

In this Issue

- **Self-Transformation through Torah** by Rabbi Avraham Kovel
- **Straight Talk** by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt
- **Appel's Parsha Page** by Rabbi Yehuda Appel
- **Ancient Wisdom & Modern Psychology** by Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman



Climb Together or Fall Together

Imagine you're in a rowboat with another passenger crossing a vast lake. Suddenly, your companion pulls out a drill and begins boring a hole beneath his seat. Alarmed, you cry out, "What are you doing? You'll drown us both!"

He looks up and responds calmly, "I'm only drilling under *my* seat."

In this week's Torah portion, the Torah outlines the abundant blessings we'll receive if we keep

God's commandments and the fierce retribution we'll suffer if we ignore our divine mission.¹ Among these consequences is a peculiar detail that might seem insignificant at first glance. When fleeing from our enemies, the Torah warns, "You shall stumble, a man over his brother."²

What does the Torah add by telling us that you'll stumble **over one another**?

Collective Responsibility

Rashi, drawing from the Midrash, explains: "One will stumble because of the sin of the other, for all Israelites are held responsible for one another."³ The Maharal of Prague⁴ deepens this insight, noting that the Torah specifically uses the term "brother" rather than "another man," emphasizing that we are fundamentally one family—a single organism with interconnected parts.

During my first year in yeshiva, my friend Mordechai and I created a vivid illustration of this principle. For a class presentation on this verse, we squeezed into a single oversized T-shirt, both our heads sticking out the neck hole. On my side, I performed the role of Mr. Health-conscious—sipping green juice and bicep-curling a dumbbell. Mordechai played the part of Mr. Indulgence—munching donuts and "smoking" a pretend cigarette.

Mid-exercise, I began coughing dramatically, turning to our classmates in feigned confusion: "How come I do everything right yet feel terrible?" In the spiritual ecosystem, no action



Behar-Bechukotai (Leviticus 25-27) *basic compendium*

exists in isolation. What affects one affects all. No man is an island, least of all a Jew.⁵

Top-Down Spirituality

The verse contains one more subtle yet powerful teaching. The Torah specifically uses the Hebrew word 'Ish' for the stumbling individual—a term that consistently refers to a person of stature and spiritual achievement, rather than the more common 'adam' or 'enosh' used for ordinary people. This deliberate word choice reveals a profound insight: even the most righteous among us cannot achieve spiritual elevation in isolation. The sins of our brothers and sisters create stumbling blocks for us all.

Rabbi Moshe Shneider, the Headmaster of Yeshivas Toras Emes⁶, addressed this principle when asked why righteous individuals perished during the Holocaust. He cited a striking passage from the Talmud⁷ where God initially instructs that, during a time of destruction, a protective mark be placed on the foreheads of the righteous. However, upon further consideration, God withdraws the protection because, despite their personal piety, the righteous leaders had not done enough to guide their straying brothers and sisters. Rabbi Shneider explained that, unless we do everything in our power to influence our brethren, even the most pious will be included in the Divine Judgement. During the Holocaust, the great leaders “looked out for their yeshivas, but not for the entire Jewish people.”

There is no solo ascent up the mountain of holiness; we either climb together or fall together. The isolationist "shtetl mentality" offers

protection from harmful outside influences, but falls short of our ultimate mission. Yes, we must first secure our own spiritual oxygen mask, but then we must immediately turn to help others. As the great sage Hillel expresses so eloquently, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"⁸

The message for us is clear - We're all in this together! Taking responsibility starts with ourselves but must expand outward to our families, communities, nation, and eventually, the whole world. To incorporate this mindset into your daily life, try this: The next time you face a decision, ask yourself, "What is the best thing I can do right now for the Jewish Nation?" This simple shift transforms personal decisions into steps toward our collective redemption.

Shabbat Shalom! Avraham

1. God never punishes for no reason. Divine punishment is like the rumble strips on the sides of the highway, bumping us around until we choose to return to the path of Truth
2. וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶשְׁרֵי-בְרָאִתָּיו" - Vayikra 26:37
3. Rather than reading “a man **on** his brother,” באחי is understood as “**because of** his brother”
4. The great 16th century Torah luminary
5. When asked why he devoted so much energy to outreach toward secular Jews, the Lubavitcher Rebbe offered almost exactly the same analogy: "Imagine a body where one limb is hurting. Does the whole body not feel the pain and respond to heal it? So too with our people; we must care for every Jew as part of our own body."
6. His student Rabbi Moshe Shternbach, told over this piece of Torah in his name
7. Shabbas 55A
8. Midrash Shmuel on Pirkei Avos 1:14:

ואפשר עוד כי בהיות שמחוייב כל אדם להוכיח את חברו כעין שאמר הכתוב הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך לא יאמר אדם אחר שחבירי חייבים להוכיח אותי אם יראו בי עון אשר חטא מה לי להזהר עוד ולפשפש במעשי די לי שאני מקבל על עצמי להיות מקבל תוכחת מכל מי שיוכיחני וכל אשר יאמרו אלי אעשה אבל כל עוד שאין שום אדם מוכיח אותי מוכחא מילתא שאין בי שום דופי וכל חברי לא ימצאו בי עון אשר חטא לי"א אם אין אני מפשפש במעשי ומשתדל

בעדי להוכיח ולהישייר את עצמי מי לי כל' מי יוכיח אותי כי חבירי אפשר שאינם נותנים לב עלי ובין כה וכה אני מאבד את עצמי לדעת ואמר וכשאני לעצמי ביען צריך לאדם להיות עושה ומעשה זוכה לעצמו ומזכה לאחרים שלא די לו שהוא בעצמו ילך בדרכי יושר כי צריך לו ג"כ שידריך את אחרים ולכן אמר וכשאני משתדל בעדי להישייר את עצמי מה אני כלומר מה אני עשיתי כלום יצאתי ידי חובתי לא בודאי כי עדיין צריך אני להשתדל להישייר את אחרים באופן כי צריך לאדם לעשות שני דברים הפכיים אל הנוגע לעצמו יחשוב שאינו מוטל על שום אדם להוכיחו ומוכיח אין בלתו ואל הנוגע לאחרים יחשוב שמוטל עליו להוכיח את חברו ואם לאו ישא עליו חטא ואמר ואם לא עכשיו אימתי דכיון שמוטל עלי לעשות שני דברים הללו להשתדל בעדי ובעד אחרים א"כ היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה ולכן אם לא עכשיו אימתי

Judaism does not believe in an "all or nothing" approach. Every command is a unique opportunity for Godliness - and it is independent of every other command. I always say that if a Jew cannot help himself from eating in McDonalds, he should at least try to have a plain burger instead of a cheeseburger. At least he's not having milk with the non-kosher meat. And if you're not going to fast on Yom Kippur, at least try to eat a bit less.

To give a more universal example: It's wrong to steal, but if you steal from someone, at least be nice and give him bus fare home. Doing one bad thing does not mean you should do another - or be an impediment to doing a good thing.

This is not hypocrisy; it is being realistic. Hypocrisy is when you pretend to be something you are not - when you pretend to fast on Yom Kippur even though you are eating in secret. Being realistic means having the realization that no one is perfect. We all make mistakes. If we are waiting to be perfect before we try to be good, we will most likely end up being bad.

The path to God is one that must be "walked." Every step is valuable, every step counts. And two steps back, with one step forward, is better than just two steps back. Being a good person does not mean getting everything right. It means "walking" in the right direction. You may never reach perfection, but you will accomplish a great deal along the way.



Walking the Walk

This week's portion begins, "If you will walk with My statutes." This is a strange turn of phrase - walk with my statutes. I could understand God instructing us to "do" the statutes, or "observe" the statutes. But to *walk* with them?

The explanation is that Torah is about walking. Moving forward at a slow and steady pace - not sitting still, but equally not running. Walking is what gets you to God. If you stand still and wait for Him to come to you, He might not. But equally, if you expect to be able to get where you want overnight, you will also fail. Slow and sure wins the race. Bit by bit, steady, daily growth leads us to Godliness.



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Individualism Vs. Collectivism

If given the choice, would you sacrifice your own goals, dreams, and desires for the sake of your family or the welfare of your group?

Dutch social psychologist, Geert Hofstede, conducted pioneering work in the field of cross-cultural psychology, analyzing the differences between different types of cultures. Two essential elements of his work include characterizing individualist versus collectivist cultures.

Individualist cultures – such as the United States and Western Europe – tend to value independence, autonomy, and uniqueness. In contrast, collectivist cultures – typified by East Asian countries – value group membership and harmony over the expression of one’s personal values or opinions.

Does the Jewish tradition fit into an individualist or a collectivist framework?

One of the classical sources that suggests a collectivist trend within Jewish thought is rooted in the passage of rebuke found in *Parshat Bechukotai*. In what was meant as a haunting description of destruction, the Torah states that

even with no one pursuing them, the Jewish people will run away in such a panic that they will stumble over one another (Vayikra 26:37). In this imagery of people stumbling over each other, the Sages find an allusion to the idea that all of Israel is responsible for one another: “*kol Yisrael areivim ze bazeh*” – each and every Jew is a guarantor for the other. This principle has ramifications for several laws, but also serves as a deeper ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical message of collective responsibility. Through the challenges and the celebrations, we are in this together. That notion generates moral and religious responsibilities towards one another.

Yet, despite this and other indications tending towards categorizing Torah as a collectivist system, we find several individualistic notions within Torah, as well. As an example, every individual is obligated to say, “the world was created for me.” In addition, an individual is not allowed to be sacrificed for the sake of saving the community, and one is obligated to save oneself before saving somebody else.

Not fitting well into either paradigm, it becomes clear that Jewish thought contains both collectivist and individualist impulses. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains in his essay, *The Community*: “The greatness of man manifests itself in his inner contradiction, in his dialectical nature, in his being single and unrelated to anyone, as well as in his being thou-related and belonging to a community structure.” The different sources that push and pull in different directions reflect this tension that requires us to balance the individual and collective components of our natures.



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This blended balance of individualism and collectivism is further reflected in the concept of counting, as related to counting the 50 years until the *Yovel* (Jubilee) and the counting of the weeks and days of the *Omer*. While discussing the laws of *Yovel* in *Parshat Behar*, the verse states in the singular tense, “you should count” – “*ve-safarta lecha*” (*Vayikra* 25:8). The Sages understand this as a directive towards the court. There should be one singular count for the entire population done by the *Beit Din*. When discussing the counting of the *Omer*, there are two different verses, with two distinct tenses used. On the one hand it states that you should count in the singular “*tispor lach*,” (*Devarim* 16:9) but it also states the same idea in the plural “*u-sefartem lachem*” (*Vayikra* 23:15). The Sages learn from this that there is both an obligation for the individual to count as well as a directive for the courts to count on a communal level.

The counting of the *Omer*, rabbinically symbolic of our preparation for receiving the Torah, incorporates the dual elements of individual and communal responsibility. We are both an individualistic and collectivist culture and it is our job to use the guidelines and framework of the Torah to strike a balance between prioritizing ourselves and serving our community.

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