

# PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PRIORITIES IN JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

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*This article illustrates how traditional Judaic sources can be used to illuminate the difficult contemporary dilemma of setting personal and professional priorities. The moral laws underlying the traditional sources provide a Jewish framework for allocating limited resources of time, energy, and money.*

Setting priorities — both professionally and personally — is the knottiest of problems because there are competing claims for limited resources based on formidable values. Priorities vary from community to community and from individual to individual, depending on their values and needs. Conflicts regarding priority decision making in Jewish communal service exist on two levels: competing claims for funding to support agency services and competing claims for the professional's time. This article is accordingly divided into two parts: (1) professional priorities in the allocation of scarce resources and (2) personal versus professional priorities in discharging the professional function.

This article offers a Judaic perspective on professional and personal priorities in Jewish communal service. In the professional realm, the major Judaic source for priorities considerations is the laws of tzedakah. In the personal realm, two leading figures in biblical history, Aaron and Moses, and a talmudic passage are analyzed.

In Judaism, an important distinction can be made between the ritual and the moral laws. The ritual laws are precise. As an example, if sundown on Friday occurs at 5:32 P.M., then 1 minute before is still the weekday and 1 minute after is Shabbat.

There is a 1-minute interval in which to desist from work, else one is guilty of violating Shabbat.

The moral laws of Judaism are not as precise; rather, they present guidelines and generally lack specific details. Since the moral laws concern intimate interpersonal relationships, the rabbis felt, according to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, that they ought not to regulate such relationships in detail but rather should permit the parties to work out the specifics themselves (Linzer, 1978). This pattern obtains in the laws regulating parent-child relationships, even as it does in the laws of tzedakah.

## PROFESSIONAL PRIORITIES

Today's economic recession has exacerbated the shortfall in federation campaigns, causing many federations to reduce their allocations to constituent agencies. When there are insufficient resources to meet basic needs, on what basis should reductions be made? Should they be made across the board or differentially? How does one choose, for example, between Jewish education subsidies and coordinated transportation for the elderly to provide them with a hot meal at the Jewish Community Center (JCC)? What standards does one use? Can a balance be struck?

Several scenarios are possible:

- If funds are allocated to Jewish education and other services, there will not be

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enough money to provide transportation for the elderly, which will then have to be eliminated.

- If funds are allocated to Jewish education and other services, there will be less funds for transportation and then transportation for the elderly will be reduced.
- Both scenarios in the reverse, with Jewish education as the dependent variable.

The talmudic literature and the codes of Jewish law consider the setting of priorities in a variety of conflict situations and along four dimensions:

1. *Pikuach Nefesh* — preserving life
2. the primacy of Torah study
3. priorities in the allocation of resources
4. responsibilities of recipients

#### **Pikuach Nefesh — The Duty to Preserve Life**

The duty to preserve life is a supreme Jewish value. It is valued even over preserving Shabbat, as well as most of the other commandments.

How do we know that the threat to life can supersede the Sabbath? Said R. Judah in the name of Samuel: “And you shall live by them” (Leviticus 18:5) and not die by them (Talmud Yoma 85b).

Regarding all the transgressions in the Torah, if some people say to an individual, transgress so that you will not be killed, let him transgress and not be killed, except for idolatry, immorality, and murder, as it is written: “And you shall live by them” — and not die by them (Talmud Sanhedrin 74a).

According to the first selection, human life is seen to be supreme, as even Shabbat, one of the holiest days of the year, the time span during which construction of the Temple ceased, could be violated when human life was to be saved.

Yet, according to the second selection, although human life could override all the other precepts, three superseded it. The requirement to sacrifice one’s life rather than

committing idolatry, adultery, or murder indicates that the preservation of human life is not an absolute value. The human being is a culture bearer, a custodian, and a guardian of values and a covenant. There are values in the covenant for the defense of which even the highly valued life is sacrificed.

These three values supersede the preservation of life because they reflect the essence of the covenantal relationship between God and humans. The worship of idols represents the denial of God as the Supreme Being, immorality is a threat to the family and the continuity of Jewish values and traditions, and murder is a violation of human sanctity, imbued by God at the dawn of creation.

The likelihood of this law of priorities being invoked in federation work is nil. Yet, the first scenario — the case of *Pikuach Nefesh* — saving life — is more prevalent. How are we to understand *Pikuach Nefesh* in modern terms? Does it only apply when death may be imminent, such as with a person suffering a heart attack or who is in the advanced stages of cancer or a terminal illness? Or, does it also obtain when the process is slower and when life is not in imminent danger, such as providing nursing home care for the elderly who cannot live alone or with their children, rehabilitation clinics for drug addicts, services to the homeless, or meals on wheels to shut-ins? If these services are also in the category of *Pikuach Nefesh*, should they take precedence in allocations over “quality of life” type services, such as those offered by JCCs, YM-YWHAS, Jewish family services, intergroup relations, and camping? In short, how broadly or narrowly should *Pikuach Nefesh* be interpreted? The value of *Pikuach Nefesh* may also clash with the primacy of Torah study, as described below.

#### **The Primary of Torah Study**

When compared with other positive mitzvot, Torah study takes precedence and is

deemed to be more valued.

These are the precepts which have no prescribed measure: the corner of a field (which must be left for the poor), the first-fruit offering, the pilgrimage, acts of kindness, and Torah study (Mishnah Peah 1:1).

These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world but whose principal remains intact for him in the world to come! They are: The honor due to the father and mother, acts of kindness, early attendance at the house of study morning and evening, hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, escorting the dead, absorption in prayer, bringing peace between man and his fellow, and the study of Torah is equivalent to them all (Talmud Shabbat 127a).

From these texts, it is not clear how the primacy of Torah study is to be operationalized. They could refer to a preference for Torah study over another mitzvah or the priority of funding Jewish education over other services.

Just as Torah study is the primary value, so do Torah scholars take precedence over other Jews.

Our rabbis taught: He, his father and his teacher (rabbi) were in captivity. He precedes his teacher, his teacher precedes his father, his mother precedes them all. A scholar precedes a king of Israel because a dead scholar cannot be replaced but a dead king can be replaced by any Jew (Talmud Horayot 13a).

If his father and his teacher (rabbi) lost objects, his teacher's object should be returned first, for his father brought him into this world and his teacher who taught him Torah brings him into the world to come (Talmud Baba Metziah 33a).

If there were many poor or captives before us and there was not enough money to support or clothe or redeem them all, the kohen precedes the levi, the levi before the yisrael, etc. We follow this practice when their wisdom is on the same level, but if the Kohen

Gadol — high priest — was uneducated and the mamzer was a Torah scholar, the Torah scholar comes first. Whoever possesses greater Torah scholarship precedes the other (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 8, 17, 18).

This last passage reflects the Jewish preference for Torah study, Jewish education, and intellectual pursuit over ascribed status. The uneducated High Priest takes second place to the scholar who was born illegitimate. Jewish family lineage does not confer social status; intellectual achievement in Torah does. The establishment of Jewish educational institutions is the Jewish community's operational response to this hierarchy of values.

The questions can now be joined. Which takes precedence: Torah study or *Pikuach Nefesh*? Is the paucity of Torah study a form of "spiritual suicide" for the Jewish people that ranks with threats to their physical and mental well-being? Should the funding of Jewish education rank equally with other *Pikuach Nefesh* services, take precedence over them, or be subordinate to them? How weighty, on the level of values, is the danger to the spiritual suicide of the Jewish people when people's lives are at stake? We would have to opt for *Pikuach Nefesh* activities due to the immediacy of the duty to save life. This duty refers to the preservation of physical life and not spiritual life, and would therefore take precedence over Jewish education and quality of life services.

#### Priorities In The Allocation of Resources

How to allocate scarce resources is not a new problem. The Sages of the Talmud were puzzled by the meaning of the word "sufficient" in the biblical command: "But you shall surely open your hand unto him and lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth (lacks)" (Deuteronomy 15:8). How much is sufficient? Here is their answer:

Our Rabbis taught: "Sufficient for his need" implies you are commanded to maintain him, but you are not commanded to make him rich; "in that which he wanteth" includes even a horse to ride upon and a slave to run before him. It was related about Hillel the Elder that he bought for a certain poor man who was of a good family a horse to ride upon and a slave to run before him. On one occasion he could not find a slave to run before him, so he himself ran before him for three miles (*Ketubot* 67b).

The talmudic answer is based on the principle of *tzedakah* — justice. A principle is a guide to action, but it does not tell the individual precisely what to do. The Sages set a minimum standard beyond which the donor is not obliged to go. One must maintain the poor according to their previously accustomed lifestyle, but not excessively. Hillel applied this principle to the poor man of a good family.

In and of itself, this talmudic passage does not directly address the issue of priorities because there are no conflicting claims for resources. However, we may deduce some guidelines from the stated principle, "You are commanded to maintain him but you are not commanded to make him rich."

What constitutes "maintenance" and what constitutes "rich"? How do these terms inform, in modern times, the allocation of scarce resources? Maintenance may be interpreted as supporting all existing services, even at a minimum, in order to keep them viable and capable of serving people in need. However, Hillel's understanding of maintenance — providing services to which the individual had been accustomed, and not the minimum by the other's standards — seems to contradict this interpretation. Yet, the situation that he confronted is radically different from the contemporary one. He faced only one poor person, whereas we face a host of "poor" agencies that are requesting allocations to keep their services going.

"Rich" may be interpreted as expanding

services in a time of austerity. Though new services are deemed to be necessary for an underserved population, for the federation to generally support a policy of expansion in constricting times may be unwarranted, according to this talmudic principle. The principle points to moral obligations to maintain existing services, and not to cut them in order to initiate new ones. Ribner has a similar discussion but on a different talmudic passage (Ribner, 1991/92).

#### Responsibility of Recipients

Do recipients have any moral responsibility to curtail their requests in times of fiscal constraints? The rabbis of the Talmud addressed this issue.

A certain man once applied to R. Nehemiah [for maintenance]. "What do your meals consist of," [the Rabbi] asked him. "Of fat meat and old wine," the other replied.

"Will you consent [the Rabbi asked him] to live with me on lentils?" [The other consented,] lived with him on lentils and died. "Alas," [the Rabbi] said, "for this man whom Nehemiah has killed." On the contrary, he should [have said] "Alas for Nehemiah who killed this man!" — [The fact], however, [is that the man himself was to blame, for] he should not have cultivated his luxurious habits to such an extent (*Ketubot* 67b).

In this story, R. Nehemiah does not go out of his way to supply the poor man with his normal diet, as Hillel might have done. He is content to share his plain meals with the man. Yet, this story raises this question: If he cannot afford to maintain him according to his former lifestyle, why doesn't R. Nehemiah make an appeal in the synagogue for the community to support the man? Apparently, R. Nehemiah anticipated the Talmud's conclusion.

When the man dies, the Sages ask, whose fault is it? The Talmud concludes that the man was to blame for his own death because he cultivated excessively luxurious

habits. The Talmud places the onus on the poor person who should have reduced his expectations of the community's largesse. For the first time in its discussion of "sufficient," the Talmud imposes some responsibility on the poor to circumscribe their needs (Linzer, 1990).

The application of the Talmudic passage to agencies is quite apparent. Agencies are exhorted to delimit their funding requests when there are shortfalls in the campaign and to reduce their "luxurious habits." Although agency leaders may resent the assignment of "luxurious habits" to their "bread and butter" requests, nevertheless the story points to the need to seek other sources of revenue by taking greater moral responsibility for sustaining oneself.

This exhortation — self-support — is nowhere more graphically depicted than in this Maimonidean passage.

A person should always push himself and even experience distress in order not to be dependent on others. He should not throw himself onto the community (to ask them to support him). Our rabbis commanded, make your Sabbath a weekday and do not be dependent. Even if the person was an honored Sage and he became impoverished, let him get even a menial, dishonorable job in order not to be dependent on others (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10, 18).

### Summary

In sum, we have seen that in Judaism's lexical ordering of values, *Pikuach Nefesh*, the saving of life, and Torah study and Torah scholars are pre-eminent. Scholars are accorded social honor due to their achievements in Torah learning.

Using only this ordering of values to determine priorities in allocations to federation's services is a complex undertaking. Since *Pikuach Nefesh* seems to supersede Torah study, even as it does Shabbat observances, it would seem that those services that preserve physical life, such as

hospitals and homes for the aged, should have priority in funding over those that are more concerned with quality of life, such as JCCs, JFSs, college services, and camping. However, questions that have been raised earlier persist. Does *Pikuach Nefesh* also include mental health? Similarly, Torah study, in the form of Jewish education, should also take precedence over quality of life services because it ranks next to *Pikuach Nefesh* in value.

"Precedence" would seem to imply that these services embodying the most important values should receive more proportional funding than the others. Yet, the others, though receiving less, may not be eliminated under the maintenance principle. Too, though the other services must be maintained, *Pikuach Nefesh* and Torah study services may be expanded and are not in the category of "making him rich," for expansion is for the continual purpose of saving life and spiritual survival.

These, then, are some of the conceptual tools that talmudic literature provides for determining priorities in the allocation of scarce resources. They are not as precise as the ritual laws, and intelligent people could legitimately disagree on the application of the "maintenance" and "rich" principles to allocations. Yet, they provide a Jewish framework for discussion of this complex subject.

### PERSONAL PRIORITIES

The dilemma of personal versus professional priorities in discharging the professional function is aptly captured by this federation professional.

One of the dilemmas I have is balancing my professional commitments with my family commitments. Theoretically we are in this work for the preservation of Jewish life and Jewish family values, yet we come into conflict with our professional obligations. If you have the opportunity to put in an extra two or three hours that will bring in money that will bring five Soviet families out of Russia, is

that more important than seeing your kids and saying good night to them and doing homework with them? It's a killer.

The reason that I'm doing this type of work is because I want to make a contribution to Jewish life and to Jewish community. Yet, I feel I really undermine Jewish community on a personal level by not being there for my family when my children need me to help them with their homework or to take them to breakfast or a play at school. It becomes increasingly difficult to balance those obligations of community and family, which to me are major values. I feel very strongly that I want to be able to do both. If I'm taking my son to a baseball game or coaching his Little League, during the time that I'm doing that there are missed opportunities of soliciting people or developing new programs.

This is an example of a self-imposed dilemma. Other examples of externally imposed dilemmas occur when a special meeting is scheduled at the same time that a personal family commitment had long ago been set. Does Judaism have anything to say about these dilemmas? Since both values are essential to the continuity of Jewish life, does one take priority over the other? Because such dilemmas do not present themselves in this manner in the classical tradition, inferences have to be drawn from the texts.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest is told to atone "for himself, his household, and for the entire community of Israel" (Leviticus 16: 17). In terms of atonement, family precedes community.

A second source that highlights the tension between serving family and serving community is the poignant biblical scene among Moses, Joshua, and God. Moses tells God that a man should be appointed over the congregation "who may go out before them and who may go in before them, and who may lead them out and bring them in" (Numbers 27:17). God tells Moses that his successor was to be Joshua upon whom he should lay his hands and thereby transfer leadership.

Nowhere in Moses' proposal regarding his successor is there a hint of his disappointment in not leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, nor is there any trace of a suggestion to nominate his sons to succeed him. All that finds expression is his concern for the welfare of his people, "that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep that have no shepherd" (Numbers 27: 17). The Sages, however, assumed that Moses did not lightly give up the idea of seeing his sons succeed him. The Midrash states:

"Let the Lord. . . set a man over the congregation" (27, 16). What prompted Moses to make this request immediately after the chapter dealing with the laws of inheritance? Since the daughters of Zelophehad inherited their father (the land that would be allocated to him upon entry into Israel), Moses said: Now is the time to make my claims. If daughters inherit, then it is only right that my sons inherit my glory! Said the Holy One blessed be He to him: "Whoso keepeth the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof" (Proverbs 27, 18). Thy sons idled away their time and did not occupy themselves with study of the Torah; but as for Joshua, much did he minister to thee and much honour did he apportion thee. He would betake himself early morning and late in the evening to thy meeting house, arranging the benches and spreading the mats. Since he served thee with all his might, it were meet for him to minister to Israel, that he lose not his reward. "Take to thee Joshua the son of Nun" — in fulfillment of the text (Proverbs *ibid.*): "Whoso keepeth the fig tree, shall eat the fruit thereof."

Why did Moses' children idle away their time and not occupy themselves with Torah study? Perhaps, Moses did not spend enough time with them, being so preoccupied with the community's needs. He devoted his entire life to the community and was hardly ever home. According to the Sages, Moses did not resume normal marital life after the revelation at Sinai. He left his two sons on their own and did not pay special attention to them, whereupon they

spent their time in secular pursuits. In effect, the Sages are indirectly blaming Moses for not functioning adequately as a father and for placing too great a priority on his communal obligations. Moses' children might have inherited his leadership had he taught them Torah and encouraged them to become involved in Jewish life. This event prompted the Sages to state unequivocally that parents are unable to bequeath Torah knowledge to children.

Qualify yourself to study Torah, since it does not come to you by inheritance (Pirke Avot 2, 12).

"Why do not the children of scholars usually turn out to be scholars?" said Rabbi Yosef: That it should not be said that the Torah came to them by inheritance (Talmud, Nedarim, 71a).

A third source of tension produced by a conflict of obligations is derived from a passage in the Talmud on the simultaneous demands made by one's father and the performance of a mitzvah. The child cannot do both at the same time and needs to choose between them. Whose honor comes first: the honor of one's father or the mitzvah?

Eleazar ben Mathia said: If my father orders me "give me a drink of water" while I have a precept to perform, I disregard my father's honor and perform the precept since both my father and I are bound to fulfill the precepts.

Issi ben Judah maintained: If the precept can be performed by others, it should be performed by others, while he should bestir himself for his father's honor.

Said Rabbi Mattana: The halakhah agrees with Issi b. Judah (Kiddushin 32a).

The Talmud offers an approach to resolving conflicts in priority setting. Though the fulfillment of a mitzvah is always a priority, it can be delegated to others so that the "personal" priority — fulfilling one's father's request — may take precedence. Similarly in federation work, when commitments to

family have long been scheduled and a special meeting is called, the professional and lay leaders need to work out arrangements to change the meeting date or to delegate someone else to staff the meeting. Reasonable people can work out agreeable solutions to these types of conflicts.

In sum, if we combine the biblical priority of atonement for family before community, the Midrash placing the onus of responsibility for his children's outcome on Moses himself, and the talmudic preference for serving the father first when another mitzvah beckons, a pattern seems to emerge: The individual may not neglect family needs for exclusive devotion to community.

What is clear from this review of classical sources on the personal versus professional conflict in priorities is that, in Judaism, family may be a more important value than community, and commitments made to family need to be honored. When the individual is confronted with the dilemma of choosing between the two, the Talmud offers a alternative: try to delegate someone else to perform the mitzvah, staff the meeting, fulfill the task, so the individual can be free to fulfill the prior commitment to the family. Professionals who inevitably face the conflict between personal and professional priorities can be guided by principles derived from classical Jewish tradition.

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