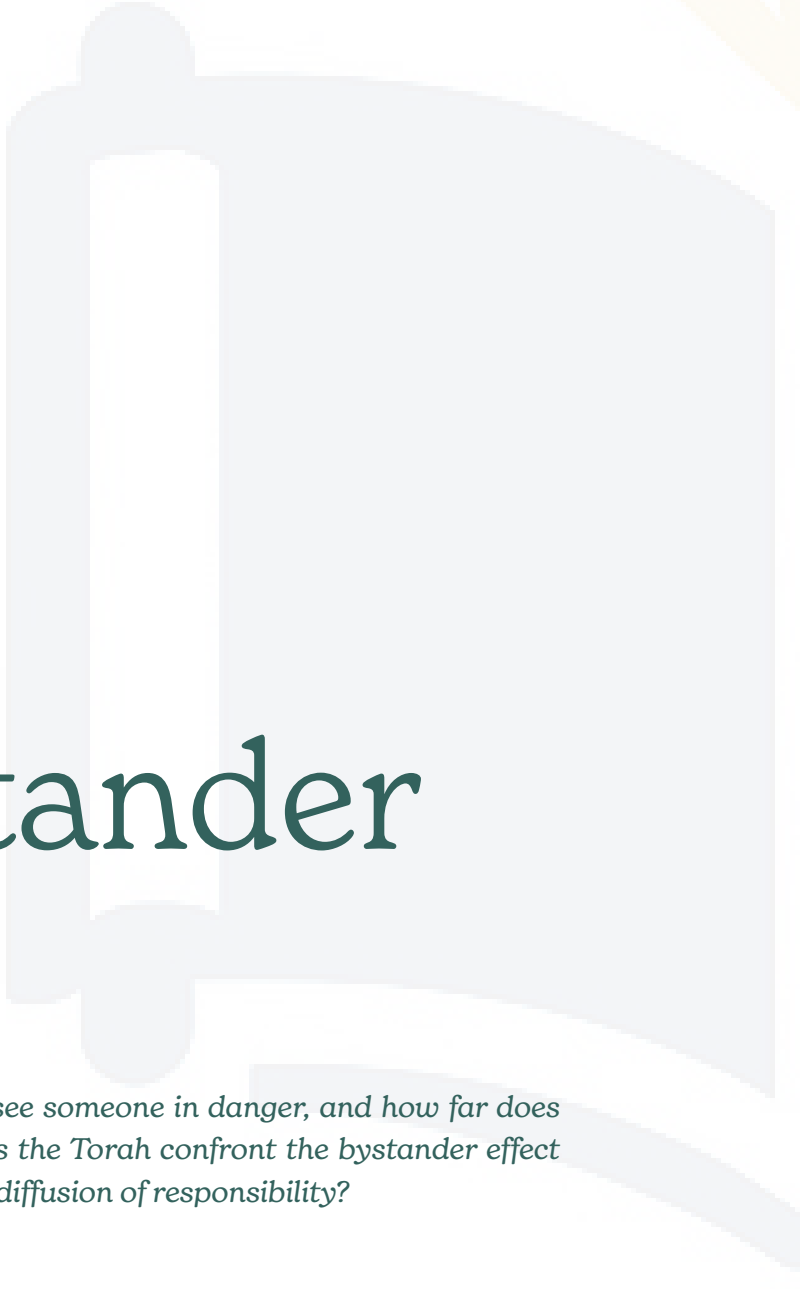




Kedoshim

The Bystander Effect

What are our true responsibilities when we see someone in danger, and how far does the Torah require us to go to help? How does the Torah confront the bystander effect and empower us to overcome hesitation and diffusion of responsibility?

Class Structure:

Overview: The Torah frames responsibility to others as absolute, challenging the bystander effect—the human tendency to assume someone else will act. Judaism emphasizes individual initiative: we are never mere spectators. Each encounter is purposeful, and intervention—physical, financial, or spiritual—is a personal duty. By internalizing this principle, one transforms observation into action, cultivating moral courage, communal care, and a proactive, spiritually attuned life.

Section 1: Not Voluntary: The Torah obligates stepping in to save others; inaction is considered complicity (**Vayikrah; Rashi; Shulchan Aruch**). This duty includes personal effort, hiring help, or financial expenditure to prevent harm (**Nimukei Yosef; Talmud; Rosh**). Silence in the face of wrongdoing spreads culpability (**Talmud**). Saving a life is like saving the entire world (**Rambam**).

Section 2: Removing the Bystander Effect: The Torah addresses the bystander effect by emphasizing individual responsibility: each person must act, even if others could intervene (**Mishna; Rambam; Shulchan Aruch**). Rewards and protections encourage participation, ensuring no one feels their effort is unnecessary (**Rambam; Shulchan Aruch**). Exemplars such as Moshe, Pinchas, and the Alter Rebbe show that initiative matters regardless of status, while all Jews are seen as guarantors for one another (**Talmud**).

Section 3: Not a Bystander: The Torah teaches there are no true bystanders: every person and situation is purposefully created, and being present where help is needed signals a role to act (**Talmud; Baal Shem Tov; Tehillim; Likkutei Sichos**). Divine Providence shows that encounters and events are intentional, making personal responsibility unavoidable. Recognizing this transforms observation into participation, and witnessing need becomes proof of one's ability and duty to intervene.

Section 4: Spiritual Saving: The Torah extends the obligation to save others from danger to their spiritual well-being (**Maharshdam; Shaloh; Vayikrah; Minchas Chinuch; Likkutei Sichos**). Just as physical life must be protected, so too the soul requires intervention. Failing to act spiritually risks greater loss, and seeing another in moral or religious peril is a call to step in, take responsibility, and actively help, regardless of status or expertise.

Introduction: The bystander effect is a psychological phenomenon in which people in a crowd are less likely to step forward and help, often because responsibility is diffused and everyone assumes someone else will act. This can occur in everyday situations, like picking up a hazard or helping clean up at a public event, but historically it has also played a role in far more serious circumstances — even when someone is under physical attack or facing the threat of death.

In this class, we will explore two key questions related to this phenomenon and what the Torah teaches about it: 1) What are our obligations to intervene and help others — what is required and what is considered extra or non-obligatory? And 2) How does the Torah address the bystander effect, encouraging people to step in and act even when others are present?

1. Not Voluntary

In society, there is a clear distinction between bystanders and upstanders. A bystander witnesses harm or injustice but does not act, while an upstander recognizes wrongdoing and intervenes. Campaigns like “If you see something, say something” and Good Samaritan laws aim to encourage intervention — the former by promoting reporting, the latter by protecting volunteers from liability. While upstanders are often praised for their moral courage, their intervention is typically viewed as a virtuous choice rather than a legal requirement.

The Torah, however, views helping those in distress very differently: it is not optional. Failing to intervene can even be considered taking part in the wrongdoing.

1.1 (STUDENT SOURCE 1) VAYIKRAH 19:16

לֹא תֵעָמַד עַל-דָּם רֵעֶךָ אֲנִי ה'.

You shall not stand idly by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood. I am the L-rd.

The commentators explain that this verse teaches that whenever a person is in a position to help save another, they are obligated to step in and do so.

1.2 RASHI, VAYIKRAH 19:16

לֹא תֵעָמַד עַל דָּם רֵעֶךָ. לְרֹאוֹת בְּמִיתָתוֹ וְאַתָּה יָכוֹל לְהַצִּילוֹ, כְּגוֹן טוֹבֵעַ בְּנָהָר וְחִיָּה אוֹ לִיְסָטִים בָּאִים עָלָיו

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor": [Meaning] to witness his death when you have the power to save him, such as [one] drowning in a river, or a wild beast or bandits attacking him.

The obligation to save another person applies not only when danger is immediate and visible. As the Shulchan Aruch clarifies, even if you become aware of a threat that is still approaching and have the ability to prevent it, you are required to step in and avert the harm.

1.3 (STUDENT SOURCE 2) SHULCHAN ARUCH, CHOSHEN MISHPAT 426:1

חַיֵּב אָדָם לְהַצִּיל אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ בֵּין בְּגוּפוֹ בֵּין בְּמָמוֹנוֹ. הָרוּאָה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ טוֹבֵעַ בַּיָּם אוֹ לְסֻטִּים בָּאֵין עָלָיו אוֹ חֵיהָ רָעָה בָּאָה עָלָיו וַיְכוּל לְהַצִּילוֹ הוּא בְּעֶצְמוֹ אוֹ שְׂשִׁכְרֵי אַחֲרִים לְהַצִּיל וְלֹא הִצִּיל אוֹ שְׂשִׁמְעָה עֲבוּרָם אוֹ מוֹסְרִים מִחֲשָׁבִים עָלָיו רָעָה אוֹ טוֹמְנִים לוֹ פֶּחַ וְלֹא גָלָה אֶזְזֵן חֲבֵרוֹ וְהוֹדִיעָיו אוֹ שְׂיָדַע בְּעֶבְרוֹ"ם אוֹ בְּאַנָּס שֶׁהוּא בָּא עַל חֲבֵרוֹ וַיְכוּל לְפִיסּוֹ בְּגִלְלֵי חֲבֵרוֹ וְלִהְסִיר מֶה שֶׁבִּלְכוּ וְלֹא פִּיסּוֹ וְכִיּוּצָא בְּדִבְרֵים אֲלוֹ עוֹבֵר עַל לֹא תַעֲמִיד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ:

A person is obligated to save their fellow, whether through physical effort or financial expense. If someone sees their fellow drowning in the sea, being attacked by bandits, or being chased by a wild animal, and has the ability to rescue them personally—or to hire others to rescue them—but fails to do so; or if they hear that [hostile people] or informers are plotting harm against their fellow or setting a trap for them, but do not inform them; or if they know of a violent person or an extortionist who is coming after their fellow, and have the ability to appease that person and change their mind for the sake of their fellow, but do not; in all these cases and similar situations, one violates the commandment: 'Do not stand idly by your neighbor's blood.'

Perspective Shift: Our responsibility to help others is not limited to moments when danger is unfolding right in front of us. The obligation begins much earlier — from the moment we become aware that someone may be at risk. At that point, remaining passive is no longer an option; we are required to speak up, intervene, and do what we reasonably can to prevent harm. This understanding dramatically broadens the scope of the mitzvah. It is not only about rescuing someone in an emergency, but about anticipating danger and taking steps to stop it before it happens.

The obligation to save another person includes using every reasonable means necessary—whether that requires personal effort, time, physical exertion, or even financial loss by hiring others to help. As the commentators explain, this mitzvah demands action through any effective means, even at a monetary cost.

1.4 NIMUKEI YOSEF, SANHEDRIN 73A

ת"ל לא תעמד וכו' דמשמע לא תעמד על עצמך, אלא חזר בכל הצדדין שלא יאבד דם רעך, אפלו לטרח ולשכר שכירים להצילו

The Torah teaches: 'Do not stand idly by.' This implies: Don't stay wrapped up in yourself. Instead, you must exhaust every possible angle to ensure your neighbor's life is not lost—even if it requires you to go to great trouble or spend money to hire others to help you save them.

This principle is derived from the Talmud's distinction between the mitzvah of saving a life and the mitzvah of returning lost property. At first glance, saving a person's life should naturally fall under the broader obligation to restore what another has lost. Yet the Torah teaches it as a separate commandment to highlight a critical difference: while one is not required to spend personal funds to return lost property, one is obligated to use money to save a life. The Torah thus makes clear that when human life is at stake, financial considerations must not stand in the way.

1.5 BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SANHEDRIN 73A

מניין לרואה את חברו טובע בנהר, או חיה גורדתו, או לסטין באין עליו, שהוא חייב להצילו? תלמוד לומר: "לא תעמד על דם רעך". והא מהכא נפקא? מהתם נפקא! אברת גופו מניין? תלמוד לומר: "והשבתו לו". אי מהתם, הוה אמינא: הני מילי בנפשיה, אבל מיטרח ומיגר אגורי – אימא לא. קא משמע לן.

The Gemara asks: Is the obligation to save someone really learned from the verse "Do not stand idly by your fellow's blood"? Don't we already learn it elsewhere? The Torah's command to return lost objects includes extra wording that can be understood to mean restoring the person himself — that is, saving his body. If so, why do we need the additional verse, "Do not stand idly by your fellow's blood"? The Gemara explains: If we learned the obligation only from the law of returning lost property, we might think a person is required to help only when he can do so personally. One might assume he is not obligated to spend money or hire others to help, just as one is not required to hire workers to recover someone else's lost object. Therefore, the Torah adds "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow," teaching that one must even hire others if needed.

Although financial loss must not stand in the way of saving a life, the responsibility to repay those expenses ultimately rests with the person saved, and the rescuer is entitled to demand reimbursement. Nevertheless, even if it is clear that the person

being rescued will be unable to repay, anyone who has the means remains obligated to spend whatever money is necessary to save that life.

1.6 ROSH, SANHEDRIN 73A

וְהַנִּצְלוֹ חַיֵּב לְפָרַע לְמַצִּיל מִה שְׁהוּצִיא דָּאֵן אָדָם מִחַיֵּב לְהַצִּיל נֶפֶשׁ חֵבֶרֶוּ בְּמִמוֹנָו
הֵיכָא דְאִית לָהּ מִמוֹנָא לְנִצּוֹל

The person who was saved must repay the rescuer for any expenses they incurred. The logic is this: while you are absolutely obligated to save a person's life, you are not required to do it at your own financial expense if the person you saved is actually capable of paying for their own rescue.

In practice, this can have wide-ranging implications. Whenever we are in a position to influence outcomes — whether by warning others, offering support, creating safer systems, or helping establish policies and safeguards — we carry a responsibility to act. If our involvement could help prevent serious injury, loss of life, or financial harm, as we will see, then stepping forward is not merely commendable; it is our duty.

Deeper Exploration: How far does the responsibility to save another person extend, and is one obligated—or even permitted—to place oneself in physical danger in order to rescue someone else? This question is the subject of significant halachic debate. Some authorities rule that when a rescue involves no danger to life, only bodily harm, helping is praiseworthy but not obligatory (Radvaz 3:1052). When there is potential risk to life, opinions sharply diverge: some maintain that one is still obligated to act (Kesef Mishneh, Laws of Murder and Preservation of Life 1:14), while many others hold that one is not obligated to endanger one's life (S'ma, Choshen Mishpat 426). Some further distinguish based on the level of risk, ruling that if the chance of fatality is 50% or higher, there is no obligation to intervene, but if the risk is less than 50%, one is obligated to act (Radvaz, Leshonos HaRambam 1:582; Yechaveh Daas 3:84). Others rule that risking one's life for another is prohibited altogether, based on the principle that one's own life takes precedence (Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chaim 329:8; Minchas Chinuch 237), while still others hold that although such self-risk is not obligatory, it is nevertheless permitted (Igros Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 2:174:4).

Failure to act and intervene when we are able, can itself be considered a form of participation in wrongdoing. When we stand by passively and do not step in,

we become part of the problem, as though we have agreed to or endorsed the wrongdoing. The Talmud teaches that a person's responsibility extends according to their sphere of influence; the greater one's ability to effect change, the greater their accountability. If someone fails to protest wrongdoing they could have stopped, they are held responsible for it as if they had committed the act themselves.

1.7 (STUDENT SOURCE 3) BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBOS 54B

כל מי שְׁאַפְשֵׁד לְמַחֲוֹת לְאִנְשֵׁי בֵּיתוֹ וְלֹא מִיָּחָה — נִתְפָּס עַל אֲנִשֵּׁי בֵּיתוֹ. כָּאִנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ — נִתְפָּס עַל אֲנִשֵּׁי עִירוֹ. בְּכֹל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלֵוֹ — נִתְפָּס עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כּוֹלֵוֹ.

Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is apprehended for the sins of the members of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.

Perspective Shift: The Torah teaches that silence in the face of wrongdoing is tantamount to agreement and complicity. When we have the ability to create positive change and choose to ignore it, we become part of the problem. Torah was the first to champion those who step up to act when they witness wrongdoing, and this responsibility applies at every level of influence. For someone in public office, their reach—and therefore their accountability—can extend far beyond that of an ordinary person. But the Talmud makes clear that this duty is not reserved only for those with broad influence. Even if your sphere of impact is limited to your community or family, you are obligated to act. Simply avoiding participation in the wrongdoing does not absolve you; if you have the ability to make a difference and fail to do so, you are, in effect, part of the problem.

The Rambam explains the profound responsibility to step in and save another by teaching that every person is like an entire world, and saving a single life is akin to saving the whole world. When we adopt this perspective, the obligation to help those in need becomes clear. Consider all the future generations a person might bring into the world, and the positive impact they can have on others. The Torah reminds us that all of humanity descends from a single man and woman—imagine the potential contained within each individual. Every life has the power to shape the world, and that is why saving even one is a duty of the highest magnitude.

1.8 (STUDENT SOURCE 4) RAMBAM, MURDER AND PROTECTION OF LIFE 1:16

כל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, כאילו אבד כל העולם כולו; וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל, כאילו קיים כל העולם כולו.

Anyone who destroys a single soul, it is as if he has destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a single soul, it is as if he has sustained an entire world.

2. Removing the Bystander Effect

Transition: We've examined the responsibility to intervene and save someone in danger. Next, we turn to how the Torah addresses the psychological challenges that can prevent action—specifically, the bystander effect and the tendency to assume that someone else will step in.

Discussion Question: What kind of systems or mindsets can help reduce the bystander effect and motivate people to step forward and act?

STORY:

Once, a king was visiting a town, and the townspeople wanted to honor him with a grand gift: a giant barrel filled with their finest wine. To gather enough wine, each family was asked to contribute a single flask, which would be poured into the barrel each day. A massive barrel was set up in the town square, and everyone lined up eagerly to add their share.

Finally, the king arrived. The townspeople proudly presented the barrel, filled a royal goblet, and offered it to him. But when the king took a sip, his face fell. "It's just water," he said.

It turned out that each family had thought the same thing: "Why should I be the one to contribute wine? One flask of water won't matter." Every family relied on someone else to do the right thing — and in the end, no one poured wine at all. The barrel was filled entirely with water.

A relatable adage from the Talmud captures the problems of shared responsibility.

2.1 BAVA BASRA 24B

אמר רב כהנא: קידרא דבי שותפי – לא חמימא ולא קרירא.

Rav Kahana said, "A pot belonging to partners is neither hot nor cold [since each partner relies on the other to make it the ideal temperature]."

The obligation to step in and save someone is clear, and failing to act can have serious consequences. Yet even with this responsibility, psychological factors can prevent people from helping. Research has shown that the bystander effect can make individuals less likely to intervene, as they assume someone else will act. While other factors—such as the ambiguity of the situation or familiarity with the place or victim—can contribute, the key factor is this diffusion of responsibility: the assumption that others will step in instead. Interestingly, Judaism addresses this challenge directly, offering three main approaches from the Torah that can inspire a person to recognize their own duty and act without waiting for others.

On a fundamental level, the Torah takes a remarkable approach to rewarding and protecting those who step in to help, especially in situations where people might assume that others will take responsibility. A clear example of this is seen with the witnesses for the new moon. In ancient times, the sanctification of the new moon relied on two kosher witnesses who had to see the moon and testify before the high court. Their testimony was carefully examined through rigorous cross-questioning to ensure accuracy.

The law required that anyone who saw the new moon must travel to testify—even if it meant desecrating Shabbat—to ensure the court received their account on time. Since many people might come forward, even though only two witnesses were necessary, the court would host a large feast for all who arrived and would listen individually to each pair of witnesses, even after the first two testimonies were sufficient to establish the new moon.

These practices were designed to encourage participation and prevent anyone from feeling that their contribution was unnecessary or irrelevant. This approach reflects the Torah's unique way of motivating people to act, ensuring that even when others could step in, individuals still feel a personal responsibility to help.

2.2 RAMBAM, SANCTIFICATION OF THE NEW MOON 2:7

ביצד מקבלין עדות החדש. כל מי שראוי להעיד שראה את הירח בא לבית דין. ובית דין מכניסים אותן כלן למקום אחד ועושין להן סעודות גדולות כדי שיהיו העם רגילין לבוא. וזוג שבא ראשון בודקין אותן ראשון בבדיקות שאמרנו. מכניסין את

הַגְדוֹל וְשׂוֹאֵלִין אוֹתוֹ. נִמְצְאוּ דְבָרָיו מְכוּנִים לְחֶשְׁבֹן מְכַנְיָסִים אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ. נִמְצְאוּ דְבָרֵיהֶם מְכוּנִין עֲדוּתָן קִימָה. וְשֹׂאֵר כָּל הַזּוּגוֹת שׂוֹאֵלִין אוֹתָם רֹאשֵׁי דְבָרִים. לֹא שְׂעָרִים לָהֶם אֶלָּא כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יֵצְאוּ בְּפַחֵי נֶפֶשׁ, כְּדִי שֶׁיְהִיוּ רְגִילִין לְבוֹא:

How is the testimony for the New Moon accepted? Anyone eligible to testify who saw the moon comes to the High Court. The Court gathers everyone in one location and hosts elaborate banquets for them, so that the public will be encouraged to make a habit of coming. The first pair to arrive is the first to be examined using the tests we have established. The court brings in the senior witness and questions him. If his account aligns with the astronomical calculations, they bring in his partner. If their accounts match, the testimony is legally established. As for all the other pairs, the judges ask them for the 'highlights' of their report. This isn't because the Court actually needs their testimony, but rather so they don't leave feeling let down—ensuring they keep showing up.

Another example appears in the laws of desecrating Shabbos to save a life. Jewish law rules that if a person requires life-saving medicine on Shabbos, and ten people bring it—even though the patient is healed by the first one—the others are still exempt from violating Shabbat and are rewarded by Heaven. In this way, the Torah protects and honors those who step in to help, even when their efforts ultimately prove unnecessary. This principle reinforces the importance of rewarding individual action in situations where people might assume that someone else will take responsibility, encouraging participation and a sense of personal duty rather than passively relying on others.

2.3 (STUDENT SOURCE 5) SHULCHAN ARUCH, ORACH CHAYIM 328:15

אֲמָרוּהוּ [כִּי הִתְבּוֹנְנוּ בְּמַחֲלָתוֹ וְשִׁעְרוּ] הָרופֵּאִים שְׂעָרִיד גְּרוּגֶרֶת אַחַת וְרִצּוֹ עֶשְׂרֵה וְהֵבִיאוּ לוֹ כָּל א' גְּרוּגֶרֶת כָּלֶם פְּטוּדִים וַיֵּשׁ לָהֶם שְׂכָר טוֹב מֵאֵת ה' אֶפְלוֹ הַכֹּרֵיָא בְּרֹאשׁוֹנָה:

If the doctors appraised him (that is, examined his illness and estimated) that he requires one fig, and ten people ran and each brought him one fig, they are all exempt, and they have a good reward from G-d, even if he got well with the first.

Beyond rewarding and protecting those who help, even when others could step in, the Torah also reframes responsibility from a communal to an individual level. While it may seem natural to view a person or situation in need as simply “something that needs help,” without a personal obligation, the Torah teaches that the duty rests on the individual who witnesses it. Even if a hundred others could intervene, this does not diminish your specific responsibility to act. This perspective prevents

deferring to others or hoping the situation will sort itself out. What truly matters is that you fulfill your own personal duty to respond and help, regardless of what others do.

This principle is reflected in the Mishna's teaching: "In a place where there are no men, be a man." It calls on each person to take responsibility and step up where no one else is. If you see something that needs help, it is your responsibility to intervene and be the person the situation requires.

2.4 (STUDENT SOURCE 6) MISHNA, AVOS 2:5

במקום שאין אנשים, השתדל להיות איש:

In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.

This idea of taking personal responsibility when no one else will has been embodied by both great leaders and ordinary people throughout Jewish history. First and foremost, Moshe led in this way. As a young man, while checking on the welfare of his fellow Jews, he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jewish man. The Torah says that Moshe "looked this way and that way" before striking the Egyptian to save the man. Commentators explain that this phrase refers to Moshe glancing around at the other Jews who were present—realizing that no one else was willing to act, he stepped in himself. Moshe's example teaches us the profound lesson of stepping up and taking personal responsibility, even when others remain passive.

2.5 SHEMOS 2:11-12

ויהי בימים ההם ויגדל משה ויצא אל-אחיו וירא בסבלתם וירא איש מצרי מכה איש-עברי מאחיו: ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש ויד את המצרי ויטמנהו בחול:

Years later, after Moses had grown up, he went out to be among his own people and truly saw their suffering. He witnessed an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man—one of his own brothers. He looked this way and that, and he saw that there was no man. So, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

2.6 HAKESAV V'HAKABALAH, SHEMOS 2:12

ויפן כה וכה. חשב משה שאחד מאחיו העברים העומדים סביבו יתקומם על המצרי ויציל את אחיו המכה מפת מות: וירא כי אין איש. ראה שאין ביניהם גבר בגבורו, ואין מהם שם על לב צרת אחיו להשתדל על הצלתו

"And he turned this way and that way": Moshe thought that one of his Hebrew brothers standing around him would rise up against the Egyptian and rescue his brother, who was being

beaten with a death-blow. "And he saw that there was no man": He saw that there was no "proper man" among them, and none of them took the distress of his brothers to heart to strive for his rescue.

Years later, this principle was powerfully demonstrated in Pinchas's bold actions. While the Israelites were in the desert, a devastating plague swept through the camp, claiming thousands of lives, triggered by the sexual immorality of the Jews with the Midianite women. In one particularly shocking incident, the head of the tribe of Shimon brazenly brought a Midianite princess into his tent in full view of all the Jewish leaders, daring them to act. Seeing that the leaders were paralyzed and uncertain, Pinchas took matters into his own hands, killing both the leader and the princess, thereby halting the plague. Although he could have been swayed by the inaction of the leadership around him, Pinchas recognized the correct course of action and stepped up to fulfill his personal responsibility, becoming the decisive force in a moment that demanded courage and moral clarity.

2.7 BAMIDBAR 25:6-8

וְהָנָה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל-אָחִיו אֶת-הַמְדִּינִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְעֵינֵי כָל-
עֵדֵת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָמָּה בָּכִים פָּתַח אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד: וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן
וַיָּקָם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקָּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ: וַיָּבֹא אַחֵר אִישׁ-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-הַקִּבְּהָ וַיִּדְקָר אֶת-
שְׁנֵיהֶם יַת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-קִסְתָּהּ וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמִּזְגָּפָה מִעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

A man from the Children of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his brothers, before the eyes of Moses and the entire assembly of the Children of Israel. They were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aharon the Priest, saw [this], and he rose from the midst of the assembly and took a spear in his hand. He went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both—the man of Israel and the woman—through her belly. As a result, the plague ended among the Children of Israel.

The actions of Pinchas were rewarded with the priesthood—an eternal recognition for stepping forward to defend G-d's honor and protect the Jewish people when others remained passive. This teaches how greatly G-d values those who take responsibility and intervene to help when it matters most.

STORY:

One Yom Kippur, in the town of Liozna, while the congregation was deep in prayer and fasting on the holiest day of the year, the

Alter Rebbe suddenly set aside his tallis and kittel and quietly left the synagogue. His disciples, puzzled and concerned, followed him only to see him walk purposefully to the edge of the town. There, in a simple cottage, lived a poor woman who had just given birth and had no one to care for her. Instead of returning to intense prayer, the Rebbe gathered wood, built a fire, and cooked nourishing soup for her and her newborn. When asked later why he did this himself rather than sending someone else, he explained that in a matter of pikuach nefesh—saving a life—the greatest Jew should be the one to act. After helping her, he returned to the synagogue and continued his prayers, his actions teaching that caring for a fellow Jew in need takes precedence even on the most sacred day.

Perspective Shift: The actions of Moshe, Pinchas, and the Alter Rebbe teach us that initiative isn't limited by status — whether someone is the leader of the Jewish people or an ordinary Jew, each person can and must step forward to act. Great leaders like Moshe or the Alter Rebbe might have felt that intervening personally was beneath their dignity, or assumed that someone simpler would handle it. Yet they led by example, taking responsibility for even menial or difficult tasks to help others. At the same time, an ordinary person like Pinchas, seeing the inaction of the leaders, could have thought, "If they aren't acting, who am I to step in?" Instead, Pinchas teaches the opposite: when we see something wrong, we don't wait for others or question why no one else is responding. It doesn't matter if the greatest and wisest remain passive — that does not lessen our own responsibility. When there is a problem, the lesson of Pinchas is clear: don't look around — look within, and act.

The message of personal responsibility is expressed even more powerfully in the Mishnah's teaching that a person should say, "The world was created for me." This idea is not meant to promote arrogance or empty pride, but to instill a deep sense of responsibility.

The message of the Sages is that just as Adam was created alone, with no one else to act in his place, so too each person should feel that if something needs to be done and they do not do it, it may never be done. In the same way, we are responsible for what happens around us. We shouldn't rely on others; we should live with the mindset that if I don't step up, no one else will. This perspective strengthens our sense of individual responsibility, reminding us that our actions truly matter.

2.8 MISHNA, SANHEDRIN 4:5

לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד... כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא העולם.

Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: "The world was created for me," as one person can be the source of all humanity, and to recognize the significance of their actions.

Perspective Shift: Another way to understand this Torah reframing is through the language of *chakirah*, distinguishing between *chovas gavrah*—the individual's personal responsibility—and *chovas cheftzah*—the responsibility inherent in the situation or object itself. Traditionally, people often view situations of danger as problems to be solved, where anyone who intervenes is seen as going beyond their duty—a hero. In this mindset, onlookers do not feel personally responsible; they see the situation as needing help and assume someone else will act. This is exactly what drives the bystander effect: we notice a problem but do not take action because we assume others will step in. The Torah reframes this perspective. It teaches that it is not the situation itself that creates the obligation to act, but your individual responsibility. It does not matter if the situation could be resolved by others or in another way; anyone who witnesses it must step in because it is their duty. The question is not whether the problem will be fixed, but whether you are fulfilling your personal responsibility to address it. In this way, those who act are not performing heroic or extra work—they are simply doing what they are obligated to do.

On a deeper level, this personal responsibility arises from the individual obligation we share toward one another as Jews. The Talmud teaches that all Jews are like guarantors for each other, taking on personal responsibility for the well-being of every fellow Jew. This makes another person's suffering deeply personal and places a direct duty on us to help. The close bonds that unite the Jewish people create a sense of individual responsibility: because we are all interconnected, what happens to one is not the concern of a stranger or something to observe from the sidelines—it is happening to someone to whom we are deeply connected. In this way, each person's plight becomes a personal call to action.

2.9 (STUDENT SOURCE 7) BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHAVUOS 39B

כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה

All Jews are considered guarantors for each other.

To combat the bystander effect, we can learn two important lessons from how the Torah assigns responsibility.

First, when a task could be handled by many people, the Torah often establishes rewards and protective measures that encourage individuals to feel needed and step forward to help.

Second, the Torah reframes responsibility from a communal to an individual level. What matters is not what others are doing, but whether you are fulfilling your obligation to help. The Torah teaches us not to focus on the crowd, but to recognize that we each carry a duty — and if we fail to act, we are not only failing the situation, but failing ourselves as well.

3. *Not a Bystander*

Transition: We've explored two ways the Torah addresses the bystander effect. Now we'll turn to a third approach: according to the concept of Hashgacha Pratis, there is, in truth, no such thing as a bystander.

Until now, we've addressed the bystander effect from the perspective that even if you find yourself on the sidelines, the Torah teaches that you still carry a personal responsibility to step in and get involved. On a deeper level, however, we can go further: in truth, there is no such thing as a bystander at all. The very idea that we are merely spectators to someone else's situation — with the responsibility to get involved — is, at its core, mistaken. With this perspective, the whole problem of the bystander effect never really begins, because the people present are not spectators; they are really part of the situation and its responsibility.

This fundamental shift in how we view our obligation to help others flows from a core concept in Torah and Chassidic thought: Hashgacha Pratis — Divine Providence. This teaches that nothing in the world happens by chance and that everything has purpose and meaning. As expressed in the Talmud, nothing that G-d created was made in vain.

3.1 BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBOS 77B

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: כֹּל מַה שֶּׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ לֹא בָרָא דָּבָר
אֶחָד לְבַטְלָהּ.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Everything that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing in vain.

This teaching is deeply logical. G-d does not create anything without purpose. If you ask a designer why a particular element exists in their work, they can explain its role — whether practical or aesthetic. In the same way, everything in creation must have meaning.

With deeper reflection, this idea extends far beyond the notion that every being was created with a purpose. It teaches that everything that exists has a purpose — not only people and creations, but also events, encounters, and experiences in a person's life. Since everything is created by G-d, every moment we experience is intentional and meaningful.

This perspective was strongly emphasized by the founder of Chassidic teaching, the Baal Shem Tov. He taught that everything a person sees or hears is purposeful, orchestrated by G-d to teach them something. Therefore, the Baal Shem Tov explains, it is a person's responsibility to reflect on each situation they encounter and try to understand the message being sent to them from Heaven.

3.2 KESSER SHEM TOV, HOSAFOS 225

מורנו הבעש"ט האט געזאגט די תלמידים אז דער דרך אמיתי איז אז דאס וואס א מענטש זעט און הערס איז נישט קיין צופעליקע זאכן נאר א הוראה מן השמים מען באדארף מערדן רחמי שמים זיין אז מען זאל זוכה זיין צו פארשטיין דאס וואס מען זעט

Our teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, said to his students that the true path is [to realize] that what a person sees and hears are not accidental things, but rather an instruction from Heaven. One must awaken Heavenly mercy so that one may merit to understand that which one sees.

This concept is reflected in Tehillim and is something we acknowledge in our daily blessings. Each morning we say, “Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d... who directs the steps of man,” affirming that the places we go and the experiences we encounter are purposeful and intentional. Even when something feels coincidental, we carry the responsibility to reflect and try to understand why we were guided to that moment or place.

3.3 TEHILLIM 37:23

מה' מצעדיו יגבר מוננו וידרכו יחפץ:

A man's steps are established by the Lord, and He finds favor in his path.

This lesson gives us a new perspective on our responsibility toward others. The very fact that we find ourselves in a place where help is needed is not a coincidence, but divinely directed. We are there so that we can help.

Just as no creation or life experience is in vain, nothing we are shown is in vain either. Whatever we see is something G-d intended for us to see, for a reason. Therefore, simply being present and recognizing that help is needed is itself a sign that we have a role to play.

At that point, it is no longer just a question of whether we choose to help, but whether we will fulfill our part in the situation or ignore it — the very part that could change the outcome. In other words, we are not bystanders; we are participants. If we were guided to be there when help was needed, it is because we are meant to step in and make a difference.

3.3 (STUDENT SOURCE 8) LIKKUTEI SICHOS, VOLUME 32 P. 125

מוֹכֵן דְּכַשְׁאָדָם רוֹאֶה אוֹ שׁוֹמֵעַ אִיזָה דְּכַר עַכְצ"ל שְׁשִׁמְיָהּ אוֹ רֵאִיָּה זֶה אֵינָה לְבַטְלָה... וַיֵּשׁ לוֹמַר שְׁוִדְדוֹ הִרְמִזוּ בְּלִשׁוֹן רַשִׁי "לְרֹאוֹת בְּמִיתָתוֹ וְאַתָּה יָכוֹל לְהַצִּילוֹ" - דָּהָא בְּהָא תִּלְיָא, דְּזִה גּוֹפֵא שְׁאַתָּה רוֹאֶה אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ בְּסִכְנַת מִיתָה ("לְרֹאוֹת בְּמִיתָתוֹ") הֲרִי זֶה הוֹכְחָה שְׁ"אַתָּה יָכוֹל לְהַצִּילוֹ", שְׁנִתֵּן לְךָ הַכֹּחַ לְהַצִּילוֹ דָּאֵם לֹא כֵן מִדּוּעַ הִרְאוּ לְךָ זֹאת? וְהֲרִי לֹא בְּרָא הַקב"ה דְּכַר אֶחָד - כּוֹלֵל גַּם רֵאִי זֶה - לְבַטְלָה!

It is understood that when a person sees or hears anything, it must be said that this seeing or hearing is not in vain... And this is the hint within the language of Rashi: 'To see his death and you are able to save him'—for one is dependent upon the other. For the very fact that you see your fellow in danger of death ('to see his death')—this itself is the proof that 'you are able to save him'; that the power has been given to you to save him. For if it were not so, why were you shown this? For the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not create a single thing—including this act of seeing—in vain!

4. Spiritual Saving

Transition: Having explored our responsibility to step in and help others in physical danger, we now turn to how this obligation extends to spiritual needs as well. Many commentators explain that just as we are responsible for a person's physical safety, we also share responsibility for their spiritual well-being.

We've explored the responsibility to physically save others from harm, and how far that obligation extends — to the point that we recognize we are part of the situation and present in order to help. Many commentators add that this mitzvah

of saving someone from physical danger also includes saving them from spiritual harm or loss.

A striking example appears in a 16th-century responsum addressed to Rabbi Shmuel di Medina. A group of Jews wrote to him about a case in which a Jewish boy from their region had run away with non-Jews, abandoning his faith. When the group reached the next town, local Jews realized what had happened. After speaking with the boy and confirming that he wanted to return to his father, they rescued him, taking him in and protecting him at significant personal expense through bribes and shelter. Unfortunately, they were only able to hide him for three days before the non-Jewish group located him and took him back.

They asked Rabbi Shmuel whether the financial losses they incurred could be treated like the costs involved in saving someone's physical life. (Ultimately, he ruled that the father was not obligated to reimburse them, since repayment is required only when the person is actually saved — which, tragically, was not the case here.) In his response, Rabbi Shmuel compares the case directly to the commandment to save a life — and teaches that saving someone from spiritual danger is, in a sense, even more severe and significant than saving them physically.

4.1 (STUDENT SOURCE 9) SHALOS UTESHUVAS MAHARSHDAM, YOREH DEAH 204

אם להציל דם חברו חייב לטרח בין בגופו בין בממונו להצילו, להציל נפשו מני
שחת על אחת כמה וכמה שחייב

If you are obligated to go out of your way—using both your physical effort and your own money—just to save your neighbor's physical life, then it is even more obvious that you are obligated to help save their soul from spiritual ruin.

This comparison is echoed in the teachings of the Shaloh, who adds that the Torah's use of the word “your friend” implies a spiritual partnership. It teaches that another person's spiritual well-being is bound up with your own — so failing to help rescue someone from spiritual decline is, in a sense, like undermining your own spiritual state.

4.2 SHALOH, TORAH SHEBICHSAV, KEDOSHIM

אם נתחייבנו בהצלת הגוף כל שכן בהצלת הנפש שאם יראנו עובר עברה שמאכר
עולמו יצילו. הנחה: והא דשני קרא וזמר “רעד”, הטעם לפי שהוא מסייעך בתורה
ובמצות, אם כן למה תזיק לעצמך

If we are required to rescue someone's physical body, it is

even more obvious that we are obligated to rescue their soul. If you see someone about to sin and destroy their world, you are required to step in and save them. Note: The reason the Torah specifically uses the word 'your fellow' (Re'echa) is that this person is actually like your partner; they help you grow in Torah and Mitzvos. When you look at it that way, failing to help them is like sabotaging yourself—why would you want to damage yourself?

The idea of stepping in to help and taking responsibility for another person is also connected to the mitzvah of rebuke. The Torah commands us to correct someone who is doing wrong, and the verse adds that if we fail to do so, we may become implicated in the sin ourselves. This parallels the principle that failing to act or protest when someone is in physical danger can render a person complicit in the harm.

4.3 VAYIKRAH 19:17

הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלֶיךָ חֵטְא:

You shall surely rebuke your friend, so that you don't bear a sin because of him.

Commentators explain that the positive mitzvah of rebuke is closely tied to the negative commandment of not standing idly by your fellow's blood — the source for the obligation to save someone physically. They teach that this prohibition includes saving someone from spiritual harm as well. Standing by while someone declines morally, without attempting to help, is viewed as no less serious than watching someone drown and doing nothing.

4.4 MINCHAS CHINUCH, MITZVAH 239

וּנ"ל דְּחִיּוּב הַתּוֹכָחָה הִיא חוּץ מֵעֲשֵׂה זֶה עוֹד מִתְחַיֵּב אֲלֵא תַעֲשֶׂה דְלֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דָּם
רָעָךְ דְּלֹא גָרַע מְטוֹבֵעַ בְּנָהָר דְּעוֹבֵר עַל לֹא תַעֲמֹד ... עֲאֻכּו"כ דָּאִם יָכוֹל לְהַצִּיל מִן
הַעֲבֵרָה דְּהוּא אֲבֵדַת נַפְשׁוֹ וְגוֹפּוֹ ר"ל בְּדַאִי חַיֵּב לְהַחֲזִירוֹ לְמוֹטֵב וּלְהַצִּילוֹ

It seems to me that the obligation to rebuke is not only grounded in the specific commandment 'You shall surely rebuke,' but is also required by the negative commandment: 'Do not stand idly by your neighbor's blood.' For moral danger is no less serious than someone drowning in a river, where one violates 'Do not stand idly' [by failing to help]... How much more so if one can rescue another from a transgression, which constitutes the loss of both their soul and their body, G-d forbid; one is certainly obligated to bring them back to the good path and save them.

The equal severity of physical and spiritual harm can be seen in the story of the harsh decrees of Pharaoh against the Jews in Egypt. In a fascinating insight, the Rebbe notes that while the boys were to be killed, the girls were to be “made to live” — a phrase that seems redundant at first glance.

He explains that this meant the girls were to be raised in Egyptian culture and values, which would spiritually corrupt them — in effect, destroying their souls. By placing both decrees side by side, the Torah underscores that spiritual destruction is no less devastating — and, in truth, even more severe — than physical death.

4.5 LIKKUTEI SICHOS, VOLUME 1 P. 111

כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו וכל הבת תחיון: "תחיון" איז דער טייטש און דיוק: איר זאלט זיי לאזן לעבן - באַלעבן. די זעלבע מצריים, וועמען פרעה האָט אָנגעזאָגט אז זיי זאלן אַרייַנוואַרפֿן אידישע קינדער אין טייך, בכדי אָפּצוטיטן ר"ל זייער גוף, האָט ער זיי אויך אָנגעזאָגט אז די שארית הפליטה קינדער וועלכע וועלן בלייבן לעבן (בגשמיות), זאלן זיי - די מצריים - מחי' זיין זיי - דערציען אין זייער דרך, אין לעבנסוועג פון מצרים, בכדי אָפּצוטיטן ר"ל זייער נשמה... און פון דעם וואס די תורה זאָגט ביידע גזירות צוזאַמען, אין דעם זעלבן פסוק, איז אַ רא"י אַז דער "וכל הבת תחיון" איז גיט קיין קלענערע גזירה פון "כל הבן הילוד היאורה תשליכוהו", אָפּטויטן ר"ל די נשמה איז אזוי האַרב ווי אָפּטויטן דעם גוף, און נאָך ערגער. ווייל: קשה מיתה רוחנית יותר ממיתה גשמית - אַ גייסטיקער טויט איז ערגער פון אַ קערפּערלעכן טויט.

Every boy born, you shall throw into the Nile, and every girl you shall keep alive (techayun)." The word techayun carries a precise meaning: you should make them live—invigorate them. The same Egyptians whom Pharaoh commanded to throw Jewish children into the river to kill their bodies were also commanded to "invigorate" the surviving children who remained alive (physically)—meaning they should be raised in the Egyptian way of life, to kill their souls... The fact that the Torah mentions both decrees together in the same verse is proof that "every daughter you shall keep alive" is no less a decree than "every boy you shall throw into the Nile." Killing the soul is as severe as killing the body—and even worse. For: Spiritual death is harder than physical death.

Even when we understand that spiritual well-being is at least as important as — and in some ways greater than — physical well-being, and that the responsibility to save someone physically extends to saving them spiritually, it can still be difficult to find the courage to act. It's easy to tell ourselves that another person's spiritual life is none of our business, that it's not our place to get involved — and sometimes the person themselves may strongly reinforce that feeling.

Yet when we truly consider the depth of damage spiritual harm can cause — affecting the soul, which is eternal and the person's truest identity — it becomes harder to remain passive. In a powerful talk, the Rebbe offers a vivid illustration: if you saw someone's house on fire while the owner slept inside, you would never say it's not your place to intervene. You wouldn't pause to wonder whether they might be upset at being awakened. If there's a fire, you run in to save them.

So too in spiritual matters. There isn't time for calculations. When a person's spiritual home is burning and they are unaware, our responsibility is to step in and help.

4.6 (STUDENT SOURCE 10) LIKKUTEI SICHOS, VOLUME 16 P. 30

א איד זאל נישט טראכטן: איך לערן דאך תורה, איז „אני את נפשי הצלתי“, ובפרט אז איך גיב נאך פון צייט צו צייט א שיעור בתורה צו אנדערע, וואס איז מיר אויף אזוי פיל נוגע ווי עס פירט זיך א צווייטער איד - צי ער איז מקיים מצות, אדער ח"ו נישט. צי ער גיט אפ זיינע כוחות צום אויבערשטן, אדער להבדיל צו „פרעה מלך מצרים“ - אויף ענינים גשמיים?... כשם ווי, בעת מען זעט אז עס ברענט א פייער ר"ל אין א אידישער הויז, וועט דאך קיינער נישט אוועקזעצן זיך מיישב זיין, צי ער זאל עפעס טאן אויף צו ראטעווען דעם צווייטן פון פייער; אדער מאכן א חשבון: ווי קען איך און וואס דארף איך זיך מישן אין דעם צווייטנס ענינים? יעדער מענטש האט דאך זיין סדר החיים וואס איז אויסגעשטעלט פון דער השגחה עליונה - איז וואס זאל איך זיך אריינמישן אין דעם אויבערשטנס דרכים? ס'איז פשוט, אז יעדער אייגער וואס זעט אזא פאסירונג וועט זיך נישט אריינלאזן אין א שקלא וטריא, צי דאס איז אויסגעהאלטן לויט דער שיטה, אדער א צווייטער שיטה, נאר ער וועט באַלד לויפן ראטעווען דעם צווייטן. אויב דאס איז אזוי בעת עס האַנדלט זיך נאר וועגן חיי עולם הזה, איז כל שכן וק"ו ווען עס רעדט זיך וועגן חיי עוה"ב און חיי עוה"ז צוזאמען, אז עס האט קיין ארט נישט צו מאכן חשבונות - נאר טאן אלץ וואס מ'קען צו ראטעווען יענעם מכאיר שחת.

A Jew should never think to himself: 'I study Torah, so I've saved my own soul.' Or especially, 'I already teach a Torah class to others from time to time—why should it bother me how another person lives their life? Why should I care if they fulfill the Mitzvos or not, or if they are dedicating their energy to G-d or to materialistic distractions?'... Think about it: when you see a fire burning in a Jewish home, nobody sits down to meditate on whether they should do something to save the person inside. Nobody makes a calculation like, 'How can I interfere in someone else's private business?' or 'Everyone has their own life path set by Divine Providence—who am I to interfere with G-d's ways?' It is obvious that anyone who sees such a thing wouldn't get caught up in a debate about which philosophy is right. You wouldn't think; you would just run to save them. If

this is true when only a person's physical life is at stake, how much more so when we are talking about their spiritual life and their future combined. There is no room for overthinking or making excuses. You must simply do everything in your power to save that person from a downward spiral.

Perspective Shift: This idea and its powerful visualization were central to the Rebbe's message, who urged his chassidim — and all Jews — to actively help others spiritually. This vision took practical form in the Rebbe's mitzvah campaigns, such as the tefillin, matzah, and menorah campaigns, and on a broader level in the entire concept of shlichus: going out to reach and help fellow Jews. The message is simple and urgent: go out and help — save a person before it's too late. Even if someone initially resents being “awakened,” in time, they will come to recognize that they were in a burning house and feel grateful for the intervention. Our responsibility is to do whatever we can to help prevent spiritual decline and strengthen another person's connection. The Rebbe emphasized that this duty is not limited to leaders or specialists; it applies to every Jew, wherever they are. If you know alef, teach alef. Everyone can positively influence others and help uplift another Jewish soul.

Takeaway: While many people view stepping in to help or save others as voluntary or heroic, the Torah teaches that it is a personal responsibility. Failing to act, when we are able, can be seen as a form of complicity in the harm that follows. Whenever we have the means — financial or physical, immediate or preventative — to help someone, we are obligated to do so.

On a deeper level, a person must recognize that wherever they are, they are there for a reason. If they become aware of someone in need, that awareness itself is evidence that they are capable of helping. Just as this applies to protecting someone from physical harm, it also applies to spiritual well-being. When we have the ability to support another person in their spiritual journey and help strengthen their connection to G-d, we carry that responsibility. If we are made aware of someone's spiritual need, that alone is a sign that we may be the ones meant to help — and with that awareness comes the responsibility to act.

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