

"I Am My Brother's Keeper"
Rabbi Judith Schindler, Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina
Rosh Hashanah 5771/2010

I have two sons. Sometimes they fight. When they do this in public, I am often greeted with a surprising response by other mothers. They say either with words or with facial expressions, "Thank God, it's not just my kids, Rabbi Judy's kids fight too."

My friend, Dru, has four boys. Just imagine that. The youngest one often wears a T-shirt that I love. It says, "It's my brother's fault." In fact, they have a family picture with all four boys wearing the exact same shirt.

The truth is, we don't even need to have siblings to deny responsibility. We are all too comfortable blaming others. "It's my parents' fault," we might say, "or my spouses' fault, or my co-workers fault, or the fault of Israel's or America's or Charlotte's governing structures." We simply fill in the blank and pass the buck.

Even the first sibling of the Torah, Cain, could have worn that "It's my brother's fault" T-shirt. After he murdered Abel out of jealousy, God called out to him asking, "Where is your brother?"

"I do not know," Cain responded and added the renowned question, "*hashomer achi anochi* - am I my brother's keeper?"

No answer was necessary. It was obvious to God and to the reader of every subsequent generation.

On these Days of Awe we admit the ways we have failed to be our brother's keeper. Today we are called to take responsibility for our brothers and sisters in Israel, in Charlotte, in our own families.

Geoffrey Canada, the great visionary behind the Harlem Children's Zone, which eliminated the black-white achievement gap for 10,000 students in 97 blocks of Harlem, opened his poem called "Don't Blame Me" with the following:

The girl's mother said, "Don't blame me.
Her father left when she was three.
I know she don't know her ABCs, her 1,2,3s,
But I am poor and work hard you see."

The teacher shook her head and said,
"Don't blame me, I know it's sad.
He's ten, but if the truth be told,
He reads like he was six years old.
And math, don't ask.
It's sad you see.

Wish I could do more, but it's after three.
Blame the mom, blame society, blame the system.
Just don't blame me."

The judge was angry, his expression cold.
He scowled and said, "Son you've been told.
Break the law again and you'll do time.
You've robbed with a gun.
Have you lost your mind?"

The young man opened his mouth to beg.
"Save your breath," he heard instead.
"Your daddy left when you were two.
Your momma didn't take care of you.
Your school prepared you for this fall.
Can't read, can't write, can't spell at all.
But you did the crime for all to see.
You're going to jail, son.
Don't blame me."

Like the mother, teacher and judge of that poem, we say those same words: "Don't blame me." The problems of our world and even of our families are too overwhelming and exhausting.

"Don't blame me" we say when it comes to Israel. Her history is too complex and her problems too great for me to heal. Israel is judged so harshly I cannot come to her defense. The world focuses on a moment captured by a CNN camera rather than on the minutes and months and millennia leading up to it.

"Don't blame me" we say with respect to our siblings who are struggling in Charlotte. I am not responsible for the 3,200 homeless students who have no home in which to do their homework. I am not responsible for the 52% of our city's public schoolchildren who live in poverty — whose families must spend more of their time worrying more about the fundamentals of food, clothing and shelter than about the basics of math and reading.

"Don't blame me" we say with respect to our own family. It is simply too hard to be my brother's and sister's keeper. Their financial woes, their emotional challenges, their physical illnesses are too great a burden for me to bear.

Even when it comes to our own selves, we give every excuse for neglecting our relationships. We blame psychological challenges for our inattentiveness. We blame our upbringing for our poor communication skills. We blame the economy for our emotional unavailability. We blame the high demands of our workplace for our absence.

Passing the buck and placing the blame can lead to devastating consequences in all realms of our lives.

Many of you may remember a family tragedy in Charlotte last Spring. A neglectful mother left her four young children alone – ages seven, four, one and two months old. A kerosene heater in the bedroom of the youngest two caught on fire killing Josiah, the toddler, and Gabriel, the baby whom they called “Smiley.”

Fingers of blame were quickly pointed: the mother, of course, the Department of Social Services who had been called in some months before. Yet Pastor Kim White, who presided over the funeral, added additional insight: “I cannot put the blame on two people. I have to realize that a community failed these children. A system failed these children. Being quiet failed these children.”

Today we yearn to fail no more. As Jews, our New Year’s resolutions are always the same. “Blame me,” we say. “I am accountable.” We begin our New Year not with champagne in hand, numbing ourselves to the realities of our world, but by facing them head on. Today we admit our personal and collective wrongs and work to make them right.

We begin by acknowledging our complacency when it comes to our brothers and sisters in Israel. Though many of you may not see Israelis as our family, I assure you they are. We are bound together historically, culturally and religiously. They represent a large part of my family tree and many of yours.

When I was a teenager, my older brother, Josh, gave me a great gift with his words. He said, “Judy, whatever trouble you find yourself in, call me and I will get out of it.”

Our Israeli siblings have said the same thing to us. They live the value of *kol Yisrael aravim zeh b’zeh* — all Israel is responsible for one another.

Just two examples... in 1985’s Operation Moses, Israel airlifted 8,000 Ethiopians, and again in 1991’s Operation Solomon, Israel brought more than 14,000 more Jewish Ethiopians home in an impressive thirty-six hour military mission.

Our siblings of Israel may frustrate us with their arrogance and hard-headedness, but they should also awe us with the ways in which they are self-sacrificing beyond measure.

The humorist Harry Leichter asks: “What is an Israeli?”

An Israeli is someone who will elbow his way past an old lady to get on the bus only to offer her his seat once she gets there.

An Israeli is someone who will do anything to get out of reserve duty in times of peace, and will do anything to be able to serve during times of war.

An Israeli is someone who does not know how to say 'please,' 'excuse me' or 'thank you' — but in your hour of need will walk through fire to lend you a hand.

History has proven that in times of trouble Israel has been there for us and we need to be there for them.

As international scholar Rabbi Donniel Hartman puts it, “For world Jewry, the key question is not whether they are willing to take a leap of faith and support every policy decision or action taken by the Israeli government... The question is whether they are willing to take a leap of loyalty in which their commitment to Israel is a critical... part of their modern Jewish lives....”¹

We need to take that leap of loyalty and support Israel as we would support our siblings of birth or adoption. When Israel does wrong, we should criticize her passionately; yet, let us be cautious publicly. For Israel has many enemies who do not criticize her as we do — from a place of love — but rather condemn her from a place of hate.

We need to support Israel financially by keeping it in the family — buying Israeli bonds for B’nei Mitzvah gifts, Israeli Judaica from our gift shop for wedding gifts, and making lifecycle donations to Birkat Shalom, our sister congregation. We need to visit Israel.

Chas v’chelila, God forbid, Israel is a victim of an attack and God calls to us asking, “Where is your sister Israel?” We will be able to say, “We did our best to support her.”

One last word on this subject — on this day that calls for honesty, let us push ourselves to see the Palestinians as our brothers and sisters as well, lest we become guilty of that same journalistic myopia, refusing to recognize the complexities on their side of the fence. Peace will not come until we see our common humanity.

As the focus of our reflection moves inward, we acknowledge our failure to support our siblings right here in our own Queen City — the tens of thousands of schoolchildren living in poverty.

Marion Wright Edelman writes the following prayer:

God, we have pushed so many of our children into the tumultuous sea of life
In a small and leaky boat without survival gear and compass.
Forgive us and help them to forgive us.
Help us now to give all our children the anchors of faith and love,
the rudders of purpose and hope, the sails of health and education,
and the paddles of family and community
to keep them safe and strong when life’s sea gets rough.

¹ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, Haaretz, July 19, 2010 “Relationship of Israel and World Jewry Depends on Meaning, Not Claims of Necessity”

It is hard enough to educate our own children — crazy schedules, soccer, Hebrew School, homework and more. Yet our own kids and our kids of Charlotte's other neighborhoods share the same city. They share the same future.

Even the rabbis of our Mishnah thousands of years ago taught that if you do not educate a child, you lead him to lawlessness. We need to take responsibility to break “the pipeline from poverty to prison” that leaves our city's impoverished kids far behind academically even before they begin. When children's reading levels are inadequate as they advance to upper grades, crime becomes more enticing than the menial jobs that lie ahead of them as the primary option for the undereducated.

If we do not support our Charlotte Schools by advocating for greater funding on national and local levels, if we do not support our Charlotte Schools by finding the time to mentor or volunteer (as our religious school parents and seniors have admirably done at Sterling Elementary School — a school with 92% poverty) then we will one day find God calling to us asking: “Where is your brother in Charlotte?” as God hears the blood of crime or the despair of poverty or prison calling upwards towards God's abode.

And finally, we reflect our failure to support our brothers and sisters in our own families.

A bed-bound hospital patient accidentally spilled water. Worried that someone might slip, he called the nurses' aid to clean it. Yet there was a hospital policy that small puddles are cleaned by nurses' aids and big puddles are cleaned by housekeeping. The nurses' aid called housekeeping and the two began to argue over whether it was a big puddle that housekeeping should clean or a small puddle that the aid should clean.

Exasperated, the patient took the pitcher of water from his night table, poured the whole thing on the floor and said: “Is that a big enough puddle now for you to decide about?”²

If we continue to play a similar passing of responsibility and blame game in our personal lives, than small drops of water will become puddles, then pools, then oceans of water in which will become too overwhelmed to swim.

Today let us accept the blame for failing to honor our parents who may not have been perfect, but raised us and gave us life. Let us accept the blame for failing to fulfill those promises we made under the chuppah many years ago — to love, honor and cherish, to give to and to forgive our spouses. Let us take responsibility to be present with our kids not just physically but emotionally, to teach them to value family not with our words but with our actions.

Let us take responsibility as co-workers and neighbors to collaborate rather than compete, to lift up our colleagues rather than leave them behind. Let us do the same with our siblings.

² Told by Pastor James Wright, St John Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL October 3, 1999

For if we do not, we may one day wake up to find ourselves alone with God calling out to us saying: “Where is your family? What have you done?”

Like the Biblical character Cain, we will find ourselves silent and speechless acknowledging that due to our failure to take responsibility for our relationships, they have been broken beyond repair.

Geoffrey Canada concludes his “Don’t Blame Me” poem with the following:

If there is a God or a person supreme,
A final reckoning, for the kind and the mean,
And judgment is rendered on who passed the buck,
Who blamed the victim or proudly stood up,
You’ll say to the world,
“While I couldn’t save all,
I did not let these children fall.

By the thousands I helped all I could see.
No excuses, I took full responsibility.
No matter if they were black or white,
Were cursed, ignored, were wrong or right,
Were shunned, pre-judged, were short or tall,
I did my best to save them all.”

Like Geoffrey Canada, who turned despair and underachievement in Harlem to hope and success, we, too, can make a difference. We can turn the tides in our homeland of Israel, in our schools in Charlotte, and in our personal lives. Pirkei Avot teaches it is not our job to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from working on it.

And Cain asked, “*Hashomer achi anochi?* Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Let our lives in the coming year speak for us in saying: “Yes we are.”

May we be our brother’s keeper in Israel, in Charlotte and in our families and homes. May our childhood selfishness be replaced with adult self-sacrifice. May our words lead to actions and our actions lead to change. May the problems of our world be our problems and may the solutions be actions towards which we strive.

I have two sons. Sometimes they fight. I pray that I can teach them through my interactions with all my siblings to be responsible for one another so that their lives can be filled with peace.

Amen.