivers it.

The Talmud’s second layer of protective responsibility is our fellow citizens. How can we build guardrails to help protect our fellow citizens from the dangers around them, and from putting themselves in danger?

One of our members, Steve, has been teaching a parenting class for forty-five years. Two years ago, he began offering his class at the Arlington County jail. His goal is to help inmates learn skills we all need: to

encourage their kids, to give them positive reinforcement instead of yelling at them or hitting them. Studies show that children who have been spanked twice a month at three years old are fifty percent more likely to act aggressively when they turn five. Steve meets with groups of men and groups of women in the jail. He told me the women tend to be more talkative in these meetings, but occasionally, he'll hear a story from one of male inmates.

One said he had used the technique of positive reinforcement to avoid getting into a fight. He told the man who was about to attack him that he was better than that, that he was a good person, and he didn't want to do this. The man stopped, thought, and agreed. Neither of them got hurt that day.

Steve's partner in these classes, Karen, teaches the inmates how to maximize the chance that they will regain custody of their children when they get out, usually within 90 days at this local jail. She encourages them to write their families and keep in touch. After the inmates complete their parenting course, they get to have a Father's or Mother's Day party at the jail – to play with their kids, pick them up and hold them. Imagine the dangers of the future that might be avoided for these kids, and for these adults, because of the lessons and opportunities Steve and Karen are giving them.

Steve's story reminds us how fragile the balance can be in keeping a family together, or a life in order. For many people in Virginia, that balance is threatened by incarceration or debt. This past year, through VOICE, we partnered with the governor to eliminate one of these risks: the state policy of suspending a citizen's driver's license for nonpayment of court fees. Losing your license can easily lead to losing your job, going further into poverty, and never getting back on your feet. But as a result of this change, over 600,000 drivers in Virginia are now eligible to get their licenses back.

Others in our community are stepping up to take protective responsibility for strangers in our midst. In today's America, when our government wants to send migrants back to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to apply for asylum, they are truly in danger. Just as we have been doing for a refugee family from the Middle East for several years, this year we began supporting a family from El Salvador, a mother and her two daughters, age ten and five. The three of them came here to escape gang violence and threats to their lives. They walked and slept in public parks during much of their journey to the border, and then they traveled to Virginia and applied for asylum. In April, we requested funds from the Temple community. Hundreds of members responded by committing over \$31,000 in just a few days. Much of that money will be saved for other future immigration work. Meanwhile, a team of volunteers has been deeply involved, providing language, transportation, housing and other assistance for this family. The girls attended our summer camp this year and had a great time. Protecting this family and becoming connected to them has been a powerful experience. This kind of work is what makes us a sacred community.

Gun violence prevention is another passion within our congregation. We must do what we can to keep our country's citizens, and especially our children, from harm. National changes in gun laws still seem far away. But there are business leaders who are doing what they can. Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods have both now stopped selling assault weapons and ammunition for them. These are courageous positions of responsibility, because they are big sales risks. And in Virginia, we may be closer than we think to changes in state laws. Some of the top leaders on gun issues in Virginia and the nation are members of this congregation. If we join with them and other Reform Jews and speak out, we can make a difference.

Finally, the Talmud tells us that if we can, we must take protective responsibility for the world. One of the most important responsibilities of our time is the danger to the earth caused by global warming. It's obvious that something needs to happen, and the Reform movement is clear on this. Current government policies are moving in the opposite direction, and it may not be in our power to change that at the moment. But it is essential for our voices to be heard on this issue so that sooner rather than later, our nation can finally move forward, united on what needs to be done.

In our own community, the TRS Solar Energy Task Force is working on an exciting proposal to install solar panels on the Temple's roof that will reduce our carbon footprint and set an example for other religious congregations. We are focusing on what *we can* do and sending a message by doing it. In addition, last year, Fairfax county created an office dedicated to addressing climate change issues, and funded it again this year, at about \$6 million, which includes an initiative to develop a community-wide energy and climate change action plan. This accomplishment was led in part by the Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, which includes Temple Rodef Shalom.

In cleaning up our messes, the Talmud asks us to start with our own household. For some of us, that's a tall order. But we do what we can. We take responsibility for the *achar*, what comes after our actions. We declutter our minds, so we can see clearly what needs to be done, and realize what we have already accomplished. And, we extend our attention outward, taking responsibility for the *acher*, the others around us as well.

As Moses says in our Torah reading, "*Atem Netzavim hayom, kulchem, lifnei Adonai Eloheichem.*" You stand here today, all of you, before Adonai your God." We set aside this day to stand still and be accountable. We remember our responsibilities, and we widen our circle of *achrayut*. Who are the *acherim*, the others, who need something from us? In what ways can we protect them and our world from harm? And where will we find that balance – where have we done too much or not enough? If we are able to turn around today, to face the past year and the present moment, what are the things we will see? Have we stepped up in our household, our community, and our world?

ⁱ Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Mussar Institute, p. 199-200

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 22:8

ⁱⁱⁱ (Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Murderer and Protecting Life, 11:4)

^{iv} Shabbat 54b