

# Individual/Communal Interplay

Rabbi Sarah Bassin

Nitzavim/Vayelech

12 September 2020/23 Elul 5780

Deuteronomy 29:18

וְהָיָה בְּשִׁמְעוֹ אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֵּאת וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה־לִּי  
כִּי בִשְׂרָרוֹת לִבִּי אֵלַךְ לְמַעַן סְפוֹת הַרְוָה אֶת־הַצְּמָאָה:

When such a one hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself immune, thinking, “I shall be safe, though I follow my own willful heart”—to the utter ruin of moist and dry alike. (Jewish Publication Society)

When such a person hears the words of this oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way,” they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. (New International Version)

And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this oath, that he bless himself in his lev, saying, Shalom be with me, though I walk in the stubbornness of mine lev—thus the quenched should be added to the thirsty. (Orthodox Jewish Bible)

לְמַעַן סְפוֹת הַרְוָה אֶת־הַצְּמָאָה:

## The Positive Take:

Da’at Z’kanim -- “so that the irrigated will be swept away with the dry;” [the sinner’s logic is that on account of one single sinner G–d will not withhold blessings such as rain from a whole community.]

Rabbeinu Bahya -- The person concerned is under the mistaken impression that he will be a beneficiary of the merit accumulated by the many people who do observe the Torah and have forsworn any form of idolatry.

## The Negative Take:

Chizkuni- “the irrigated plants will be swept away with the dried out ones.” He feels that if the community has sinned and God will punish them, it makes no difference that he adds a few extra sins which he as an individual indulges in. We can perhaps understand this logic as the deluge swept away everyone and they could not all have been equally guilty.

This idiom is puzzling. It seems to express the inevitable destructive consequences to the righteous as well as to the sinner. (Women’s Torah Commentary)

## **The Neutral Take**

*Redeeming Relevance; Deuteronomy:* Its words speak of a communal listening predicated on its internalization by each individual member. For that internalization to happen, each individual must feel that the message is directed specifically to him or her, and that it is not just a general mandate for the Jewish people as a whole.

## **In Defense of Individualism**

Diffusion of responsibility occurs when people who need to make a decision wait for someone else to act instead. The more people involved, the more likely it is that each person will do nothing, believing someone else from the group will probably respond. Psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané set up an experiment where a distress call made it appear that a person nearby had suffered an injury. When subjects heard the cry, and thought they were the only ones who heard it, 85% of them helped. But if subjects thought there was another person who heard the call too, only 62% helped. And if subjects thought that four other people also heard the cry for help, just 31% took action. Diffusion of responsibility makes people feel less pressure to act because they believe, correctly or incorrectly, that someone else will do so. And, when we don't feel responsible for a situation, we feel less guilty when we do nothing to help. <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/diffusion-of-responsibility>

## **When Individualism Runs Amok**

In response to criticisms of new tax regulations passed by Congress, conservative writer and radio host Erick Erickson wrote on Twitter: "The Bible teaches it is an individual responsibility to help the poor. Shame on those who'd pass off their personal obligation to the government." Unfortunately for them, it's a sentiment that God has promised to judge harshly (Exod 22:21-27). One of the Bible's most pervasive and defining claims is that the community is responsible for the welfare of all who reside in it—particularly the poor and vulnerable. The Bible's idea of justice doesn't ignore individual responsibility. It goes far beyond it.

In fact, ancient Israel stood out among its ancient Near Eastern neighbors *precisely because* its legal traditions assume that the entire community is responsible for the welfare of the poor and vulnerable. In the epilogue to the Code of Hammurabi, the king of Babylon pledges to take care of the widow and the orphan—yet those vulnerable people are not protected by the body of the law code itself. In the Law of Moses, by contrast, the widow and orphan are explicitly protected by legislation (Exod 22:22) and given economic provision in the law code (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:17-21). Moses also mentions "the poor" (Exod 22:25; 23:6, 11) and "the aliens" (Exod 23:9; Deut 24:14), classes of people not even considered in any other ancient Near Eastern law code. While ancient Babylonians certainly considered it a nice thing to take care of vulnerable people, they never legislated it. For them, taking care of the vulnerable was a matter of personal responsibility, and the community should be left out of it.

[www.huffpost.com/entry/biblical-responsibility-for-the-poor-individual-or\\_b\\_5a24ef7de4b0545e64bf94c2](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/biblical-responsibility-for-the-poor-individual-or_b_5a24ef7de4b0545e64bf94c2)