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Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, my rebbe, my dissertation lodestar, my favorite theologian-cum-activist-cum-political theorist, wrote that one of the most fundamental evil maxims in the world comes from this *parsha*.¹

Does anyone have an idea to what he is referring?

Heschel says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”² (הַשְׁמֵר אֲחֵי אָנוֹכִי (Genesis 4:9), is one of the most evil statements in the world.

What leads Heschel to such a fiery provocation?

In an essay containing one version of perhaps the most famous line attributed to Heschel: “in a free society, few are guilty, but all are responsible,” he writes about why he was compelled to participate in the anti-Vietnam war movement.³

Heschel gives three reasons:

1. What he calls “countless onslaughts” on his “inner life, depriving [him] of the ability to sustain inner stillness
2. His study of the prophets. In his studies, he writes, “it became quite clear [] that while our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves and to silence our conscience.
3. And the last (which he lists second), is his disgust with indifference.

He explains: “Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself. The most wicked men must be regarded as great teachers, for they set forth precisely an example of that which is unqualifiedly evil. Kayin’s (Cain’s) question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ and his implied negative response must be regarded among the great fundamental evil maxims of the world.”

Why is *hashomer ahi anohi* so evil? Not merely because Kayin the fratricide has done an evil deed. But because the question demonstrates Kayin’s indifference to the death of Havel.

What about the death of Havel (Abel)?

What are the consequences of the fratricide?

1. Kayin isn’t only punished by endlessly wandering the earth and fully losing God’s favor

¹ The Torah is split up into 54 *parshyot* (singular, *parsha*), which are read each Shabbat. The entire Torah is cycled through in one year, so sometimes *parshyot* are read together.

² Transliterated as: *hashomer ahi anohi*

³ “Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement” (1973), in *Moral Grandeur, Spiritual Audacity* (1997), ed. Susannah Heschel.

2. His parents, Adam and Ḥava (Eve), have to mourn a child
3. Seth, the next child, has to bear the trauma of two lost siblings
4. Havel, the shepherd, the first in a long line of important shepherds in our tradition (Moshe, David), and his loss indicates the fragility of behaviors of tending and caring

By asking “am I my brother’s keeper,” Kayin is declaring how little he cares about others, how indifferent he is not only to the death of his brother, but to the pain and loss that ripples outward.

Heschel is moved in part by Kayin’s question because he can no longer stay private or quiet. But this is in part what I find so compelling about Heschel: he escaped the Shoah in Eastern Europe because Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary in Cincinnati got him a visa right on time. He escaped, but his dear family, his mother, his sister, did not. Cincinnati did not fit, so eventually Heschel moved to New York, where the descendant of the *Apter rebbe*⁴ took up a post at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Heschel rebuilt his life in the United States, and was compelled to speak out against racial injustice, march with Dr. King, and protest the Vietnam War. He had a good theologian’s job, but he agitated for a better life for others because he could not be indifferent. And, with all that pain and loss, one might imagine he earned a little rest, a little inaction for a while.⁵

Heschel’s dilemma is about whether to serve in private or in public. Cain’s question in part incited him to live and serve in public. I will always encourage you to live in Heschel’s example and serve in public, to as we used to say at the RAC⁶ (where I worked before graduate school), paraphrasing Heschel, “pray with our feet”⁷ — but I think the provocation that “am I my brother’s keeper?” is the most evil maxim in the world, has a more precise resonance for our community at the register of what we even think our community is. And, as such, how or what we can be indifferent to in our community.

Before I go any further, like a good political theorist in training, I need to make sure I’ve clarified all my concepts so my readers (listeners) know what I’m talking about. My key concept? Community.

What, or who do I mean when I say community? At the very least, everyone in this room. Undergraduates, graduate students, professors, Cornell affiliates, Ithaca residents, are just some of our usual qualifiers. Orthodox Jews, maybe. I’m here, and I have a tendentious relationship with that moniker. How about, anyone who would be drawn to our davening... so Jews in general, quite possibly?

⁴ A Hasidic leader.

⁵ For an account of Heschel’s life and legacy: *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Spiritual Radical*.

⁶ The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (the RAC — “the rack”), in Washington, D.C., RAC.org.

⁷ When Heschel marched with Dr. King in Selma, AL, he described his experience as follows: “I felt as if my feet were praying.” Which gets shortened and paraphrased into “praying with your feet.”

I can't speak to *k'lal Yisrael*,⁸ in one d'var Torah (sermon). I may be wordy, but I'm not *that* wordy. But I will try to speak to what it means to be this community on this campus, from my perspective. And why I think indifference could have serious, negative repercussions.

So, what does "am I my brother's keeper?" have to do with community? Well, I think too many of us have been "am I my brother's keeper?" when it comes to this community – some intentionally, some selectively, some indignantly, indifferent.

Indifferent how?

Why do I have to be inconvenienced for the sake of others, am I their keeper, their guardian? And if the consequences of choosing my convenience mean the exclusion of others, am I my brother's keeper? Why do I have to do anything beyond what I think is right for *me*? Am I the keeper of my fellows? My fellow community members? My fellow Jews?

Kayin thought that the only consequence of the fratricide was the death of his brother. As I mentioned before, it certainly had more repercussions. We may think that focusing only on the needs of right now, or of a subset of this community is the appropriate response to a difficult situation. When especially, like Kayin, we are struggling with the feelings that come from comparison — fair or not, imposed or not — from ambition, from frustration, loss, or anything else. None of those feelings or reactions are wrong or inappropriate per se. But Kayin acts from the depth of his feelings and it renders him indifferent to everything but himself. We can choose, unlike Kayin, to act in response to how we as individuals feel and think *and* hold space for others. For our proverbial brothers. We can keep each other and nurture our own needs.

We all come to minyan for different reasons. We are obligated, we want to be with fellow Jews, we enjoy davening, we like socializing, we like a good late-morning snack on Saturdays,⁹ you all have your reasons.

And you know in small or large part how much work it takes to meet our basic needs as a minyan. Because you *leyn* or *daven* frequently,¹⁰ or serve as *gabbai*,¹¹ or make sure we get the right rooms booked, or set up and clean up *kiddush*, or keep the *minyan* going in the summer, or host meals, or teach *shiurim*,¹² or advocate to make sure we're safe on this campus, or you help

⁸ Literally, all of Israel, but used to mean all of the community of Israel — all Jews.

⁹ A reference to kiddush. After services on Shabbat morning, the congregation usually gathers to hear the benediction of wine or grape juice, which sanctifies the day, called *kiddush*. Traditionally, one cannot eat on Shabbat until having heard kiddush, so the blessing of wine is almost always accompanied by food.

¹⁰ Leyn, read from the Torah, more literally cantillate, because the reading is a kind of chanting/singing; daven, Yiddish for pray, used hear to mean leading prayers.

¹¹ A person (usually there are multiple *gabbai'im* for a synagogue) who helps coordinate the time of prayer services, who leads what, who is called up to bless the Torah (called 'having an *aliyah*'), etc.

¹² *Shiur* means lesson (any lesson), but in this context, a *shiur* specifically refers to a lesson about an aspect of Jewish law (what to do when it snows and its Shabbat, for example), philosophy, or something of particular import to observant Jews (i.e., what do Jewish sources say about our commitment to social justice?).

make a *minyan*,¹³ or you respond to *kaddish*¹⁴ or a *bracha* (blessing) with *amein*, or a myriad of other ways you contribute. Given the conditions of our community, some of those tasks have to be filled by men, and so there are women leading us to make spaces for ourselves where our contributions are not always in reference to what we cannot do, and that sometimes means women-only spaces are necessary.

I mention all of these things because if you do all, some, or, none of this, you have a seat in this *minyan*. At least, that's what I thought. That's what I thought the bare minimum of our communal values was.

I've been led to believe - by listening, observing, talking - over the last few weeks that relatively minor individual comfort preferences and how certain cohorts of people can be of instrumental use to a subset of the community are the measure of who should have a seat here. If you do not align with these two categories, the attitude is "*hashomer ahi anohi?*" Am I my brother's keeper? If you are not comfortable with the rules we have decided upon, then you don't have to come.

Indifference.

But an active indifference. An indifference that will separate some people from this community by "the community."

I feel that indifference. And it does not feel good.

I will turn to Heschel again to express what part of my response to all that I have described: "Why is my belonging to the Jewish people the most sacred relation to me, second only to my relation to God? Israel is a spiritual order in which the human and the ultimate, the natural and the holy enter a lasting covenant, in which kinship with God is not an aspiration but a reality of destiny. For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with Israel. Abandoning Israel, we desert God."¹⁵

This is what we could strive for. Instead of asking "am I Sarah's keeper?" "Am I so-and-so's keeper?" Instead of responding with indifference, we can respond with generosity and curiosity.

¹³ A quorum of ten men that is required for the bulk of traditional prayer services, including saying most of the prayers out loud and reading from the Torah.

¹⁴ Prayer that requires a quorum of ten men, there are multiple versions. The Mourner's Kaddish is the most well-known.

¹⁵ From "To be a Jew: What is It?" in *Moral Grandeur, Spiritual Audacity*.

With assuming that everyone contributes to our community, instead of needing a scorecard for each person. With being in relationship to each other knowing that is as if being in relationship with Hashem,¹⁶ it *is* relationship to Hashem.

Immediately, concretely, we would need to rethink the norms and values we explicitly and implicitly reinforce such that anyone seeking a seat here can find one. I hope we can do the work together to reaffirm our commitment to sacred relationship, to covenant, ultimately, not the indifference of Kayin.

As Heschel says again, “our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community.”¹⁷

Shabbat Shalom.

¹⁶ In Hebrew, “The Name” — a way of referring to God without taking God’s name in vain/using the names of God.

¹⁷ Also from “To be a Jew: What is It?”