

Do Not Stand on the Blood of Your Fellow:

Today, Tomorrow and Forever



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While one does not see people bleeding to death as they walk down Broadway, the mitzvah to not stand in the blood of your fellow is extremely relevant. The reason I chose this mitzvah is because I wanted to find a way to pull this mitzvah into the 21st century, because bloodshed is not part of my life. In the original hebrew the mitzvah is לֹא תֵעָמַד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ (Leviticus 19:16). This mitzvah falls into the category of Mitzvot Bien Adam L'Chavero because by observing it you are saving people's lives.

Upon first glance, the commandment is vague and unclear. When I was trying to figure out a possible course of observance, I came up with two questions. I wanted to know if it was a literal commandment, if there has to be blood. Also, I wanted to know how a mitzvah dealing with death can be observed when there is no death around me. I thought that it might mean preventing emotional injury. However, my opinion has changed.

When trying to determine how to observe the mitzvah, I consulted five sources. They were Rashi, JPS Torah Commentary on Leviticus, Sefer HaChinuch, MyJewishLearning.com, and an article written by Rabbi Yonah Bookstein for Huffington Post Religion. I decided to categorize my research into two categories, one that dealt with death, and one that contained applicable answers.

Rashi, Sefer HaChinuch and part of JPS' make up the death category. Rashi's explanation was able to answer the question of if this is a literal mitzvah. He gives the example of drowning which means that blood is not involved. Sefer HaChinuch says that we only have to save our fellow Jews and the we must apply all of our resources. I disagree with Sefer HaChinuch. I think that you should help everyone, and at some point you need to stop helping if it puts you at risk. Finally, JPS Torah Commentary explains that there are three common approaches on how to observe the mitzvah. Only one falls into the category of death. It is a basic,

or p'shat, understanding, which is to not stand by when someone's life is in danger. I think that these explanations are not so relevant in today's society.

The applicable category is made up of the remainder of JPS, MyJewishLearning.com and Rabbi Yonah Bookstein. JPS has two other opinions. The first is very easy to practice. It is to provide testimony that can prove someone innocent. The final is to not cause any harm, which is vague and might involve emotional harm. MyJewishLearning says to help, but do not help that the person becomes dependent on you. Rabbi Yonah Bookstein gives a very applicable answer. He says that you should donate to charity in a time of crisis. I think that donating in a time of crisis fulfills the mitzvah because people are at risk of injury and death, and donating can prevent that. I agree with Rabbi Bookstein, but would take it to the next level, making donating a habit. I think that these answers are much more relevant, and can be made a part of your daily life.

After spending a large amount of time observing this mitzvah, I have learnt a lot about myself. I have felt very privileged. I feel that I am very unaware of real issues around me. I realized that there is death around me, and that I don't do much about it. I think that helping the less fortunate is a way to observe this mitzvah. By helping those in hunger or giving someone a coat, you have prevented death. My observance has brought me closer to my city. There is hunger and people living on the streets who I sometimes pass without giving them a second thought. This mitzvah makes me more aware of what is happening around, and has drove me to change it. Due to this mitzvah, I feel less naive and part of the bigger picture.

Rabbi Yonah Bookstein's opinion that one must help people in a time of crisis supports my opinion that you should help everyone, not just Jews. He says that you can help anyone, which contradicts Sefer HaChinuch. For the most part, my sources were fairly helpful. They did not just tell me what the mitzvah meant, they helped me form my own opinion. I think that this

mitzvah does not involve pulling someone out of a river like Rashi says. It is that we have to keep people from being at risk of dying.

The mitzvah to not stand in the blood of your fellow is not a literal commandment. It is not to wait until someone is about to die from starvation. I believe that this mitzvah is to prevent someone from falling into a life threatening situation. In order to observe you can donate to charity or volunteer. I do not believe that observing is a one time thing. I think that it should be observed very often. I hope that the observation of this mitzvah becomes a regular part of my life. To not stand in the blood of your fellow is to not stand by while someone's life is at risk.