
TAISING RESPONSIBILITY

Sechar V'Onesh

We learned in the two Morasha classes on free will that this principle lies at the foundation of Judaism. When God created man He granted him the ability to freely choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood, right and wrong. In this class, we will discuss the most basic corollary of free will: taking responsibility.

Taking responsibility extends beyond ourselves to incorporate our families, our nation, humanity, and the entire universe, applying to both the physical and spiritual realms.

Accountability for our decisions is the natural outgrowth of taking responsibility. The system of reward and punishment serves as a powerful reminder of the consequences of the responsibility we have to use our free will in the correct way.

This class will examine the following ideas:

- ~ What responsibilities do we, as Jews, have to the world?
- ~ What responsibilities do we, as Jews, have to one another?
- ~ How does Judaism view someone who shirks his responsibilities?
- ~ Are we accountable for our actions?
- ~ Does a Jewish leader have more responsibility than ordinary people?
- ~ How does the system of reward and punishment help us to live up to our potential?

Class Outline

- Section I: Responsibility for the Physical World
- Section II: Responsibility for the Spiritual World
- Section III: Irresponsibility of the Wicked
- Section IV: Responsibility of Israel for One Another
- Section V: Special Responsibility of Leaders
- Section VI: Reward and Punishment

SECTION I: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PHYSICAL WORLD

Judaism teaches us to assume responsibility for our selves, our families, our environment, and our future.

1. **Shemot (Exodus) 20:13 – Principles of responsibility.**

You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your fellow.

לא תרצח. לא תנאף. לא תגנוב. לא תענה ברעך עד שקר.

2. **Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah 7:19 – Responsibility for the environment.**

“Observe God’s doing! For who can straighten what He has twisted?” When God created Adam, He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden. He told him: “Behold how pleasant and beautiful and excellent are My deeds – and all that I have created, I have created for you. Beware, that you should not ruin and destroy My world.”

בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי.

3. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 20:19 – Preserving the trees.**

When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down.

כי תצור אל עיר ימים רבים להלחם עליה לתפשה לא תשחית את עצה לנדח עליו גרזן כי ממנו תאכל ואתו לא תכרת....

4. **Sefer HaChinuch 529 – The virtuous do not waste anything.**

The way of the virtuous and the righteous is to love peace, to rejoice in the well-being of others, and to draw them closer to Torah. Furthermore, they will not waste even a single grain of mustard, and will be distressed by every loss and destruction that they see, and whenever possible will do their utmost to save whatever they can from being destroyed.

וזהו דרך החסידים ואנשי מעשה אוהבים שלום ושמחים בטוב הבריות ומקרבים אותן לתורה, ולא יאבדו אפילו גרגר של חרדל בעולם, ויצר עליהם בכל אבדון והשחתה שיראו, ואם יוכלו להציל יצילו כל דבר מהשחית בכל כחם,

5. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Shabbat 140b – Preserving oneself takes priority.**

Rav Papa taught, “Someone who is able to drink beer, yet drinks wine, transgresses the prohibition of ‘You shall not cause unnecessary waste [*ba’al tashchit*].” But this is not correct, since preserving one’s physical state takes precedence.

ואמר רב פפא האי מאן דאפשר למישתי שיכרא ושתי חמרא עובר משום בל תשחית ולאו מילתא היא בל תשחית דגופא עדיף.

[I.e., one should not seek environmental economy – drinking cheap beer rather than expensive wine – at the expense of one's physical health. Otherwise, however, one must seek the greatest economy vis-à-vis the environment.]

6. **Shemot 21:10 – Responsibility for one's wife.**

He may not diminish her [his wife's] food, her clothing, or marital relationships.

שארה כסותה ועונתה לא יגרע

7. **Talmud Bavli, Chulin 91a – Responsibility for one's property.**

“Yaakov (Jacob) remained alone.” Rabbi Elazar taught that he remained in order to retrieve small vessels [that had been left behind].

ויותר יעקב לבדו אמר רבי אלעזר שנשתייר על פכין קטנים.

8. **Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim 7 – Responsibility for the future.**

God told Israel, “Even though you find [the Land] full of goodness, do not say, ‘We will dwell and will not plant,’ rather, be diligent to plant, as it is written, ‘You shall plant all fruit trees.’ Just as you entered, and found the Land full of vegetation that others planted, so you should plant for your children's sake ...” It is told of King Adrianus ... that he saw an elderly man planting a fig tree. The king asked him, “You are old, why are you toiling for others?” The man answered him, “My Lord the King, I am planting – if I will merit it, I will live and eat the fruit; and if not, my sons will eat them.”

אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל אע"פ שתמצאו אותה מליאה כל טוב לא תאמרו נשב ולא נטע אלא הווי זהירין בנטיעות שנאמר ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל כשם שנכנסתם ומצאתם נטיעות שנטעו אחרים אף אתם היו נוטעים לבניכם מעשה באנדרינוס המלך ... ומצא זקן אחד שהיה נוטע נטיעה של תאנים, אמר לו אנדרינוס אתה זקן וטורח ומתיגע לאחרים, אמר לו אדוני המלך הריני נוטע אם אזכה ואחיה אוכל מפירות נטיעתי ואם לאו יאכלו בני.

SECTION II: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

In addition to the responsibility that man bears for his own physical well-being and that of his surroundings, he is commanded to ensure the spiritual well-being of the world. On the simplest level, this is achieved through the learning and dissemination of Torah so that man knows the instructions by which he is supposed to live.

The world was created in a way that left it flawed, and man has the opportunity and responsibility to rectify it and bring it to its completed form. The performance of mitzvot helps to achieve this, while sin distances us from this goal. We have been given free will to enable us to fulfill our responsibility to build the world's spiritual core.

1. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 245 – Responsibility for spiritual well-being of oneself and one's family.

It is a positive commandment to teach one's child Torah; if a person's father did not teach him, he must teach himself.

מצות עשה על האיש ללמד את בנו תורה ואם לא למדו אביו חייב ללמד לעצמו.

2. Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 40b – Spiritual responsibility for the world.

A person should always regard himself as though he were exactly balanced between merit and guilt – if he does one good deed, he tips the scales to the side of merit; if he performs one sin he tips the scales to the side of guilt ... Because the world is judged according to the majority [of its citizens] and the individual is judged according to the majority [of his deeds], if a person does one good deed, fortunate is he, for he has determined that both he and the entire world will be judged to be meritorious; and if he performs one sin, woe unto him, for he has determined that both he and the entire world will be judged to be guilty.

לעולם יראה אדם עצמו כאילו חציו חייב וחציו זכאי עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע עצמו לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו לכף חובה ... לפי שהעולם נידון אחר רובו והיחיד נידון אחר רובו עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה.

3. Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 68b – The Torah grants continued existence to the world.

Without the Torah, the heavens and the earth would not exist, as it is written, "If My covenant with the night and with the day would not be; had I not set up the laws of heaven and earth."

אילמלא תורה לא נתקיימו שמים וארץ שנאמר אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חקות שמים וארץ לא שמת.

4. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 1:3 – Responsibility for higher worlds.

God created man, and appointed him to rule over myriad powers and countless spiritual worlds. He entrusted them to man, that he should lead and direct them by means of his deeds, words, and thoughts, and by all of his actions, whether good or bad. For through man's positive deeds, words and thoughts, he strengthens the spiritual power of elevated holy worlds, and gives them sanctity and spiritual light.

ברא הוא יתב' את האדם והשליטו על רבי רבוון כחות ועולמות אין מספר. ומסרם בידו שיהא הוא המדבר והמנהיג אותם עפ"י כל פרטי תנועות מעשיו ודבוריו ומחשבותיו. וכל סדרי הנהגותיו. הן לטוב. או להיפך ח"ו. כי במעשיו ודבוריו ומחשבותיו הטובי' הוא מקיים ונותן כח בכמה כחות ועולמות עליונים הקדושים. ומוסיף בהם קדושה ואור.

SECTION III: IRRESPONSIBILITY OF THE WICKED

In contrast to the responsibility that the righteous take upon themselves, the wicked shirk all responsibility off their shoulders. To the great detriment of humanity, the world, and – ultimately – their own selves, they think only of their own worldly pleasure and gain. God does not allow the world to be destroyed by the evil of the wicked – He will not bring another Great Flood – yet, the wicked will pay the penalty for their deeds.

1. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 22:23 – The attitude of the irresponsible man.

Eat and drink, for tomorrow we will die.

אכל ושתה כי מחר נמות.

2. Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 54b – The enduring world.

The world continues to function in its normal manner; the wicked, who caused ruin, are destined to give judgment in the future.

עולם כמנהגו נוהג ושוטים שקלקלו עתידין ליתן את הדין.

3. Sefer HaChinuch 529 – The consequence of evil.

Not so the wicked, brothers of destruction, who are content with the demise of the world. They destroy themselves: “A person is dealt with in the same manner that he acts.”

ולא כן הרשעים אחיהם של מזיקין שמחים בהשחתת עולם והמה משחיתים, במדה שאדם מודד בה מודדין לו.

4. Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 33:1 – Good is stronger than evil.

Just as these mountains are sown and give rise to fruit, so the deeds of the righteous bear fruit, as it is written, “Tell the righteous that it is good, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds” (Yeshayahu 3:10). And just as this chasm has no bottom, so the suffering of the wicked is bottomless, as it is written, “But woe to the wicked who does evil, for the recompense of his hands will be dealt to him” (Ibid. 11). Just as this chasm is not sown, and does not bear fruit, so the deeds of the wicked do not bear fruit – for if they would do so, they would destroy the world.

ומה הרים הללו נזרעים ועושים פירות כך מעשיהם של צדיקים עושים פירות הה"ד (ישעיה ג) אמרו צדיק כי טוב וגו' ומה תהום זה אין לו חקר כך אין לפורענותן של רשעים חקר הה"ד (שם) אוי לרשע רע ומה התהום הזה לא נזרע ולא עושה פירות כך אין מעשיהן של רשעים עושין פירות שאילו היו עושין פירות היו מחריבין את העולם.

SECTION IV: RESPONSIBILITY OF ISRAEL FOR ONE ANOTHER

A special unity binds together the members of the Jewish nation. At Mount Sinai, when the nation gathered to receive the Torah, the people are described as being “As one man, with one heart.” This unity, in which every individual of the nation is considered to be an individual limb of a single body, obligates us with a special responsibility: To care for our fellow, just as we care for our own selves.

The most basic expressions of this responsibility are the acts of charity and kindness that we are commanded to perform. On a deeper level, our fellow’s spiritual concern must be our own concern – another’s sin should be as disturbing and distressing to us as our own, and we must seek to rectify it, in whatever way possible. One who does not appreciate this special responsibility, neglects a fundamental principle of the Torah.

1. Talmud Bavli, Shavuot 39a – Communal responsibility.

All Jews are responsible for one another.

כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה.

2. Bereishit Rabbah 24:7 – Love your neighbor.

Rabbi Akiva taught: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a great principle of the Torah.

אמר רבי עקיבא, ואהבת לרעך כמוך, זה כלל גדול בתורה

3. Rambam (Maimonides), Book of Mitzvot, Mitzvat Asei 205 – Caring about others.

This is the commandment to rebuke someone who sins, or is about to sin, and prevent him from doing so with words and reproof. And one should not say, “I myself will not sin, so if someone else does, why should I care what judgment he will receive from God?” for this is the diametric opposite of the Torah.

היא שצונו להוכיח החוטא או מי שירצה לחטוא ולמנוע אותו ממונו במאמר ותוכחה ואין ראוי לנו שיאמר אחד ממונו אני לא אחטא ואם יחטא זולתי מה לי דינו עם א-להיו זה הפך התורה.

4. Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah 5:6 – The nation of Israel is like one body.

“Israel is a scattered sheep” (Yeshayahu 50). Israel is compared to a sheep. Just as when one of the limbs of a sheep is hurt all of its limbs feel the pain, so too when one individual within Israel sins, all of the Jewish people feel it.

שה פזורה ישראל נמשלו ישראל לשה מה שה הוזה לוקה על ראשו או בא' מאבריו וכל אבריו מרגישין כך הן ישראל אחד מהן חוטא וכולן מרגישין.

SECTION V: SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF LEADERS

The greater the level reached by a particular individual, the greater is his range of responsibility. Whereas an ordinary person has little direct influence over the entire nation, a king (or any other head of state) has obvious influence over all of his subjects, and his responsibility is therefore much greater.

From a Torah perspective, the leaders of the generation are its spiritual leaders, i.e. the Torah scholars, whose rulings are followed by the people. The greater the responsibility of a particular individual, the greater the Divine assistance he receives in order to meet the challenge of his responsibility.

1. Talmud Bavli, Mo'ed Katan 6a – Extended responsibility of the Torah scholar.

A Torah scholar who lives in the town – all matters pertaining to the town are placed upon his shoulders.

צורבא מרבנן דאיכא במתא כל מיילי דמתא עליה רמיא

2. Ibid., 5a – Responsibility of the city elders for a case of murder.

The elders of that town [in which a murdered person was found] wash their hand with water in the place in which the calf is killed and declare: “Our hands did not spill this blood, and our eyes did not see.” Would we think that the elders of the *Beit Din* are killers? Rather, [by saying this they mean] that he did not come to them (for food) and they rejected him, nor did they see him and just leave him (without an escort).

זקני אותה העיר רוחצין את ידיהן במים במקום עריפה של עגלה ואומרים ידינו לא שפכה את הדם הזה ועינינו לא ראו וכי על דעתינו עלתה שזקני ב"ד שופכי דמים הן אלא שלא בא על ידינו ופטרנוהו (בלא מזון) ולא ראינוהו והנחנוהו (בלא לוייה).

3. Avodas HaKodesh 3:4 – Jewish leaders were shepherds.

“Moshe (Moses) and David, of blessed memory.” The Midrash relates that David was tested with sheep to see if he was suitable [to be a leader], and [God] found him to be a worthy shepherd. And God also tested Moshe with sheep. This was to see whether they were able to shepherd Israel, God's sheep ...

ומשה ודוד ע"ה, כבר אמרו בואלה שמות רבה פרשה ב', בדק לדוד בצאן ומצאו רועה יפה וכו'. ואף משה, לא בחנו הקב"ה אלא בצאן וכו'. והכל לתכלית רעות ישראל צאן מרעיתו...

4. Mishlei (Proverbs) 21:1 – The heart of kings.

Like streams of water is the heart of a king in the hand of God, wherever He wishes, so He directs it.

פלגי מים לב מלך ביד ה' על כל אשר יחפץ יטבו.

SECTION VI: REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

As mentioned in the Overview, accountability is a simple consequence of responsibility: Above every position of responsibility looms the reality of accountability. Fittingly, as responsibility grows, so does accountability. God is more exacting with individuals who have greater responsibility than with those who have less.

All governments and social orders have systems of reward and punishment that help preserve the principles of justice and motivate people to uphold the ideals that the society values. According to the Torah, however, the concept of reward and punishment extends far beyond the idea of deterrents and incentives. Choosing good earns one eternal reward, whereas evil is punished – not as a punishment per se, but in order to cleanse the evildoer of his iniquity. This system ensures that man will benefit in the next, eternal, world by receiving reward for his good deeds, and retribution/cleansing for his wrong-doings.

On a still deeper level, reward and punishment are a direct consequence of the deed itself. In a spiritual sense, every good deed makes a real, positive impact on the world, which itself is the reward for the deed, as the Talmud states, “The reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah.”

1. **Rambam, The Thirteen Principles of Faith, Principle 11 – Reward and punishment.**

I believe, with complete faith, that the Creator, blessed is His Name, rewards those who observe His commandments, and punishes those who violate His commandments.

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה. שהבורא יתברך שמו גומל טוב לשומרי מצותיו ומעניש לעוברי מצותיו:

2. **Talmud Bavli, Bava Kama 50a – God overlooks nothing.**

Anyone who says that God overlooks, his life is overlooked.

כל האומר הקב"ה ותרן, יוותרו חייו

3. **Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 39b – Reward is reserved for the World to Come.**

There is no reward for mitzvot in this world. [It is reserved for the eternal World to Come.]

שכר מצוות בהאי עלמא ליכא

4. **Mishnah, Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:22 – The more we input, the more we receive.**

The reward is proportional to the difficulty [of performing the mitzvah].

לפום צערא אגרא

5. **Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 121b – God is more exacting with those who are closer.**

God is exacting with those close to Him to the degree of a hairsbreadth.

הקב"ה מדקדק עם סביביו כחוט השערה

6. **Ramchal(Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Adir Bamarom – Punishment in the Afterlife is a natural consequence of sin.**

The purity of the soul is achieved either through Gehinnom, or by means of repentance. This is because each type of thing is attracted to its own kind. Therefore, the soul needs to descend into Gehinnom, so that the filth of evil should depart from it, and it is then able to cling to its [holy] source.

מהרת הנשמה היא או על ידי גיהנם או על ידי תשובה. והוא כי כל זינא אזיל לזיניה, ונמצא שצריכה הנשמה לרדת בגיהנם עד שהזוהמא תפרד ממנה ותדבק בשורשה.

7. **Ramchal, Kinas Hashem Tzevakos – The mitzvah and its reward are one and the same.**

From the depth of His wisdom, God enacted a true wonder, by which it will be known that it is a Divine deed, which no other could perform: The world, the mitzvah, and reward and punishment – all are one, unified matter, indivisible from one another ... Thus, it emerges that the Creator created these as a single unified entity, and not as several distinct entities, because it is the hallmark of wisdom to refrain from multiplicity wherever possible.

מעומק עצת החכמה היה לעשות דבר נפלא, אשר יודע כי המעשה מעשה אלקים הוא, וזולתו לא יוכל עשיהו כלל לעשות, הבריאה, המצוה, השכר והעונש - הכל ענין אחד הוא, אשר לא ימצא זה בלא זה ... עד שנמצא, שלא המציא הממציא רק מציאות אחת, ולא מציאויות רבות, כי ממשפט החכמה להתרחק מן הריבוי אם אינו מוכרח.