The Silent Community

A Talk with Dr. Yehuda Maimaran

**Biographical Note**

Dr. Yehuda Maimaran holds a Master’s degree in clinical psychology and a Ph.D. in education, both from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is an alumnus of the Mandel School for Educational Leadership.

He initiated and managed social and educational projects in disadvantaged neighborhoods and development towns, was principal of a State Religious school, and established and ran the Memizrach Shemesh Center, a center for Jewish social activism and leadership, and the Morasha network to promote Jewish education and community engagement.

In recent years, he has been CEO of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and has served on the executive committees of various educational and social NGOs.

**Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 58a**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rav Yehuda [says that] Rav says:

What [is the meaning of that] which is written: [“And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away;] so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his inheritance” (Micah 2:2)?

[There was] an incident involving a certain man who set his eyes on his master’s wife, and he was a carpenter’s apprentice [*shulya*].

One time his master needed to borrow [some money, and his apprentice] said to him: Send your wife to me and I will lend her [the money].

He sent his wife to him, and she stayed with him for three days.

He went back to [his master] before [she did, and the master] said to him: Where is my wife whom I sent to you?

[The apprentice] said to him: I sent her [back] immediately, but I heard that the youths abused [and raped] her.

[The master] said to [his apprentice]: What shall I do?

[The apprentice] said to him: If you listen to my advice, divorce her.

He said to him: [But] her marriage contract is large [and I do not have the money to pay it]. [The apprentice] said to him: I will lend you [the money, and] you will give her [payment of] her marriage contract.

[The master] arose and divorced her.

[The apprentice] went and married her.

When the time came [that the debt was due,] and he did not have [the means with which] to repay it, [the apprentice] said to [his master]: Come and work off your debt with me.

And they, [the apprentice and his wife], would sit and eat and drink, while he[, the woman’s first husband,] would stand [over them] and serve them their drinks, and tears would drop from his eyes and fall into their cups.

At that time [the Jewish people’s] sentence was sealed. Some say [that the Jewish people were punished] for two wicks in one lamp[, a euphemism for the sin of adultery committed by this couple while the master was still married to the woman].

**Havruta**

**Gil:** The story before us belongs to a well-known collection of rabbinical stories on the destruction of the Temple that appears in Tractate Gittin. The Sages’ choice of positioning the destruction stories in a tractate entirely devoted to the destruction of the private home appears to carry symbolism. Our story is a very difficult one and its placement in Tractate Gittin seems self-evident.

**Yehuda:** The story is introduced as an interpretation of Micha 2:3, “They defraud men of their homes.” A man’s wife is his home.

**Gil:** It is worth paying attention to the passage of Micah that precedes this: “Ah, those who plan iniquity and design evil on their beds; When morning dawns, they do it, for they have the power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away….” (Micha 2:2).[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is not only his wife but also his physical home, his land, that is endangered.

**Yehuda:** This story, as I see it, is an account of total destruction. I emphasize the word *total*. The story deals with a carpenter and his apprentice. The apprentice sets his eyes on his employer’s wife, the carpenter’s spouse. Afterward, we are told that the carpenter needs money. We readers find this puzzling: We would expect the apprentice to play the role of the weak figure in the story; it would be he who needs help from his boss. What we have here is a reversal of roles, one that raises questions about the social situation at the time.

# A Divorce and an Errand: The Beginning of Destruction

**Gil:** The story is puzzling in many other ways—for example, concerning the nature of the spouses’ relationship.

**Yehuda:** The story does make us wonder about what kind of relationship spouses have if one of them is insensitive to a relationship that is developing under his nose. “Send your wife to me and I will lend her [the money].” Also puzzling, of course, is that the carpenter agrees to send her to him: “He sent his wife to him.”

**Gil:** And you see total destruction in this.

**Yehuda:** It begins to verge on an account of total destruction. On the one hand, the carpenter’s apprentice lusts for his master’s wife and takes practical action to realize his desire. On the other hand, the husband himself agrees to send his wife to him. The wife, of course, agrees to go.

**Gil:** It is worth paying attention to the different versions of the story. In the version before us, we read *shahata ‘imo* [she stayed with him], as opposed to the wording that appears in the printed editions: *shaha ‘ima* [he stayed with her]. There is a great difference between the two.

**Yehuda:** Indeed, but we see in any event that she agrees and spends three days with him. We do not know what happens during those three days but we can imagine it. One of the lovely things about rabbinic stories is that they are written concisely but they contain a wealth of allusions, like a small container that holds large contents. The apprentice spends three days with her and then returns to his master before her. Here again, one can understand this in various ways: Who preceded whom? Either way, the carpenter now asks: “Where is my wife whom I sent to you?” Pay attention to the words. *Shiger,* sent, and *geresh,* divorced, are spelled with the same letters but their order is reversed. You noted before that the stories about the destruction of the Temple appear in the tractate that deals with divorce. The man’s “sending” his wife to the apprentice marks the beginning of the divorce.

**Gil:** The apprentice’s answer is perhaps even more shocking.

**Yehuda:** That is why I said the story is one of total destruction. The apprentice replies: “I sent her back immediately, but I heard that the youths abused her.” That is, the story describes a social reality in which it is possible, conceivable, and even an accepted fact that young men will abuse a woman who was just walking along.

**Gil:** The reversal of roles is once again noteworthy. It is the carpenter who asks his apprentice, his pupil: “What shall I do?” instead of the other way around.

**Yehuda:** Read carefully: What is he really asking him? My wife has been violated; she is off-limits to me. What should I do? He asks the apprentice for a halakhic solution that points to total aloofness and alienation. Where is his pain over the act as such? At this stage, his pain is neither noticeable nor central. His attitude toward his wife is almost instrumental: I need money, he asks me to send my wife so that I will receive the money, so I sent her. Now, it seems, the young men have abused my wife and I cannot stay married to her. Again, it is totally technical, heartless.

**Gil:** There’s lots of implicit criticism of the carpenter here.

**Yehuda:** On first reading, the great villain of the story appears to be the carpenter’s apprentice, whereas the husband and the wife are victims to different extents. When you read the story, however, you see that none of them comes out entirely clean. No character presents a shining example. This, perhaps, is the total expression of the devastation: no one is admirable, not the carpenter’s apprentice the carpenter, his wife, the youths, or, of course, society.

**Gil:** In my eyes, what we have here, more than anything else, is a very great silence on society’s part. Where is the court of law? Where are the community’s charitable institutions? Let’s say that the man didn’t notice that his apprentice had eyes on his wife, but do you turn first to your employee for a loan? By implication, he has no one to turn to. There’s no one around him, not even one person, whom he can approach for a loan. Even though he may suspect something amiss about his apprentice’s behavior, he has no choice but to approach him. This is where things have broken down.

**Yehuda:** The absence of the community is one of the main points here. One may even revisit the verse with which we began: “…so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his inheritance” (Micah 2:2). There’s a man and his home, a man and his land, but not a man and his town. The community is conspicuous in its absence; it does not exist. The story gives you a few people, individuals only. One of them is motivated by lust and, perhaps, honor. It is his master’s wife! He tells himself: “I was his apprentice; now I’m above him, I lend to him, I take his wife.” Our story brings me back to Cain and Abel. When the Sages speak about the reasons for history’s first murder, they list three motives: lust for a woman, honor, or wealth.[[3]](#footnote-3) One can see this here, too. The apprentice is motivated by lust and honor, and I suggest we should not rule out the possibility that the carpenter, too, is interested only in money. He wants money so badly that he is willing to send his wife to a person who turns out to be his rival. If this is so, then it is a truly inconceivable request. He needs a loan and the money is more important to him than his wife, whom he treats as a sort of object, a deposit. The wife appears to be passive but we soon realize that she is not. After all, she could stand up and say: “I do not want to go. Why on earth should I go?” Look, in many other midrashim how women stand up to their husbands.

**Gil:** What amazes me is the way the husband is preoccupied only with himself and the question of “What shall I do”; he does not consider even for a moment to see what has happened to his wife. In his experience, she is of no interest. He is not worried about her being abused on the way home; she may be prostrate on the side of the road; maybe she is still in danger.

**Yehuda:** That is exactly the point. It does not seem to trouble him that his wife has apparently been abused, that his wife was raped, or perhaps, in a less-bad case for her personally, she willingly chose to stay in the company of another man. It is a reasonable suspicion. But he takes no interest whatsoever in her. What concerns him? The practical, functional question: I have reached a situation where I cannot continue living with my wife. This, as we have already seen, is a tremendous alienation. By implication, his marriage to this woman, to whom he gave her a “large contract,” presumably because she came from a wealthy home, also originated from his greed. In this sense, the apprentice is an outstanding student of the carpenter.

**Gil:** His utilitarian attitude emerges clearly in the laconic way the process is described: “He arose and divorced her, and he went and married her.”

**Yehuda:** No crisis, no anguish. He is totally unmoved.

**Gil:** And no community intervention.

# Where Has the Community Gone?

**Yehuda:** As we mentioned above, the community does not exist. It reminds me of something that Rabbi Joseph Messas[[4]](#footnote-4) addressed in his book *Geresh Yerahim.* In the preface to the book, he turns to the rabbinical judges and speaks about the importance of peacemaking. He tells them: When couples come to you to divorce—even if they speak to you unpleasantly or even if they curse you—try to accept it understandingly because they are in a very bad way: “For reason and shame give way before melancholy and sorrow.” Please do whatever you [*dayyanim,* rabbinical judges] can to make peace between them, to draw them close to each other. When a home is destroyed, it is as though the Temple was destroyed. Indeed, the Holy One is willing to see His Name erased so that a home does not fall apart. Therefore, waive your honor, too. Then Rabbi Messas adds something very audacious: If you *dayyanim* see that the cause of the divorce is rooted in the couple’s precarious finances, then you are obligated to help them with your own money to thwart the divorce. Rabbi Messas’s reports that his father often paid couples from his own pocket so they would not divorce. That is how important the values of peace and marital harmony are. Compare this with our story, in which there’s no intervention by anyone. The society of the characters in the story is not a society but a collection of individuals who act in a vacuum. The carpenter asks his apprentice for a loan simply because they work together; in the background, there’s no hint of a community context, of neighbors, of a court that asks or suggests: “Just a moment, maybe we’ll arrange a reconciliation, maybe we’ll look into the reasons for the divorce and try to keep that home from being destroyed.”

**Gil:** “He arose and divorced her, and he went and married her”—how could the apprentice have married her so easily? Where was the court that officiated? How did it agree to let them get married? Interestingly, all sides seek to act according to the halakha and law, but only in the technical sense. The carpenter considers it important to pay off his wife’s contract.

**Yehuda:** It was important for the apprentice that this be done lawfully. Everything has to comply with the halakha. You must divorce her because otherwise, I cannot have her. Pay off her contract, too. It is the law.

**Gil:** Ultimately, he will receive the sum of the contract twice. It seems as though the Sages wish to caution us, in this story and other destruction stories, against adopting an instrumental, technical, and soulless attitude toward the world of halakha and justice—an attitude that eventually causes these mechanisms to be misused.

# Craving for Status

**Yehuda:** It is hard not to discern the apprentice’s covetousness; he apparently craves status, as well.

**Gil:** His craving status ultimately translates into the humiliation of the carpenter.

**Yehuda:** The apprentice says: “I’ll covet your wife, your status, and your money, and I won’t be silent until I humiliate you, too.”

**Gil:** To some extent, the carpenter treats his wife the way his apprentice treats him. The apprentice manipulates him: “You want me to give you a loan? Give me your wife.” “You want me to tell you what you should do after the youths abused her? Divorce her.” “You’ve got a problem, you can’t afford to pay off her contract? I’ll pay it for you.”

**Yehuda:** It is interesting to notice the cup motif in this story. The Sages say: “A man should not drink from this cup while setting his eyes on another cup.”[[5]](#footnote-5) At the end of our story, they say: “And tears would drop from his eyes and fall into their cups.”

As we said, setting eyes on his master’s wife, on someone else’s “cup” in this case, is more than an expression of lust. It is an assertion of class envy.

**Gil:** Yes, that is so. Marriage is also the assertion of one’s social standing. So it is in both the Bible and in the Talmud. In the Bible, sleeping with a father’s concubines is the assertion of one’s status, one’s primacy, or dominance. So it was with Reuven, Absalom, and Adoniya. The Talmud, too, alludes to this when a great sage dies and another wishes to marry his widow.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This difficult moment which concludes our story, of the tears falling into the cup, forces us to contemplate: What is happening here? Why now, of all times, does he display emotion? Why does he cry now?

**Yehuda:** The image of the husband that emerges from the story is one of complete unfeeling. If we follow this line, we may see the pain he experiences as a loss of status. This man is crying over what has been taken from him, over the tremendous reversal of his life as a man who has become his servant’s servant—or, better put, his servants’ servant because his wife, too, from his standpoint, used to be a servant of sorts who did his bidding. He looks into “their” cup. What is their cup? They are together, they have money, they eat and drink, and he is got nothing.

**Gil:** According to this interpretation, the story describes human relations that lack all compassion and sensitivity. All three characters are flawed in this respect. The apprentice does not refrain from humiliating his counterpart to satisfy his covetousness. He wraps his hypocrisy in an ostensible wish to help. “You need money? I will help you out with money. Do you need advice? If you heed my advice, here is what you will do. Do you have a problem repaying me? I’ll find you a solution.”

**Yehuda:** And all this time, while expressing the deceitful message of “I am here to help you,” he is a snake waiting to strike.

**Gil:** As stated, the three of them are deficient: the apprentice, the carpenter who does not refrain from sending his wife away, and the wife, who does not balk and ultimately marries the apprentice. At the end of this ghastly process, the sadness is related to the loss of status, money, and honor only.

**Yehuda:** Total alienation and complete heartlessness, disregard, and erasure of the other’s suffering.

**“Work Off Your Debt”**

**Gil:** Just the same, might there be a flicker of hope in the story? Perhaps the beginning of repair?

**Yehuda:** There may be a turning point here despite everything, such that first signs of redemption begin to emerge from this destruction. To allow such a reading, one needs to interpret the carpenter’s tears differently: He is not weeping over the status and the money that he has lost; instead, it is an initial expression of some inner realization that he has managed, for the first time, to connect with himself and to the destruction that he is experiencing.

**Gil:** “And at that time [the Jewish people’s] sentence was sealed”—this story belongs to a collection of atrocities. Why emphasize “at that time” specifically?

**Yehuda:** Because that moment marks the pinnacle of the humiliation, an extreme manifestation of wanton cruelty, exploitation, oppression, and manipulation.

**Gil:** Might this of all moments offer the potential of an awakening?

**Yehuda:** The destruction begins with people being alienated from themselves and others.

**Gil:** And this alienation, as we have seen, is relevant to all the characters in the story.

**Yehuda:** Of course. The wife is alienated from herself and, in turn, from her husband, too. The greatest destruction is to be alienated from oneself. When you are alienated from yourself, you are alienated from the other, and round and round it goes. When the society is one in which the other’s sorrow, the other’s distress, the fact that someone needs a loan and has no one to ask for it, is of no concern to anyone, in such a society, individuals are ultimately alienated from their own sorrow. Here, however, the carpenter may have begun a slow process of understanding his situation. The events described in the story shout at him, as it were—“Wake up, man, wake up!” Suffering cleanses a person of his transgressions and allows growth to occur. Suffering can introduce a person to themselves and start a process of recovery.

**Gil:** The steadily escalating ordeal should inspire the carpenter to take action.

**Yehuda:** That is right. At first, he has to ask his apprentice for help. That is where the trouble begins. But it is more than that: He approaches the person who is ogling his wife—his apprentice who goes wherever he goes. In all these situations, all these moments when he and his apprentice work together, haven’t you, the carpenter, noticed that he is angling for your wife? It gets worse still: He has to send his wife to the apprentice. Here, however, he’s got a place to hide, as it were: “I’m doing it only so I’ll receive the money.” But it goes so far that he has to divorce his wife. It ends with a situation in which he has to serve both of them; now it is all in the open; everything is revealed. Here, there’s no possibility of hiding.

**Gil:** A breakthrough of awareness may have occurred here: the moment at which the tears, tears of authentic anguish, appear. This metaphor of flowing tears and with them, the appearance of a sentence being handed down, is reminiscent of the story of Rav Rehumi.[[7]](#footnote-7) His wife, waiting for him to come home, sheds a tear and immediately the roof collapses on him. This moment of the dripping tear is the moment of authenticity. When the tear appears, the pain emerges in full force and the sentence is sealed.

**Yehuda:** As I see it, the fact that the carpenter cries attests to health, to the beginning of spiritual health, comprehension, and emergence from corruption. Destruction takes place only when the possibility of subsequent repair exists. There has to be a small beginning, a small vessel, from which everything starts over. Otherwise, if everything were corrupt, a deluge that leaves nothing behind would ensue. The purpose of the destruction is the recovery from it.

**Gil:** It is interesting to note the motif of debt and repayment that appears throughout our story. It recurs four times. The carpenter has to take a loan and has to repay it. From the moment he decides to divorce his wife, the debt of her “large contract” looms over him: I owe her a debt; I have to repay it. Then the second loan comes due; the carpenter has to pay the apprentice: “Come and work off your debt with me.” The fourth occurrence appears at the end of the story: “At that time, the sentence was sealed.” Here is a debt that you, in the plural, have to pay; you as a society will pay it. That is to say, a society that comports itself instrumentally, in terms of debts and repayments, with neither compassion nor humanity, will also have to pay its debt in the coin of punitive destruction.

**Yehuda:** You are right. In such a society, money answers every need (Ecclesiastes 10:15). [הוספתי] If there is a financial debt, it is got to be repaid at any price. Betrayal, cruelty, manipulation, thou-shalt-not-covet—all of these are legitimate in this society, but the only rule on which we all agree is that when you owe money, it must be repaid. It brings to mind an ultra-capitalistic outlook in its ugliest embodiment, what they call swinish capitalism.

**Gil:** Everything in the story works via capitalistic mechanisms. It begins with capitalistic mechanisms and ironically ends in the same way: “Now you [in the plural] will pay the debt.” The destruction settles the debt in its full scale and depth. Once the land is laid waste, the heroes of the story and their heartless community will see what the actual payback of debt tastes like. From this standpoint, the destruction is a mirror image of a reality that has been laid waste, both in the sense of being destroyed and in the sense of desolation. It is a reality devoid of the slightest trace of kindness and compassion. Only then, perhaps, will they confront their blindness and realize just how much they have squandered.

**Yehuda:** And speaking of capitalism, it is indeed “swinish capitalism.” After all, the apprentice extracts from the carpenter double.

**Gil:** Yes, he marries the woman who comes with the contract that she received from her husband, who has divorced her, and now he will receive the same sum from the husband, this time as payment for the loan that he has given him.

**Yehuda:** If what we are saying is right, it also explains the community’s indifference to the possibility that the youths have abused her. The youths detect an opportunity; they are strong, and they seize the moment. It is almost a Social Darwinist ethos, in which it is legitimate to seize any resource, at the expense of a woman’s honor and while exploiting distress. Any injustice is permitted in the service of self-interest.

**Gil:** Note the Talmudic narrator’s ironic device: paying debts boomerangs against a corrupt society. It’s a tale from the stories of the destruction of the Temple: “At that time, [the Jewish people’s] sentence was sealed.”

The Talmud makes the intriguing choice of presenting us with a different possible ending: “And some say [that the Jewish people were punished] for two wicks in one lamp.” Why do the redactors of the Talmud provide an additional ending? What does it contribute?

**Yehuda:** Good question. Isn’t what has happened here enough? The second ending alludes to licentious conduct: “two wicks in one lamp,” the lamp symbolizing the woman and the wicks the two rival men. It is a sexually lawless society.

**Gil:** The second version of the ending, “two wicks in one lamp,” traces the destruction to an overt, unequivocal, and blatant crime. There is no disputing it: It is a case of adultery. These are acts that cause destruction. The infuriating and painful thing about the story is that until this statement is made, it is impossible to catch almost anyone for anything. Everything seems just fine. The apprentice acts entirely lawfully, assuming he did nothing wrong with her during their stay together. On the surface, everything is in order, but really nothing is.

**Yehuda:** One more remark about the way the story ends: How were they able to eat without choking on their food? … These newlyweds, how could they sit there and eat? “**And they would sit and eat and drink”…** And how did this carpenter agree? How could he have had no limit? How couldn’t he say “That is far enough”? Is there a shortage of places to work? Could not he have taken the trouble of looking for other people who might get him out of this?

# Responsibility Without Self-Victimization

**Gil:** You are not exactly empathetic toward the carpenter, Yehuda. Why is that?

**Yehuda:** It is because one can be a victim only up to a point. There comes a stage where people have to take responsibility for themselves; they have to get up and say, that is enough, not *this*. There seems to be an acquired helplessness here, a kind of despair and shirking of responsibility. It is an ongoing process. When a person in distress does not turn to anyone and does not even try, it attests to a society that has been behaving this way for a long time and, as you correctly said, the community does not exist at all. None of this, however, can justify handing one’s wife over to another man and accepting a state of servitude to both the apprentice and the woman. There’s a problem with the carpenter and not only with his apprentice. Here you have the delicate boundary between empathizing with the victim and personal responsibility. I think it is part of the fundamentals of the Torah. Maimonides, when he speaks of the commandment of *tzedakah*, giving to the poor,[[8]](#footnote-8) teaches us that even the poor are not excused from *tzedakah*. Likewise, someone whose father did not educate him must teach himself Torah. Individuals bear personal responsibility under all circumstances. Irrespective of their state of distress, there are values that they cannot set aside. Are you poor? You have to give charity anyway. They didn’t teach you? You have to learn anyway. Even if you are in terrible distress, you cannot send your wife away to escape from your economic hardship. You cannot agree to it; it is an act of destruction, and you are giving yourself a free pass. I was born in 1962 in Morocco. When I was three years old, in 1965, we immigrated to Israel. My father badly wanted to live in Jerusalem but it was not possible at first, and like many immigrants, we were directed to Kiryat Gat. Ultimately, after two years of struggle, we reached the Shmuel Hanavi neighborhood of Jerusalem, a slum neighborhood where there was crime and prostitution, terrible housing density, and a mishmash of ethnicities—from Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Morocco, and Romania.

We lived in a tenement next to my grandparents’ tenement; they had immigrated to Israel before we did. My father had headed a yeshiva in Morocco and my mother had been a teacher in Morocco and France. We were five siblings, four boys and a girl. They sent me to Moriah Elementary School in the nearby Geula neighborhood. I had a rich and effervescent childhood, with lots of friends and lots of football. Many of my friends went on to the Betar and Hapoel clubs in Jerusalem, and if I had not been religious and Sabbath-observant I would have joined them and would not have become a psychologist and an educator. I joined the army, and when I was discharged I studied psychology and philosophy for a Bachelor’s degree and clinical psychology for a Masters. At the university, I met my wife, Ayelet, [נא לוודא את איות שמה] a clinical psychologist with a doctorate. We have four children; the oldest is studying industrial design, the second medicine, the third awaiting induction into the army, and the fourth is in high school.

I have lived in two parallel realities: one of disadvantage, crime, and violence, and a parallel one of community, good friends, and a special, strong family with values anchored in Jewish tradition and life. I attended Himmelfarb High School but most of my friends in the neighborhood did not finish their matriculation exams. Some went to vocational schools. Most did not make it to university but it was not because they lacked the ability. Obviously, this reflected a very problematic social reality.

**Gil:** And because of that reality you subsequently established the bet midrash for social leadership, Memizrach Shemesh.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Yehuda**: Exactly so, and I will get to that as we continue. I grew up in a very aware, rooted, and strong Jewish world. As a *talmid hakham* who was vastly knowledgeable about Judaism generally and North African Jewry particularly, my father spent a great deal of time writing and propounding Torah thought. I was exposed to a Judaism that one does not encounter in the public sphere. The Jewish education that I received at home placed *ben adam la-havero,* [interpersonal] relations in the center. There was no clash between general education and Judaism. At home, we had an enormous library. Father collected books and manuscripts. He had books about philosophy, history, science, theology, Christianity, and Islam. I grew up with a Judaism in which service of God is central in life but does not demand segregation and puts great value on working and making a living. My father worked for years as a clerk in the Postal Ministry, and even though he had headed a yeshiva in Morocco, he chose to enroll us in an ordinary religious high school rather than in a yeshivah—because his Jewish conception and understanding said that one must immerse oneself in society, be part of it, and acquire general and university schooling as well.

My parents always emphasized personal responsibility. It does not matter where you grew up and under what conditions; you can and must be a moral individual, you must succeed, and you must achieve. It is like the poor person according to Maimonides, who is not exempt from giving charity himself. Someone whose parents did not teach them must teach themselves. I believe that a person has the inner strength and ability to push ahead. Therefore, the carpenter’s passivity is difficult for me.

Still, when children grow up with psychological neglect and are exposed to violence when they lack a family that builds mental and educational foundations for them, it is no simple matter to make sure they will not deteriorate. It was my good fortune to have a very strong family. Such families can protect their children and keep them on a normative path. Children who come from weaker families and grow up under harsh environmental conditions either do not fulfill their potential in the less-auspicious case or—in the worst case—fall into crime and violence. That is to say, on the one hand, there is personal responsibility. It doesn’t matter where a person grew up, they must maintain their human image, develop it, and not rely on others and on “extenuating circumstances.” On the other hand, social responsibility exists. In cases where individuals find themselves in dire circumstances of life and livelihood and cannot extricate themselves from their prison, society has to mobilize and help them.

If we go back to that verse from Micha—“They oppress a man and his house, even a man and his inheritance”—one may read it simply, as a string of words: oppressing a man and his house and a man and his inheritance. However, one may also read it as cause and effect: Oppressing a person results in oppressing their house, and so on. That is what happened to us here.

**Gil:** To wit, injustice generates further injustices, a cycle of injustices.

**Yehuda:** Just as good deeds generate additional good deeds.

**Gil:** In what way are these insights relevant to the social mission that you have chosen?

**Yehuda:** First of all, in the very act of hearing and listening to distress. As in the Exodus story, in which God hears the Israelites’ outcry, the ability to listen to the other’s distress and not look away is very central: “Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors” (Exodus 2:11). This willingness to see and listen becomes a desire to participate and share. Rashi, commenting on this verse, says that Moses saw their suffering and therefore carried their burdens with him, on his own shoulders. This is something that has accompanied me personally for many years whenever people speak about social disparities and distress. In the Talmudic story before us, we saw the distress of a person who is mired in an economic problem. First, you have to see the individual and care about him. I have taken this lesson with me since I became aware of myself. I think about the neighborhood where I grew up and the wretchedness that I encountered there. Sometimes it was economic distress but sometimes it was not: A child was thrown out of his house because of behavioral problems, or a child descended into crime against the background of very acute parental distress. The question that always cried out inside me was: So where is society? Often society fails to see the distress or sees it and does not care. Then, people are left to cope with their hardships and agonies on their own. When that happens, sometimes they accept bad advice, like the apprentice’s advice to the carpenter.

**Gil:** Advice that helped to bring him down all the more.

# Between Psychology and Sociology

**Yehuda:** There are situations in which people in distress need advice and may do things that will entangle them even further if they reject it. Imagine, for example, the child of a family in economic distress who is invited to get involved in some sort of dubious work. Should he accept the offer or not? What is the individual’s responsibility in this matter? These questions have occupied me for many years. How can education help to build foundations and draw boundaries that will enable the individual to stop and say: “That’s far enough; no farther.”

My transition from clinical psychology to education through social involvement is exactly the kind of transition that relates to these two poles. Clinical psychology hardly deals with social responsibility. It concerns itself with the person as an individual and disregards the situation outside. There’s something abnormal, something problematic, about that, as though the people in your surroundings the situations you find yourself in, or the policies that created them bear no responsibility. These two axes accompany me in everything I do: individuals’ responsibility for their situation in accordance with their strengths regardless of where they grew up, and the responsibility of the surroundings for the conditions under which this individual grew up. I carry that tension with me all the time. Reinforcing the ability to see the other and reinforcing human dignity—these are two very, very central things.

Where human dignity is concerned, it begins with relatively simple matters: be sensitive to others’ dignity. Were you his apprentice? It is important to lend him money in a way that does not demean him or worse, that hurts his wife and the relations between them. I see this as the core of Judaism and that is why this is a story about the destruction of the Temple. It deals, first of all, with demeaning the other and weakening one’s view of the other to the extent of corrupting interpersonal relations.

**Gil:** Your social pronouncements sound very sensible and, above all, responsible. However, it is hard to let go of the thought that you are making a radical argument regarding the discourse of psychology, from which you come, and regarding today’s conventional wisdom in sociology.

The core ethos of the therapeutic world from which you come as a clinical psychologist is that individuals can liberate themselves. For this purpose, they need to refrain from telling themselves stories about external factors, economic and social, that are thwarting their development. In contrast, the critical social approach in sociology, which must have influenced you as well, promotes—some would express it sarcastically—a “discourse of victimhood.” If a person is weak or disadvantaged, it is due to others and he should be excused because society is responsible. Under the circumstances, less, or nothing, should be demanded from the victim. What you are presenting here, in contrast, is an in-between approach that is very responsible without being anemic.

**Yehuda:** It does not ignore the surroundings because the surroundings, as we know, have a great deal of influence.

**Gil:** Your approach seems to combine the two approaches into a new and very complex ethos. You are promoting, a community of responsibility and this is also the center of your educational work: a community that looks out for itself, that liberates itself, but concurrently assumes responsibility for society at large.

**Yehuda:** To my mind, both the conception of Judaism and the Jewish identity that we are promoting place this in the center. When you center this, the definitions of religious and secular begin to change. I have little appreciation for a religiosity that’s reflected solely in a halakhic formalism that allows a person to be a “scoundrel with the Torah’s sanction.” The Judaism I am speaking about establishes connections in ways that fall outside the familiar template of religious vs. secular but to my mind are the very core of the religion.

Israeli society is intensively occupied with the matter of poverty. When the annual “Poverty Report” is published, for example, standard media rituals follow, as we know. Reporters interview single parents and ask whether there really are a million hungry children as if you could sleep quietly if there were fewer…. Society is in a bad state: single-parent families, youth at risk, child prostitution, and exploitation. There’s a lot to do.

**Gil:** We spoke about the beginning of repair in the story. Do you see a process of repair in Israeli society?

**Yehuda:** There are beginnings but much work yet remains. The notion that we are responsible for one another has gained strength. Social activism and striving for social justice have become stronger in Israeli society and need to be strengthened even more. When I established the Memizrach Shemesh movement, I coined the term “Social Judaism.” To enable currents of repair and strengthening to move in this direction, more treatment of poverty and less treatment of the individual are needed. If honoring the elderly is not just a ritual at the personal level, like giving an elder your seat on the bus, then important questions such as pensions and income assurance for the elderly must be addressed, so that people can age with dignity. In our movement, we take interpersonal commandments and try to translate them into today’s terms. The Torah gives seven prescriptive and proscriptive commandments that pertain to concern for the orphan and the widow. We asked: Who are the orphan and the widow of our days? Does a child whose father is in prison fall into this category? What about a single-parent household? What about a child with a parent who is functionally impaired due to mental problems?

The commandment of tzedakah, giving to the poor, mustn’t be limited to putting a coin into a collection box. Something like that has never lifted any poor person out of poverty; it cannot possibly be just a commandment for a given moment. Among Maimonides’ eight levels of charity,[[10]](#footnote-10) the highest of all is extricating someone from the cycle of poverty—converting tzedakah, charity, into tzedek, justice. What this means in the Israeli reality is the distribution of resources, addressing how land is allocated and questions of municipal jurisdictions.

An example of this is found in a little allegory that I heard at an event meant for students who doing volunteer work in disadvantaged towns and neighborhoods. “Imagine an empty swimming pool,” the lecturer said, “that you’ve come to fill with a spoon. You may despair of the task: How will we fill it? But look around and see how many we are! If everyone picks up a spoon, the pool will fill up.” That is what the lecturer said, with self-satisfaction. But he was wrong. It is not the right moral. The question is why there are pools that are easily filled from a pipe that delivers water to them while other pools remain dry. Why do some municipalities invest more in children than others? The determining factors are municipal property taxes and jurisdictional boundaries. The more affluent a city is and the more revenue it has, the more resources it has. The sums invested in children and social needs differ in magnitudes of four and five times over. Some kibbutzim benefit from tax revenue paid by factories that are geographically closer to the development towns, but the land was apportioned in a way that sends the revenues in their direction and not to the town that needs them much more. Sad to say, the radicalization of religious society in recent years has been concentrating not on concern for the weak, social responsibility, and the interpersonal sphere but rather on how you dress—the size of your fringes and the length of your skirt—and the number of hours you devote to Torah study, as if the social questions are not fundamentally religious.

**Gil:** Do you pay prices for the position that you have taken? After all, to be moderate in this context, ideologically moderate, not moderate due to compromise but moderate from the outset, requires courage. Paradoxically, it is easier to take a radical stand.

**Yehuda:** Sometimes it seems as though the choice to be in the center amounts to a compromise or a concession, but there’s power in it. One does pay prices for this choice, of course. People like clarity and find it hard to spend much time facing complexity. I am socially active but do not identify with radical groups for exactly this reason. This choice may also impair the effectiveness of the work because fighting elicits stronger reactions from people than moderation. People respond more powerfully to struggle. All of this, however, is only at first glance; it means that one has not examined the real outcomes of the militant social struggle. When you examine them in depth, you may find that the struggle has not delivered much at all. One may say that the path that I chose is the longer but shorter one.

1. Original according to MS Vatican 13. English (with adjustments) based on the William Davidson Edition, downloaded from sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translated from the Hebrew in accordance with *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bereshit Rabba 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rabbi Joseph Messas (1882–1974)—a *dayyan* (rabbinical judge), halakhicist, poet, and public personality who served as Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Haifa. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bavli, Nedarim 20b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bavli, Bava Metsi’a 84b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bavli, Ketubot 62b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Memizrach Shemesh is a center that develops activists and leaders for Jewish social activism and leadership according to the social values of the Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)