

Bnei Akiva Svivot 5780: Choveret Chinuchit

The principle of achrayut, responsibility, is core to everything that Judaism is about. Judaism is not a passive religion, where we sit back and take what God throws our way. Rather, it is about taking responsibility for our actions in the way that we relate to others and to God. This week is Global Responsibility Week, a time where we should take an extra moment to think about how we can go out of our way to help those in need around the world.

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WEEK 13: Global Responsibility Week

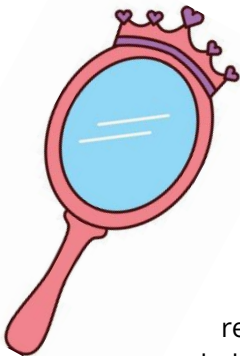
B'tzelem Elokim

A famous dispute in the Jerusalem Talmud is recorded in Nedarim 30b. Rabbi Akiva cites a verse in Sefer Vayikra – ואהבת לרעך כמוך, *"love your neighbour as yourself"* (Vayikra 19:18) – proclaiming this to be a great principle in the Torah. His contemporary, Ben Azzai, responds with an alternative pasuk that he claims holds an even greater principle:

זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם בְּיוֹם בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אָדָם בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹקִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ:

"This is the book of the generations of Adam, on the day that God created Adam He made him in the likeness of God" (Bereishit 5:1)

To Ben Azzai, the most crucial message of the Torah is that humanity is created in the image of God. Every individual has something Godly in them, and we have a responsibility to recognise that Godliness and treat them appropriately. It is this idea that led Chief Rabbi Mirvis to develop a social action initiative named the Ben Azzai Programme.



An international initiative

As Jews, our lives our community-focused. Whilst this has many advantages and can be a beautiful thing, it means that we sometimes have a tendency to be quite inward-looking. It is important to remember that we have a responsibility not only to our own communities, but to anyone in need around the world, whether Jewish or not. Ben Azzai's chosen pasuk reminds us that all of humanity is created in God's image, not just Jews.

In this spirit, the Office of the Chief Rabbi developed an annual programme for university students designed to create ambassadors to the Jewish community who can raise awareness of the challenges of poverty, education and social mobility. For a number of years now, the Chief Rabbi's Ben Azzai Programme has taken groups of Jewish university students to Ghana and India to engage with the work of Tzedek, the UK Jewish sustainable development charity, and to explore a range of issues in the areas of international development and extreme poverty.



Former participants of the programme have launched Global Responsibility Week in order to raise awareness of extreme poverty in developing countries and encourage support of international development. They selected the week leading up to Tu B'Shvat, when we celebrate the natural beauty and bounty of the Earth which Hashem gave to all of mankind to guard and nurture together.

Voluntourism: a contentious issue

The term 'voluntourism' refers to the growing phenomenon of individuals travelling to developing countries to carry out volunteer work. In recent years, increasing concerns have been raised about voluntourism and gap year projects and some have argued it can cause more harm than good to host communities.

In certain countries, the voluntourism industry can become profitable. Institutions such as orphanages may be able to benefit financially from hosting international visitors and are incentivised to run as businesses, often to the detriment of families. Children may be intentionally separated from their parents and find themselves forming bonds with visitors who then disappear after a few weeks or months, never to return. Save the Children looked at orphanages in Sri Lanka in 2005 and found that 92% of children had a living parent. A 2006 survey by Unicef in Liberia found that 98% of children living in orphanages were not orphans. This problem extends to other projects as well: if an organisation is able to find international volunteers who are willing to pay for experiences such as building projects and digging wells, they will not hire local workers who require a salary.



There is also concern regarding the attitude of visitors. Often, volunteering opportunities are marketed as a chance to boost CVs while on holiday. Teenagers and young adults who don't always have the right intentions or the best interests of the recipients at heart can be placed in positions of huge responsibility. There are of course those who have more

noble intentions: seek personal growth, connection to those less fortunate, and the satisfaction of making a difference. However, these volunteers often are unaware of or don't consider the impact that voluntourism can have on local communities. A culture of Western superiority can result in unnecessary services being provided and even local culture being eliminated.

We were only trying to help!

The above paints a very bleak picture of volunteering abroad, but don't be disheartened! It's important to do your research and be aware of the problems with particular projects, but people giving of their time to help others in a selfless way is a fulfillment of both Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai's visions.

Experience is the best method of education – by visiting other communities, we can learn about social issues that may not be common where we live. By recognising these problems as international issues that the world should take responsibility for, we can reduce global inequality. We can also gain from learning about other cultures and societies that are different from our own, enhancing our worldviews and opening our minds!

It's all about the follow-up: the Chief Rabbi's Ben Azzai Programme doesn't aim to revolutionise the communities it visits, but rather to create a group of dedicated ambassadors who will make a difference in the long run. For many, volunteering holidays are merely a platform for getting involved with a lifetime of social action work, at home and abroad. Connections built with particular communities lead to people to donate and raise money that can really enhance their development and benefit local people.



Questions to ponder

- What is the difference between the two pesukim that Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai claim reflect the most important principles of the Torah?
- Who are the people who benefit most from social action holidays?

Peula Ideas

- See the attached guide from last year's Social Responsibility Week!

- Think of a social responsibility project that your community can take on

For more game ideas head to:

<https://www.bneiakiva.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ShabbatGames.pdf>

Discussions

- Should we be encouraging “voluntourism”?
- If you could pick one global social action project to support as a community, what would it be?

