

Parashat Re'eh

Overall Question

What causes compassion fatigue, and what obligations remain when we know our help won't solve the larger problem?

Deuteronomy 15:7–8

כִּי־יְהִיֶּה בָךְ אֶבְיֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ לֹא תִאָּמֵץ
אֶת־לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ מֵאֶחֶיךָ הָאֶבְיֹן:

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kindred in any of your settlements in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kindred.

כִּי־פָתַחַתְּ תִפְתָּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לּוֹ וְהֵעַבְטָה תַעֲבִיטְנוּ דֵי מַחְסָרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסֹר לוֹ:

Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.

Rashi

[1040-1105, France]

There are people who painfully deliberate whether they should give or not; therefore Scripture states, “Do not harden your heart”; there again are people who stretch their hand forth but then close it; therefore it is written, “do not shut your hand.”

Questions

- Why does Torah command both “do not harden your heart” and “do not shut your hand”? Aren’t they describing the same failure?
- Does the Torah require us to feel compassion, or only to act compassionately?

C. Daryl Cameron and B. Keith Payne

[Contemporary, United States]

The collapse of compassion isn’t always an involuntary failure to feel. People sometimes anticipate that caring about a large group will become overwhelming or costly, so they regulate their emotions before those emotions fully emerge. Compassion fatigue may therefore include an act of self-protection: we feel less because we suspect that feeling more will place a demand upon us.

Paul Slovic, “Psychic Numbing and Genocide” (2007)

[Contemporary, United States]

People often respond intensely to one identifiable person while becoming emotionally numb when confronted by suffering on a massive scale. Statistics communicate magnitude, but they don’t necessarily awaken moral feeling. Because emotion becomes less dependable as the numbers grow, moral principles and public institutions must carry obligations that individual sympathy cannot reliably sustain.

Charles R. Figley

[Contemporary, United States]

Compassion fatigue is a natural but disruptive consequence of working closely with people who have experienced trauma. The desire to help can expose the helper to another person's fear and suffering until caring itself becomes exhausting. Fatigue should not automatically be interpreted as indifference or moral failure in individuals or communities, for communities that depend upon sustained compassion must also create support and shared responsibility for those who carry it.

Questions

- Which explanation leaves us most morally responsible for our withdrawal?
- Does naming compassion fatigue help people address it, or does the diagnosis become an excuse?
- Rashi describes a person who closes the hand. Do these researchers make that person appear less blameworthy?

**Olga Klimecki, Susanne Leiber, Matthieu Ricard, and Tania Singer,
“Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity after Compassion and Empathy Training” (2014)**

[Contemporary, United Kingdom]

Empathy, in which we share another person's pain, is distinct from compassion, in which concern is joined to a desire to help. Continually absorbing the suffering of others can increase distress and encourage withdrawal. Studies have found, however, that compassion training reduced the negative effect and strengthened positive concern. Sustainable caring may require learning to stand beside suffering without making another person's pain entirely our own.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira

[1889-1943, Poland]

One should not become accustomed to repeated suffering. The sheer volume of pain must not blur our response to each individual; rather than protecting the heart from anguish, we must continue to arouse compassion.

Question

- Which is the greater danger: becoming overwhelmed by suffering or becoming accustomed to it?

Rabbi Rex Perlmeter

[Contemporary, United States]

Work with suffering exposes helpers to compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. Attending to one's own mental and spiritual condition isn't a retreat from responsibility but a requirement of responsible service. Taking inventory of one's limits and support systems is part of the obligation to continue helping.

Rabbi Jordana Schuster Battis

[Contemporary, United States]

Moses had endured years of complaint, but the people's need for water still had to be heard anew. His exhaustion didn't excuse his decision to treat a legitimate cry as rebellion. A long history of being asked to help doesn't permit us to dismiss the next person's need as merely one more demand.

Question

- Battis focuses on the person who still needs water while Perlmeter focuses on the condition of the person being asked to provide it. Whose need should govern the moment?
- Should the exhausted helper be expected to continue, or should the community be responsible for finding another person to carry the obligation?

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972)

[Contemporary, Australia]

When we can prevent something very bad without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, helping is an obligation rather than an optional act of generosity.

Question

- Who gets to decide what "comparable moral importance" actually means?

Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 50a

[Compiled c. 5th-6th century, Babylonia]

A person giving tzedakah should not distribute more than one-fifth of their resources.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 71a

[Compiled c. 5th-6th century, Babylonia]

A person in poverty precedes one who is wealthy, one's own poor precede the poor of the wider community, and the poor of one's city precede those of another city. Need alone doesn't determine obligation.

Question

- When nearby need is less severe but more visible, should it take precedence over distant suffering that is much greater?

Hermann Strack, commenting on the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 9b

[1848-1922, Germany]

Rabbi Yitzhak teaches that the person who gives money to someone in need receives six blessings, while the person who offers words of comfort and encouragement receives eleven. Material assistance matters, but it is not the only form of assistance. When we cannot repair someone's circumstances, we can still refuse to abandon that person to humiliation or loneliness. Presence remains an obligation even when a solution is beyond our reach.

Rabbi Kerry Chaplin, “Yearning for Our Ner Tamid” (T’ruah, 2022)

[Contemporary, United States]

Burnout doesn’t necessarily mean that the work should be abandoned; it may reveal the false belief that one person must sustain it alone. The eternal light is produced by a community, and the helper must be willing both to contribute and to trust others to carry the light when their own strength dims. The obligation remains, but its bearer can change.

Pirkei Avot 2:16

You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

Kerry Olitzky

[Contemporary, United States]

The scale of the task therefore changes neither our responsibility nor the meaning of our contribution. We are judged not by whether we brought the work to completion, something no single person may be capable of doing, but by whether we allowed its incompleteness to become an excuse for withdrawal.

Joanna Macy

[1929-2025, California]

Hope is distinct from confidence in that a desired outcome will occur. When action depends upon optimism, people become immobilized whenever success appears unlikely. Active hope, therefore, begins by identifying the direction in which we want the world to move and choosing to participate in that movement. We need not believe that our efforts will prevail before deciding that those efforts are worth making.

Questions

- How do we distinguish abandoning the work from recognizing that a particular contribution is no longer effective?
- Can a person ever say, “I have done my part,” or does unfinished work continually renew the obligation?