

**Noah's Culpability & Our Own**  
**Parashat Noach 5787**  
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Shabbat Shalom! There is a Talmudic passage that is about the ownership of a particular cow that appears to be working on Shabbat. This cow has a strap attached to it, a sign that it is performing work. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya was identified as the owner of this cow; but why would this renowned rabbi allow his cow to work on this holy day, a clear violation of the laws of Shabbat? As it turns out, the cow did not actually belong to Rabbi Elazar; rather, it belonged to one of his neighbors. But the rabbis declared that the cow belonged to Rabbi Elezar because he did not protest the behavior of his neighbor; therefore, it was as if Rabbi Elezar himself had violated Shabbat.

Now, the rabbis of the Talmud could have made this story only about the prohibitions concerning Shabbat; that all of us are responsible for ensuring that we correctly observe our day of rest each week. However, they broadened the purpose of this story. They declared:

*"Anyone who has the capability to protest the conduct of the members of their household but does not protest, they too are culpable. Anyone who has the capability to protest the conduct of the people of their town but does not protest, they too are culpable. Anyone who has the capability to protest the conduct of the whole world but does not protest, they too are culpable."*<sup>1</sup>

According to the rabbis of the Talmud, we hold a responsibility to protest or rebuke others who are acting poorly. Not necessarily to change the situation or make it better; but at the very least, to make it known that the action is wrong. And, if we fail to lodge our complaint or organize our disagreement, we too are culpable for the actions of that person. It is as if we too were part of that rude comment, that unjust decision, that cruel action, or that inhumane behavior. We too would be culpable.

Our Torah portion this week, Parashat Noah, is also a story of responsibility and culpability. Throughout the newly created universe, there is corruption, lawlessness, and violence. In response, God decides to destroy the world, to begin again with a new set of creatures who can better care for one another. God designates Noah to lead this mission, to save himself, his family, and many animals on a big ark that will survive the end of the world. Noah follows God's commands precisely and makes it to the other side of the flood, beginning the world all over again.

Our Torah describes Noah as such:

נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו

Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age;

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<sup>1</sup> BT Shabbat 54b:20

Noah walked with God.

And yet, for a man more righteous than all his peers, for a man so blameless, for a man who walked with God, Noah is awfully silent about the state of the world around him. Amidst corruption, lawlessness, and violence, Noah fails to register his protest or rebuke. When he does learn of God's plan to destroy the world, a plan that includes saving himself and his own family, he fails to attempt any action to save humanity; there is not so much as a plea to God to change God's mind. By these standards of our Talmud, Noah is culpable in the death and destruction of the entire world.

One explanation for this comes from Alshech, a rabbinic commentator from 16th century Ottoman Empire, who notes that Noah walking with God means that "Noah practiced his religion between himself and God. He did not engage in teaching or preaching or trying to persuade his peers of his convictions." Professor Avivah Zornberg, a preeminent Torah scholar, also agrees with this assessment, arguing that "Noah's silence...is a metastasis of the sickness of his time. He is incurious. He does not care what happens to others. He, too, is imprisoned by the mighty waters." Another explanation of Noah's behavior can be found in a different figure from our Tanakh: the prophet Jonah. As you may remember, Jonah runs away into the belly of a whale, fleeing his God-appointed role to protest the actions of the people of Nineveh. So perhaps, like Jonah, Noah was afraid. Afraid of what his actions might lead to, the conflicts he might have to engage in, the chance that the lawlessness and corruption of the world might influence him in some way. In this regard, I have a lot of empathy for Noah. Choosing to take action, especially on behalf of others, can be incredibly difficult. And yet, Noah's actions, or rather his inaction, seem to be exactly the kind of behavior the rabbis of the Talmud were warning us against.

Now, it's important to remember that when our rabbis instituted this Talmudic idea around protest and culpability, they were living in very different times than our current day. People really knew their neighbors and others in their town, tribes and nations were smaller, so they actually could protest if they saw someone doing something wrong. But today, in our world? When we pass by or interact with dozens if not hundreds of people each day; when social media constantly gives us updates from friends, family, celebrities, and organizations about a variety of topics; when news headlines surround us, telling us about a horrific event across the country or around the world; how could we still be expected to lodge our protest for all of these things, big and small, personal and impersonal, every single day? How could we possibly be held culpable for people, and ideas, and decisions, and events that blow past us, perhaps not even on our radar. Or perhaps they're so big, so unwieldy that it feels as if we don't actually have a way to combat them. This Talmudic passage's insistence on protest feels incredibly difficult, overwhelming, unfair, and just about impossible. In fact, I worry that being held to this standard of culpability or complicity may lead us to not want to take action at all. In

our overwhelming questioning about how to respond to any number of issues, we may find ourselves falling silent, just like Noah.

I began studying and reflecting upon this Talmudic passage a few weeks ago when I heard Jane Doe's story of sexual assault and rape at Cornell University. The details are horrendous; the response by the university and the district attorney, entirely insufficient; the larger sexist and patriarchal system that exists in our society and world, all too real. It is infuriating that versions of this event continue to happen, again, and again, and again, not only on college campuses, but throughout our society. The detail in the story that has been echoing throughout my mind, and weighing on my heart and soul, is actually a number: 57. This is the number of young men who were part of the Chi Phi group that the night of this appalling event. 7 of these men are accused of directly sexually assaulting Jane Doe; the other 50 were notified of her intoxicated state and were invited to join the assault. It is despicable that these 7 young men would attack this young woman on that night; but it is equally despicable, unconscionable, that so many other young men could know about this horrific assault and not do something, anything to make it stop. Each of them had a choice that night, and in saying nothing, in doing nothing, they too are culpable. But that culpability didn't seem to stop at the doors of that fraternity house. It echoed beyond, to the university, to the bars that allowed underage drinking, to the institutions of Greek Life, to the justice system, and to so many of us, around the world, who felt our hearts break as we heard this story. I do not know Jane Doe or anyone directly involved with this case; I have only visited Cornell University one time in my life; I was never part of a fraternity in college; I have, in the past, spoken and written about sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy; and yet, I felt culpable when I heard this story. I felt responsible. Not guilty, not ashamed, but responsible. And desperately wanting to do everything possible to make sure that something like this never happens again.<sup>2</sup>

I similarly felt responsible last week when Oscar Belgal, a 28-year old immigrant from the Dominican Republic, was shot by ICE agents in our city, by our government. And I felt responsible yesterday when children were shot and killed at a school in Oregon. And I feel responsible when Palestinian families are attacked by Jewish supremacists in the West Bank, or killed by bombs in Gaza more than a year after the ceasefire was announced. Perhaps you do too, about these examples, or others that make their way to our head and heart each and every day. And so for as much as this Talmudic passage is challenging and difficult and feels just about impossible, maybe, just maybe, there are still ways it can call us into something bigger than ourselves. Because it is precisely in these moments of chaos - when a young woman is raped and 50 other young men don't respond, when immigrants are attacked in our own city by our own government, when children, the youngest five years old, are shot and killed at school, when Jewish supremacists destroy homes and lives in the West Bank - when the proverbial flood is coming down and engulfing the entire world of another human being, it is precisely in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/10/01/nyregion/cornell-rape-accusation-reporting.html>

these moments in which we cannot be silent. In which we must take responsibility for the agency we do hold in this world. For in our silence, our rabbis of the Talmud seemed to know, we too become culpable.

I'll conclude tonight with the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who called us to understand that "few are guilty, but all are responsible." So perhaps there is space, somewhere between not taking action at all and feeling entirely culpable for all the events of the world, perhaps there is space for responsibility. Seeing others as created in the image of God and feeling compelled to speak out, to support them, to love them, without feeling like we need to be a superhero taking care of all of the world's problems each and every day. And that feeling of responsibility can lead us out of the daze of culpability, and out of the stupor of total inaction to take ownership of our agency, the power we do hold, to protest, rebuke, organize, vote, donate, volunteer, and more. I pray that in these difficult times, we find the wisdom and the insight to hold onto our responsibilities towards others, and that together we move toward a better, brighter day. Shabbat Shalom.