

FOR WHOM ARE WE RESPONSIBLE?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Core Purpose & Mission

TriBEs are about small groups of people that are learning together through the pursuit of Jewish wisdom; praying together and developing personal spiritual practices and inspiring worship that uplifts the soul and connects to God; Acting together through ongoing significant acts of loving kindness and world repair; Playing together in fun social settings where people can relax, laugh, and be ourselves; Caring for each other by valuing and supporting one another in times of joy and sorrow; and are Accountable to each other through shared leadership that serves the best interests of the individual and community.



Blessing

As we gather in our TriBE, may we honor the values of our Jewish tradition. May we bring compassion, insight, and wisdom to our presence with each other through learning and dialogue. May we recognize the Divine Image in one another, and let that awareness be reflected in our words and actions.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzi-vanu la'asok b'tzorkhay tzibur.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of All, who has made us holy with your mitzvot and instructed us to engage deeply with our community.

Brit

Before we begin, let's review the brit (covenant) that enriches our time together.



ASK & SHARE

Welcome, and thank you for joining this conversation. Please think about this question: When you hear the word ‘responsibility,’ is there a person or story that comes to mind? Take a moment, and share when you’re ready. You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

LEARN

“If am not for myself, who will be for me? When I am for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” Hillel the Elder, the first-century rabbinic sage, was famous for asking these questions. At the heart of them is our question: For whom are we responsible? Can we expect anyone else to be responsible for us? If we are only responsible for ourselves, what does that make us?

In the poem on the next page, the main character deals with all these questions. We’ll read it together, and then have a chance to discuss it.

Okay
By Lowell Jaeger

There's a man in the road, waving.
We're driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.

He's holding something bundled
in his arms. Don't stop, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, He's
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview

are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry. This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers, everything's
locked up. I'm thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over
to let the man and dog out. You better call
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
to be the man she hopes I am. I don't
know what's okay and what's not. The man
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.
I feel a lot like that.

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As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What's going on in the poem? Can you summarize the action?
- How does the driver understand to whom and for what he is responsible?
- Are there people he feels more responsible for than others? How does he prioritize?

Reflective Questions

- If you were in the same situation, would you do the same?
- What would get you to stop on the side of the road? What would keep you from stopping?
- How do you decide for whom you are responsible?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider the following two texts from Jewish tradition:

Rav Yosef taught: “If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you” (Exodus 20:2). [This teaches, if the choice for helping lies between] a Jew and a non-Jew, a Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your town have prior rights.

— Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 71a

Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.

--Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a

- Do you agree with the priorities that Rav Yosef has outlined? Why or why not?
- What do you think “for the sake of peace” in the second reading, meant at the time it was written? How might you understand it now?
- How do these texts intersect with the tension that the narrator in the poem felt?
- It’s possible to see a tension between the first text’s suggestion that we care for Jews first and the second text’s instruction to care for both Jews and non-Jews. Do you feel this tension in your own life? Which of these approaches more closely represents your own priorities in giving or serving?

Now take a look at this modern approach, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how, and by whom?

--Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002).

- How do you personally decide whom to help? Do you prioritize those in greater need, or those in your local community?
- Do you have particular places to which you feel a sense of ownership or obligation? What are they?
- Do you think the globalization that Rabbi Sacks refers to affects our obligations as articulated in the Talmudic texts above? Are we still primarily obligated to those of our own cities, or does greater knowledge of events far away change our sense of obligation?

Use the space below to reflect.

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Use the space below to note your response to these questions, and then we'll do a final round of sharing.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Portions of this guide were originally developed by Rabbi Nicole Auerbach for Central Synagogue.



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