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How to repair a broken world

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“When a man or woman commits any wrong toward another person, thus breaking faith with the Lord.” Think about what this phrase is telling us. There is a profound message in this phrase—the middle phrase in Numbers 5:6, found in last week’s Torah portion, Naso—and it is one we need to take very seriously, especially now when a pandemic rages through our world, and anger and frustration rages through our streets.

Here is that message: Any sin we commit against another person, and by extension against anything else in God’s creation, is as much a sin against God as it is a sin against the person or thing harmed.

Every action we take, every word we speak, involves God in some way—and if what we do is wrong, God is one of the injured parties. God, after all, made everything that exists and declared it all to be "very good.” To harm that which God made and called very good makes God an injured party. God also was very specific about how we are to behave towards other people and the rest of Creation; to not behave in those ways is to ignore God, which also is an injury to Him.

This is not as simple as it may sound, however, because it is so easy to violate the precepts regarding behavior. Say, for example, there are five people in a room and four of them exclude the fifth person from a private conversation. Regardless of what is being discussed, that person is bound to wonder whether something negative is being said about him or her. That is a sin against that person (even if what was being discussed was, say, a surprise birthday party for him or her). According to this verse, it is also a sin against God.

Or consider this example: There are five people in a room waiting for a crowd to gather for an event to begin, and a sixth person enters and says, “where is everyone?”—not “where is everyone else, but “where is everyone.” If just one of the others who hears that said feels insulted by it (“what, we’re not part of everyone?”), even if he or she does not say so, that is a sin against that person—and it is also a sin against God.

These are not the obvious bad deeds; these are the kind of ordinary, everyday, common acts we all do, often without thinking, and without intending to hurt anyone. I do not know how many times I have said “where is everyone.” It is hard to believe that so casual a remark could cause anyone to feel hurt—and that is our problem. It is very easy to commit a sin against another person when we do not realize that what we are doing is a sin.

It is just as easy to unintentionally sin against the environment. If we do not recycle, for example, that is a sin—against the environment and against God. If we speed along a highway, burning more gas than we have to, then, based on a ruling in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Shabbat 67b, that also is a sin—against the environment and against God.

It also is just as easy to sin against an animal without intending to do so, or even realizing that we did it. For example, sitting down to a meal before feeding the animals in our care is a sin—against the animals and against God. Jewish law requires us to feed our animals before we feed ourselves. (See BT B’rachot 40a.)

In other words, if we take this phrase in Numbers 5:6 seriously, we would have to walk on eggshells all day long. The phrase is asking us to behave in a way that is unnatural, and perhaps even unreasonable.

Actually, though, all God really wants is for us to try. God wants us to give it our best effort; He wants us to be more careful, more considerate, more circumspect, in all that we do. In a sense, God in this verse is saying, “If you need to believe that these are all sins against God in order to watch what you say and consider what you do or do not do, then, fine, consider it a sin against God.”

We can become more considerate. All we need to do is work at it, practice it, force ourselves to constantly be aware of it. “Frequent repetition” of such acts, “when performed over a long period of time, acclimates us to them,” said Maimonides, the Rambam. It is, he said, how we achieve moral excellence in our lives. We will be more caring, more careful, more compassionate, with no effort on our part, because such behavior will have become second nature to us. (See Chapter 4 of his commentary The Eight Chapters.)

We will not always get it right, but at least we will have made the effort to do so. And by doing so, we will pass this behavior down from generation to generation. Eventually, the whole world will end up acting this way—and we will have fulfilled our mission as God’s kingdom of priests and holy nation.

We will have repaired the world.

Repairing the world begins with one person at a time. How we behave to others influences how they behave toward us, at least we have to hope it does. If we behave morally, ethically, considerately, compassionately, caringly to others, then maybe they will adapt that behavior to their own lives. And if they do that, maybe they will influence the behavior of still others.

It is not just about what we do and how we do it in our immediate lives, however, that is involved here because the phrase does not contain such a qualification. Included as well is what we do or do not do when it comes to everything outside our individual spheres.

When others suffer an injustice, such as the injustice done to George Floyd, do we sit on our hands and say “thank God I am neither responsible for it nor a victim of it”? Or do we remember God’s words, “Justice justice shall you pursue” (see Deuteronomy 16:20), and do something about that injustice?

When a pandemic strikes and people find themselves without the funds they need to buy the basic necessities of life, do we say “how sad” and then get on with our day? Or do we remember God’s words, “Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land” (see Deuteronomy 15:11), and do something to help them (donating, say, to our local Jewish Family Services, or to Mazon, or Feeding America), something God insists we must do?

An extra-talmudic commentary reminds us that even the mosquito was created by God before humans were (see Tosefta Sanhedrin 8:4). So when a developer or a government entity decides to build a dam across a river that is a natural habitat for certain endangered species—Tennessee, for example, in 1978, decided to build the Tellico Dam, putting at risk of extinction the 2- to 3-inch-long darter snail that lived in that river—do we roll our eyes in disbelief that anyone even cares about tiny little darter snails? Or do we do something to protect that poor creature because God created it even before God created us?

When a rain forest or some park land is attacked by developers, do we say “oy vey” and get on with our day? Or do we hear God’s words in Deuteronomy 20:19—”is the tree of the field a person that it could run away from you”—and then do something about such wanton destruction?

By acting more caringly, more considerately, to other people and to the world around us, we have the means to carry that change in behavior to another level—to pass it on by getting involved in what goes on in the world—the immediate world around us and the world around the globe. That includes, for example, the political process—not merely voting in primaries and elections, but voting intelligently, after doing all the homework necessary to make an informed choice.

If in all we do we get it right, we take a giant leap towards the end goal God set for us: to create a better world tomorrow than we have today.

Judaism is meaningless if we do not understand that goal, and if we do not actively do everything we can to reach it. To not even try, however, is also a sin.