

EXPANDING OUR MORAL TERRITORY

HOW HAVE YOU CHANGED?

As we have seen over the course of the past 7 discussions, questions regarding how best to engage in social justice and community service work have occupied Jews for thousands of years. In that regard, the discussions you have had as a group are the latest in a long chain of tradition, beginning with biblical text and continuing through our ancient sages, medieval commentators, and contemporary Jewish leaders. The reason these questions remain compelling is that there is no one answer to them, and certainly no one “Jewish” answer. If Judaism “says” anything about these questions, it is that Jews are obligated to take them seriously, and to make conscious decisions about them in light of our tradition and values. If we do so, we may find that our answers change over time. Even with respect to our core ethical values, we are always works in progress.

Consider the following text:

When two armies are locked in battle, the place where the struggle takes place is called the front line. This line is drawn at the place where the two forces meet. On either side, there is territory that belongs to that side and is thus not the location of battle. The front line moves and changes, but battle, generally speaking, occurs only where the two sides meet.

Our moral choices can be thought of in a similar way. There are decisions that we have made in our lives so many times that they are no longer decisions. It is obvious to us that we will respond in particular ways to particular events. Those choices are within our territory. There are also choices we have never had to make and likely will never have to make. They are beyond the realm of our experience. They are firmly out of our territory.

The place where these territories meet is the place of choice – [in Hebrew,] “*bechirah*.” On the spectrum of what we know to be ethical and what we know to be unethical, we make choices only at the *bechirah* point. This is the point where our values come into conflict and thus the choices are not obvious. Each individual’s *bechirah* point is unique, and it moves as we grow and change. By recognizing the *bechirah* points in our lives, we are able to set our sights on expanding our moral territory and thus becoming better people.”¹

¹ Paraphrased from Eliyahu E. Dessler, *Strive for Truth: The Selected Writings of Rabbi E.E. Dessler, Part Two*, translated into English and annotated by Aryeh Carmell (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1988), pp. 52-57. Paraphrase by American Jewish World Service.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) When it comes to community service and social justice work, what decisions are clearly in your “territory”? Which are not?
- (b) What questions were at a “*bechira*” point for you when the group first began meeting? (That is, with respect to which questions were your ethical beliefs or values in conflict). Has that changed over the course of your discussions? Where is your *bechira* point now?

Finally, consider the following text:

Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The other spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.

— Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 40b

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Has your study in this group led to action? How might it lead to future action?
- (b) How has your study enriched your experience of social service work, and vice versa?
- (c) What might you want or need to study next to enable you to engage in more effective and meaningful action on issues that are important to you, either individually or as a group?