

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps  
Torah Portion – Bereshit

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן, אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו; וַיְהִי בְהִיּוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה, וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן, אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר ל' אֲדַעְתִּי, הֲשׂ מִרְ אָחִי אֲנִי כִי  
וַיֹּאמֶר, מָה עָשִׂיתָ; קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה .

...and when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. God said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Then (God) said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!"

(Genesis 4:8-10)

**COMMENTARY:** In the passage above, God does not answer Cain's question directly. Is he his brother's keeper? Some have suggested that the entire Torah can be seen as an affirmative answer to Cain's question, a kind of running commentary on our responsibility to one another.

Commandments such as

*If you see another person's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near to you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow comes to claim it. You shall do the same with...anything that your fellow loses and that you find: you must not remain indifferent.*

(Deuteronomy 22:1-3)

and

*Do not stand idly by the blood of your brother.*

(Leviticus 19:16)

make it clear that we are each other's keepers. The extent of that obligation is made clear by the laws regarding redemption of captives from kidnapers or enemies. Maimonides writes:

*The redemption of captives takes priority over sustaining the poor and clothing them. Indeed, there is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives, since captives fall under the category of those who are hungry, thirsty, and naked, and their lives are in danger. Anyone who ignores the plight of captives transgresses [many negative commandments, including]: "do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman" (Deut. 15:7); "do not stand idly by the blood of your brother" (Lev. 19:16); "do not rule ruthlessly over [your kinsman]" (Lev. 25:53). In addition, he fails to fulfill the positive commandments, "open your hand to the poor and needy" (Deut. 15:11); "your brother shall live with you" (Lev. 25:36); "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18); "rescuing those taken off to death, those condemned to slaughter" (Prov. 24:11), and many others. Indeed, there is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives.*

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 8:10)

**QUESTION:** How in your own life do you demonstrate that you are your brothers' and sisters' keeper? How can we do that as a community? As a nation?