

Jewish Guilt

By: Yanki Tauber

When you build a new house, you shall make a fence for your roof, so that you shall not cause blood [to be spilled] in your house, when he who falls shall fall from it (Deuteronomy 22:8)

Among the many interesting mitzvot enumerated in the Torah reading of *Ki Teitzei* (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19) is the mitzvah of *maakeh*--the commandment to built a fence around one's roof, lest someone fall from it and hurt himself. In its broader application, this includes the prohibition to "raise a dangerous dog, or keep a wobbly ladder in one's home"--to own or maintain in one's possession anything that can cause injury to a fellow (Talmud, Bava Kama 15b).

The commentaries note the curious terminology employed by the Torah--"when he who falls shall fall from it" (*ki yipol hanofel mimenu*). Rashi explains: "Even though this person deserves to fall anyway, you should not be the cause of his injury."

A guy climbs up on my roof in the middle of a snowstorm, decides to do cartwheels on its icy ledge, falls and breaks his nose. I could blame his foolhardiness, I could blame the weather, I could blame G-d (since nothing happens unless G-d wills it); instead, says the Torah, I should hold myself responsible. Given the type of guy we're dealing with here, this was bound to happen anyway; but the very fact that it happened on my roof means that it is my responsibility--it even means that I could have somehow prevented it.

"Jewish guilt" entered American literature half a century ago, and dozens of Woody Allen movies and Bernard Malamud novels later, the idea evokes a caricature of neurotic self-absorption: the Jewish father who, sixty years later, still blames all his son's failings on the fact that he couldn't afford the bicycle his kid wanted for his seventh birthday; the Jewish mother who's convinced that her failure to impress the shul president's wife marked her family as social outcasts for all generations; the Jewish rabbi who believes that all the world's troubles are caused by his own sins. Quite a self-centered, dismal and pessimistic view of the universe.

In truth, it is a self-centered view, but in the most positive sense of the word. And rather than dismal and pessimistic, it is the most encouraging and optimistic perspective of reality in the history of human thought.

Think about it: the notion that we, as creatures of choice, are responsible for all that occurs within our domain also implies that we do have control over what happens there, that our choices and actions do make a difference. The notion that even though my choices and actions overlap only a miniscule area of another person's life, and an even smaller area of human history, what I choose and do will profoundly influence the fate of the guy dancing on my roof, the achievements of the community of which I am a part, and the course of humanity's progress through time. What I choose and do will even make the difference between death and life, between failure and success.

The Rebbe would often say: if you see your fellow Jew traveling down a self-destructive path, and you seek to set him straight but fail, the fault is yours. The reasoning behind this conclusion is both profound and simple. Our sages have declared that "words that come from the heart enter the heart." So if your words did not enter his heart, this can only mean that they were not spoken in complete sincerity. Had you been truly sincere--had you spoken with no objective in mind other than *his* good--your words would have entered his heart and would have had their desired effect.

9 September | 10 Elul

Ki Teitzei

Shabbat Begins: 7:15 pm

Shabbat Ends: 8:15 pm

The guiding principle behind Judaism's perspective on reality is: If G-d has placed me here, that means I can make a difference. The fact that I can make a difference means that it is my responsibility to do so. It also means that I have the power to do so--for G-d does not place a responsibility on me without providing me with the ability to execute it successfully.

We will never be free of "Jewish guilt"--it's hardwired into our Jewish soul, programmed into our spiritual DNA. But how will it blossom in our life? Will it surface as a neurotic, debilitating pessimism, or as an empowering confidence in our ability to effect true change in our lives, the lives of our fellows, and the world as a whole? That, of course, is up to us. And the more we understand the dynamics of this sense of responsibility we carry in our souls--where it comes from and what its purpose is--the better we will be able to actualize to its innately positive function.

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