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### Are We All Responsible?

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The Torah portion of Nitzavim-Vayelekh, Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30, is read on Shabbat, August 31. The call to unity is appealing at any time, but most particularly at times of national crisis. Today we often hear people invoking the Talmud's statement in Tractate Shvu'ot that "All of Israel is responsible for one another." Beyond the slogan, are we prepared to take those words as originally intended, and to bear responsibility for the actions of all individuals who make up our community? Is this a realistic or desirable goal, and if so, can we ask the same of our enemies?

One of the most opaque verses in the Torah addresses the community's or nation's responsibility and culpability for an individual's sins. "Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; but with revealed acts, it is for us and for our children until eternity to apply all the provisions of this Teaching" (Deuteronomy 29:28). Most interpretations understand "concealed acts" as sins that an individual commits in private, actions of which the community is entirely unaware. "Revealed acts" are overt sins, committed in the community's presence.

In the scribal tradition of copying the Torah scroll, dots are placed with no explicit reason above 11 letters of the words "for us and for our children until eternity." Seeking a meaning, the Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin explains the dots as hinting at a change with regard to the community's culpability for individual sin after the nation enters the Land of Israel. The last dotted letter, the ayin of "ad," "until," indicates that until the Israelites entered the land, there was a lighter standard. Once they entered, new rules and higher standards would apply.

That agreed, a dispute arose over the specifics of the change. Rabbi Yehudah held that God did not punish the nation for the concealed sins of the individual until they crossed the Jordan. Rabbi Nehemiah, however, held that God never punishes the nation for individuals' private sins. Rather, the verse teaches that the nation was not punished even for overt sins of the individual until the people of Israel crossed the Jordan. But from that moment, if the community did not punish the individual for overt sins, God would punish the community. Increased responsibility comes with entering the land and establishing national sovereignty. Living in a framework of government provides the collective with the power of enforcement. National autonomy, it turns out, reduces personal autonomy. Once a nation is living in its land, the sin of the individual also becomes the sin of the collective.

Today, in Western society, we tend to separate the failings of an individual from those of society. While we may occasionally make sociological observations about the relationship between the individual's actions and trends in society, we rarely use a person's independent acts to render judgment on the entire collective. We may be willing to attribute a growing rate of incarceration to societal breakdown, but rarely do we look upon individual criminal acts as providing a basis for communal guilt. Often, Diaspora Jews have argued against guilt by association. We have claimed that we bear no greater responsibility for the crimes of a fellow Jew than we do for anyone else's errors.

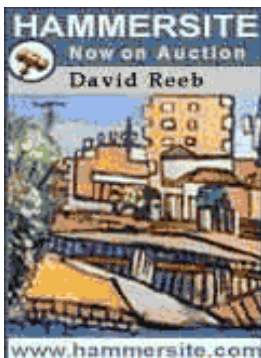
Even in Israel, a shared communal responsibility that should complement commitment to democracy and free speech has at times been obscured. It appears, though, that the Talmudic sources embrace an even more communitarian perspective. The conceptual difference between our two Talmudic sages is not whether the community should be held responsible for the sins of individuals, but rather the degree to which it should be held responsible. The "liberal" by modern standards, Rabbi Nehemiah, asserts that the community is only responsible for the sins of an individual when that person commits them publicly. The "conservative," Rabbi Yehudah, holds that the community is responsible for sins that the individual commits privately, even when it is

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not in the position of being able to stop them.

While the Talmudic discussion treats the strange scribal markings - the dots above the words - as emphasizing new stringencies enacted upon entering the Land of Israel, Avot Derabbi Natan, the Talmudic-era commentary on Pirkei Avot, understands them as a series of question marks. Is the verse recorded correctly in our Torah? Ezra the Scribe, living at the time of the return from Babylon, is said to have placed dots above letters of the Torah text so that when the prophet Elijah comes, if he asks, "Why did you write the verse in this way?" Ezra can reply that he was indicating his own uncertainty. If, however, Elijah announces that the verse was written accurately, Ezra will remove the dots.

Our own uncertainty mirrors Ezra's. We too aren't quite sure that an entire nation should or can be held responsible for the acts of every individual in it. If such responsibility is appropriate, how far does it extend? Perhaps, the collective is responsible only when the community's culture contributes in some way to the sin. Or is the nation required to promote a kind of unity in which the individual becomes an extension of the nation's ideals? What is the appropriate response to failures of collective responsibility - by us or by our enemies? We need you now, Elijah, to solve all of our difficulties and questions.

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