Justice Text Study
Jewish Chaplains Seminar 2015
Zoloth

Rabbinic source texts

1. Two people were walking along the way, and in the hand of one of them was a flask of water. If both of them drink, they die, but if one of them drinks, he reaches civilization. Ben Petura expounded: it is better that both of them should drink and die and let not one of them see the death of his fellow. Until Rabbi Akiba came and taught: "That your brother may live with you"--your life takes precedence over the life of your fellow. (Bava Metzia 62a)[1]

2. It has been taught:
A person of wisdom should not live in a city that is empty of the following ten things:

1. **a court of justice that imposes flagellation and decrees penalties**
2. **a communal charity fund, collected by two and distributed by three**
3. **a Synagogue**
4. **a mikvah**
5. **a toilet**
6. **a mohel**
7. **a surgeon**
8. **a scribe**
9. **a butcher**
10. **a schoolteacher**

Rabbi Akiba is quoted "Also several kinds of fruit, because these enlighten the vision."[2] (Sanhedrin17b)

Levinas texts

1. How does one preserve oneself from evil? By each taking on himself the responsibilities of the others. (Persons) are not only and in their ultimate essence "for self" but "for others," and this "for others" must be probed deeply. . . . Nothing is more foreign to me than the other; nothing is more intimate to me than myself. Israel would teach that the greatest intimacy of me to myself consists in being at every moment responsible for the others. I can be responsible for that which I did not do and take upon myself a distress which is not mine. . . . The scent of Paradise is Jacob bearing the weight of all that he will not do and all that others will do. For the human world to be possible--justice, the Sanhedrin--at each moment there must be someone who can be responsible for the others. Responsible! The famous finite liberty of the philosophers is responsibility for that which I have not done. Condition of the creature. Responsibility that Job, searching in his own impeccable past, could not find. "Where were you when I created the World?" the Holy One asks him. You are a self, certainly. Beginning, freedom, certainly. But even if you are free, you are not the absolute beginning. You come after many things and many people. You are not just free; you are also bound to others beyond your freedom. You are responsible for all. Your liberty is also fraternity.[3]

2. To be under the sleepless gaze of God is, precisely, in one's unity, to be the bearer of another subject--bearer and supporter--to be responsible for the other, as if the face of this other, although invisible, continued my own face and kept me awake by its very invisibility, by the unpredictability that it threatens.[4]

3. Humanity is defined not as liberty . . . but by a responsibility prior to all initiative. (One) answers

for more than his(her) freely chosen acts. (S)He is the hostage of all the universe. Extraordinary dignity. Unlimited responsibility.[5]

4. . . [This] thing is the worst, worse than the enthusiasm for idolatry. Isolation within Judaism, a no uttered to the community. To be outside a synagogue filled with people, that is the extreme apostasy; to say "that does not concern me. . . . Here is the condemnation that is beyond recall."[6]

5. The heirs of Abraham--(persons) to whom their ancestors bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other, one which is never done with, an order in which one is never free. In this order, above all else, duty takes the form of obligations toward the body, the obligation of feeding and sheltering.[7]

6. But here is where the logical integrity of subjectivity leads: the direct relation with the true, excluding the prior examination of its terms, its idea--that is, the reception of Revelation--can only be the relation with a person, with another. The Torah is given in the Light of a face. The epiphany of the other person is ipso facto my responsibility toward him(her): seeing the other is already an obligation toward him. A direct optics--without the mediation of any idea--can only be accomplished as ethics. Integral knowledge or Revelation (the receiving of the Torah) is ethical behavior.[8]

7. To hear a voice speaking to you is ipso facto to accept obligation toward the one speaking. . . . Consciousness is the urgency of a destination leading to the other person and not an eternal return to the self.[9]

8. . . . an absolute uprightness which is also absolute self criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and whose look calls me into question. It is a movement toward the other which does not come back to its point of origin the way diversion comes back, incapable as it is of transcendence--a movement beyond anxiety and stronger than death.[10]

9. The original function of speech consists not in designating an object in order to communicate with the other in a game with no consequences but in assuming toward someone a responsibility on behalf of someone else. To speak is to engage the interests of men. Responsibility would be the essence of language.[11]

10. . . . the (person) whose rights have to be defended is in the first place the other (person), it is not initially myself. It is not the concept "(person)" that is at the basis of this humanity, it is the other (person). The other (person's) right is practically an infinite right.[12]

11. Evil surpasses human responsibility and leaves not a corner intact where reason could collect itself. But perhaps this thesis is precisely a call to (one's) infinite responsibility, to an untiring wakefulness, to a total insomnia.[13]

12. The words of the Levites will reach everyone's ears: each person here is in the presence of all the others. Each person shall say: "Amen." The pact concluded, then, is an authentic one, made in the presence of all the people, members of a society in which--I continue to emphasize the point--everyone can observe everyone else.[14]

13. In the four last books of the Pentateuch, there is a verse which constantly reappears: "Speak to the Children of Israel *le'mor* ('thus')." . . . In my own reading of this verse, le'mor would mean "in order to say." This gives us: "Speak to the children of Israel in order that they speak" teach them so profoundly that they themselves begin to speak, let them listen until they reach the point of speaking.[15]

1. Bava Metzia, 62a, translation by Adin Steinsaltz, The Talmud, Steinsaltz Ed. (New House, 1991), p. 29.

2. The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Vol. III, Sanhedrin, author's translation.

3. Levinas, Talmudic Readings, p. 85.

4. Ibid., p. 168.

5. Ibid., p. 171.

6. Levinas, Talmudic Readings, p. 176.

7. Ibid., p. 99.

8. Ibid., p. 47.

9. Ibid., p. 48.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 21.

12. Ibid., pp. 97-98.

13. Ibid., p. 193.

14. Ibid., p. 215.

15.

Ibid., p. 221.