

Silence, In the Face of a Tragedy, is a Crime All Its Own

It Is Not Enough to Be Good; We Have to Stand Up for Good

Summary:

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Altar, known as the first Gerer Rebbe, the Chidushei HaRim, was perturbed by the explanation that the Levites were counted from one month old due to their refusal to worship the Golden Calf. Surely, he argues, there were many others who did not serve the Golden Calf. Why, then, was only the entire tribe of Levi singled out to serve in the Sanctuary and subsequently in the Holy Temple? Why didn't G-d select anyone who did not serve the idol? Why base it on tribe, rather than on personal virtue?

The answer is simple, and it teaches us what it takes to be a leader and one of the key differences between Western and Jewish morality. The story of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's leaving his prestigious Rabbinic post for the sake of nine families, demonstrates to us the definition of activism, leadership and caring in the Jewish tradition.

The Value of Work

Yankel of Chelm was always very busy and was always tired. He always told his friends that when he retires, he will finally have time to rest. When the time of retirement came, he was very excited.

A few days later, his friend sees him walking around town yawning loudly. When asked why he is still so tired, Yankel responds: "When you are not working, you don't have opportunities to take a break!"

A Shooting in Chicago

Twenty-two years ago, On May 16, 1998 in Chicago, 15-year-old Christopher Sercye was shot twice in the chest while playing basketball on a playground close to the Ravenswood Hospital. With the help of two friends, the boy made it to within thirty feet of the hospital entrance. When Christopher collapsed, almost at the hospital door, his friends ran in to get help, but the emergency-room staff refused to come out. Hospital policy was that they should not leave the hospital because, as the explanation later indicated, of fear of possible legal liability for neglecting patients already in the hospital. But going thirty feet outside the hospital is not much different for staff than going thirty feet inside. As Christopher lay bleeding on the sidewalk, a policeman begged the staff to come out. But the hospital staff refused to budge and instead placed a call to 911. Christopher lay on the sidewalk for twenty-five minutes before a police sergeant arrived and commandeered a wheelchair to bring him in. The boy died shortly afterward.

What is astounding is that the emergency room personnel did not violate any laws. In most of the United States, there is no legal obligation to help someone in danger. (Chicago has since then considered adopting a "Good Samaritan" law which would require bystanders to provide help to victims of crimes and accidents.)

Sandy Tragedy

Then, there was the sickening story which occurred on October 29, 2012, during the Sandy Hurricane.

Glenda Moore, a young mother, was heading to drop off her boys, Brandon, 2 and Connor, 4, at a relative's house before her nursing shift. A sudden surge of water sent wave upon wave of flood water pounding their SUV in the middle of a Staten Island street, tossing the vehicle into a nearby marshy area.

The terrified mom managed to free both boys from their car seats, even as the water flipped their vehicle on its side. She approached a tree and held on to the trunk with her life, gripping both of her kids in her arms, as the surging waters were pounding down. Glenda Moore, a powerful swimmer, stood there for hours holding on to her kids. But she saw that soon she will lose her desperate struggle with Mother Nature.

She ran up to a nearby home. Glenda, holding her two babies, related to the police, that she approached the door of the home, she saw a man inside, and she knocked on the door. The man opened the door; Glenda pleaded with the man to let her enter till the storm subsided. The man refused.

She ran with the children to the porch in back of the home, trying to break the window to enter the home. She took a flowerpot, threw it at the window in order to break it; but to no success. As she stood there on the porch, frantically attempting to force her way in, the waves just kept coming and crashing and began covering their heads. She held her children tightly, till a wave came and swept them out of her arms. Two days later they were found floating in the waters, lifeless.

Could this monster be charged as a criminal? No. Legally, you cannot be charged for refusing to help somebody in an emergency. Even if you close the door on a mother with two babies, allowing them to die, you are not deemed a criminal.

What would Judaism say about this situation?

The Count

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The weekly Torah portion Bamidbar, commencing the book of Numbers, begins with the Torah's command to take a census of the Jewish Nation. Each male over twenty years old from every tribe was to be counted. (It was a census of basically everyone who could join the army, males from 20 to 60.) The Torah enumerated in detail the number of those individuals for every respected tribe, Reuven, Shimon, Judah, Naftali, etc.

However, the reader will immediately notice that there was one exception, the tribe of Levi was singled out to remain uncounted in the national census. Levi was counted separately and differently. Its children were counted from a month old as opposed to twenty years old.

Why did the tribe of Levi merit such distinctive treatment? Isn't this discriminating between one tribe and another? Why don't we include their number with the rest of the community?

The Midrash and Rashi¹ explain that G-d specially designated them. They were considered as the "King's special legions," the Royal Army of G-d. During the tragic event of the Golden Calf, when so many of their fellow Jews served the idol, the tribe of Levi was stalwart in its opposition. Thus, Levi was chosen to serve in the Temple in the place of the first-borns, who were originally designated to perform the service. The Midrash quotes G-d as saying, "the Levites made themselves close to me, and I will be close to them."

But Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (1799-1866), the first Rebbe of Ger known as the Chidushei HaRim, was perturbed by this explanation.² Not everyone served this idol, only around three thousand.³ Why, then, was only the entire tribe of Levi singled out to serve in the Sanctuary and subsequently in the Holy Temple? Why didn't G-d select anyone who did not serve in the Golden Calf regardless the tribe? Why base it on tribe, rather than on personal virtue?

What It Takes to Be a Leader

The answer is simple and profoundly relevant. The tribe of Levi did much more than passively not serve the idol. When Moses, in the aftermath of the creation and worship of the Golden Calf, cried out, "Who is for G-d? Let them gather to me!" The Torah testifies that "all the children of Levi gathered by him."⁴ The only collective group who responded were the Levites.

Many Jews may have refrained from worshipping the Golden Calf, but when Moses proclaimed "Who is for G-d? Let them gather to me!" the others remained silent. They were ready to do the right thing, but they were not ready to stand up and fight for the right thing. They were ready to silently be good, but they were not ready to take a stand and declare war against bloodshed, idolatry, and adultery (which were practiced during the orgy of the Golden Calf.) Only those who stood up and protested against the heinous crimes during the

Golden Calf debacle were capable of becoming spiritual leaders of the nation, the ambassadors of G-d in the Holy Temple.

This was not a punishment; it was a demonstration of reality. To be a leader you can't only choose to do the right thing in the privacy of your own domain; you must be ready to stand up and cry out against injustice; you have to be ready to fight publically for truth. If not, you are incapable of leadership.

Even if most of the people are silent, you must be ready to stand up for what is right. Bill Clinton once said that "running a country is a lot like running a cemetery; you've got a lot of people under you and nobody's listening". (in a speech at Galesburg)

Between Western and Jewish Morality

In Western society, there is a concept called an "innocent bystander." In Jewish law, if you just stand by, you are not innocent. In American society, you're guilty for doing "something." In Jewish law, you're guilty for doing nothing.

"Lo taamod al dam reacha," Leviticus states.⁵ "Do not stand idle by your brother's blood." Remaining passive or neutral is not an option.

It has been said that there are three types of people in this world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those whom you must tell what is happening.

The triumph of evil does not occur because of the perpetrators of evil alone; it happens because of the many ordinary men and women who don't care enough or are too afraid to stand up for what is right. "For evil to flourish, it only requires good men to do nothing," is as true as it gets.

When ordinary people of good moral standing lose the courage or willingness to protest injustice, morality is dead. When multitudes of people of moral stature do not feel an urgent responsibility to combat the flames of hate and evil burning in their society, evil flourishes.

This is true concerning every crisis—physical or spiritual—that faces our people and communities today. When good people do not speak out about child abuse, domestic violence, women trapped by ruthless men who refuse to give a divorce; when rabbis avoid taking a strong stand on their followers disobeying instructions of health officials to save lives during a pandemic—we allow innocent people to suffer.

Leaders must profess the courage to speak up. Silence, in the face of a tragedy, is a crime all its own.

The Levites

It was for this reason that only the tribe of Levi received the privilege of representing holiness and serving in the Temple. While silence may sometimes remove the cloak of culpability from your shoulders, it will never crown you with the strength of leadership.

Think about it: Till this very day, the Kohanim and Levites—all descendants of the Levite tribe—contain a unique holiness and status among our holy people, all because of a single event that transpired 3333 years ago when they chose not to remain silent to Moses' cry "Who is for G-d?"

This is a powerful lesson. Sometimes there are occasions in life where the clarion call goes out to rally around G-d's banner—the banner of Torah, of justice, morality, goodness and holiness. If upon hearing that call, one rises to the occasion, his actions can have ramifications until the end of time. If one fails to heed the call and does not respond, that too can affect not only that person, but also his children and his grandchildren, for all generations.

G-d Weighs

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), was the renowned leader, commentator and activist on behalf of German Jewry in the mid-1800s.

In 1830, he was appointed as the chief rabbi of Oldenburg, a respected rabbinic position. He served there for eleven years, after which he became the chief rabbi of the illustrious community of Moravia.

In 1851 he was asked by a handful of Jewish Torah observant families in Frankfurt, Germany to assist them in combating the strong opposition and struggle they were facing from the newly and radical reform movement which had its headquarters in Germany.

Rabbi Hirsch heeded their call and left his eminent position to take up the new post. He served as their rabbi for 37 years until his passing in 1888. He built an extraordinary Jewish community and institutions which flourished beyond the scope of anyone's imagination. The community is still known today as the "Yekke community" with its headquarters in Washington Heights, NY.

When asked why he left one of the largest Rabbinic positions in Europe to join nine struggling families in Frankfurt he is reputed to have answered a profound response.

To appreciate his answer, a small introduction is necessary. In the book of Exodus,⁶ G-d commands Moses to count the Jews. How? By each Jew contributing a coin known as a half-

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shekel—a specific weight of silver (around 7 grams of silver or .22 troy ounces of silver)—and then they counted these coins.

When Rabbi Hirsh was asked why he left such a large community in numbers, in order to assist nine small families who were fighting for their Jewish life with profound courage, he responded:

"G-d doesn't count Jews. He weighs them."⁷

¹ Numbers 1:49

² Chidusei HaRim, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Altar, Parshas Bamidbar

³ The Torah states that 3,000 were killed by the Levites, since they worshipped with witnesses who first warned them. But there were others who died from drinking the water and from the plague.

⁴ Exodus 32:26.

⁵ Leviticus 19:16

⁶ Exodus 30:12

⁷ My thanks to Rabbi Nir Gurevitch (Serfers Paradise, Australia) for his help with this essay.