

"Charity begins at home" but should not end there

By Shlomi Ravid

In a witty 1903 article titled "Tikkun Haolam and Zionism" Ahad Ha'am makes the following statement: "Our youths are so used to dwelling on and dealing with the questions of "Tikkun Haolam", until too many of them this question became their spiritual focus, and unknowingly the center of all questions that engage them, including the question of Zionism (Hashelach, vol. 11, booklet 4; my translation, SR)". This article which sounds as if written today exposes a seeming contradiction: Ahad Ha'am, mostly known for raising the flag of the Jewish ethical mission in the world, expresses criticism of the Jewish search for a universal solution to the world's problems. What becomes apparent later in the article is that what Ahad Ha'am is critical of is the perception that if the world will be "fixed" (in his days through socialism), the problems of the Jews will go away by themselves.

A hundred years later, though much has changed the debate between caring for "your own" and *Tikkun Olam* is heating up again. It could be interpreted as a healthy reflection of Jewish ethical sensitivity: How, with scarcity of resources, does one balance the responsibility for one's own with the need to address the pain of others in remote places of the world? Underneath the surface of this ethical dilemma, however, lie a few challenges worth clarifying. I will try and raise two of them, offer a short analysis and propose an alternative approach.

A few years ago I attended the launching by Koldor of a Jewish Social Action Month at the Knesset. After a very inspiring description of rescue efforts performed by an Israeli NGO throughout the globe, a prominent Knesset member asked: "but don't you think that *Aniyei Ircha Kodmim* (your city's poor come first)?" The politician was expressing a view widely held both in Israel and the Jewish establishment that Israel and its needs should receive first (if not absolute) priority. This approach proved to be relevant and effective for the first five decades of the State, but more recently Israel is not seen by world Jews (nor, one should add, by Israelis) as "our town's poor". This new reality however does not stop Israeli politicians and public from employing the Talmudic expression for justifying continuous philanthropic priority on Israel coupled with permission to ignore the suffering of others. The majority of Israelis, for example, unlike fellow Jews in the US, are too preoccupied with their own national issues to address the challenge of the Darfur genocide.

The above example represents an abuse of a dictate that was created in order to refine Jewish ethical sensitivity but seems to be having just the opposite effect. You are not permitted, in ethical terms, to go save the world, and overlook the injustice in your own back yard. However, this dictum is not meant by any means to release you from your responsibility to the world. The outcome of this approach is that young Jews are raised in Israel without commitment to *Tikkun Olam* in the broader sense, and the vision of creating a more sensitive and just Jewish state seems long forgotten.

On the other side of the ocean some of the expressions of *Tikkun Olam* imply that giving any preference to members of one's own people reflects a sense of parochialism which undermines the ethical foundations of these philanthropic acts altogether. In direct opposition to the "charity begins

at home" view, this approach questions if helping one's own qualifies as charity at all. True *Tzdaka*, it claims, should take place away from home and be free of any hint of sectarianism. Ethically speaking, if the act complies with the interest of the Jewish collective, it cannot be seen as a pure act of *Tikkun Olam*.

One way out of the dilemma created by the opposing approaches is to address the issue through a collective rather than an individualistic prism. According to Martin Buber, our individual identity is established at the meeting place with a concrete collective into which we are born and where we grow. Our collective sentiment is our moral obligation to the other and to the larger group we are part of. This is a sense of ethical love that expands through concentric circles. Starting from the most concrete and private one, directly present, all the way to the remote, amorphous and general, that can be related to only through the link between families to families, communities to communities and peoples to peoples. Through his or her family and community a person relates to their people, and through the people s/he relates to the entire human race.

Grappling with the tension between looking after one's own (broadly defined), and combating injustice throughout the world in the context of the collective Jewish value system does not solve the dilemma. It enables us to develop the framework for addressing the challenge. Two core Jewish values are in struggle here: one considers the survival of the people as a value in its own right. The other sees the Jewish mission of repairing the world as a central imperative. That tension cannot be eliminated, but ethical considerations of need, urgency and fairness can be used in order to reach equilibrium between the conflicting agendas. The challenge is not to rule that needy Jews are not really the responsibility of Jews, or that *Tikkun Olam* is but a trend for "spoiled wealthy Jews". The challenge is to address both demands and do it in accordance with a Jewish sense of justice.

Ten years ago I solicited on behalf of a Jewish Federation a very noble elderly Jew. He surprised me with the following question: "My daughter tells me that in Africa there are people starving to death. Tell me why I should give money to the Federation and not to them?" I told him that he should definitely give money to feed the hungry in Africa, but that if he also gave to Federation he may help raise a future generation of Jewish activists who will continue working to save Africa and fix the world.

Dr. Shlomi Ravid is a member of the founding team of the Jewish Peoplehood Hub. His doctoral dissertation in philosophy focused on the relationship between norms and values within normative systems.