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## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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# Today's Torah

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## New Year's January 1, 2020 - 4 Tevet 5780



By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff  
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## Taking Care of Yourself in the New Year

Jews learn early in life that their Jewish heritage includes a strong focus on helping others. The Torah has multiple laws that require us to take care of the poor (e.g., Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 15:7-15), and the Rabbis expanded on that to require that every Jewish community establish a soup kitchen to feed the poor and a charity fund to supply them with clothing and shelter (Tosefta, Pe'ah 4;9). Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, depicts God as caring for the widow, orphan, and stranger (10:18), and it bids us in several places to do so likewise (14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19). The Prophets therefore regularly chastise the Jewish community of their time for failing to provide for the poor, the orphan, and the widow (e.g., Isaiah 1:17, 23; 3:14-15; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Zekhariah 7:10; etc.) The Rabbis (Tosefta, *Gittin* 3:18; B. *Gittin* 61a) insisted that we help the non-Jewish poor and sick as well as Jews; this is truly remarkable because the non-Jews the Rabbis were talking about were the Romans of that time, who were definitely not worrying about Jews who were poor or ill. The Rabbinic term for these acts of helping others is *gemillut hasadim*, acts of kindness, and a deservedly famous Mishnah (*Avot* 1:2) that many of us sing says that Torah (learning it and fulfilling its precepts), worship, and acts

of kindness are the three pillars on which the world stands. The contemporary term that Jews often use for the same kinds of activity is *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, and although that is not the entirety of Judaism, it is a core value and focus of our tradition. Sometimes the way that I describe this aspect of the Jewish tradition is to say that “Judaism spells responsibility with a capital R.”

Aside from parties on New Year’s Eve and parades and football games on the day itself, the one thing that characterizes the marking of the New Year in the American tradition is New Year’s resolutions. The Jewish New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah calls our attention to our relationships to other people and to God and bids us to evaluate how we have fared in those relationships, how we can make up for what we have done wrong, and how we can do better in the year to come. New Year’s resolutions in the American setting, in contrast, focus on what we can and want to do for ourselves. This year I will lose weight, or I will spend more time with my family, or at least on Shabbat I will liberate myself from my electronics. Some even tie a string around their finger to remind them of their resolutions.

This does not violate the substance or spirit of Judaism in the least bit. In fact, the Talmud (B. *Bava Metzi’a* 62a) asserts that in dire circumstances, one must save oneself first and only then seek to save others. (This is very much like what you are told on airplanes: “First put the mask on yourself, and then help others.”) In monetary matters as well, the Talmud (*Bava Metzi’a* 71a; B. *Nedarim* 80b) describes concentric circles: first one must support oneself, then one’s immediate family, then one’s extended family, then one’s local Jewish community, then the larger Jewish community, and then the non-Jewish community. Of course, as Jews we must also care for others, and Jews of all forms of affiliation are right in seeing that as a core Jewish value. You cannot help others, though, unless you yourself are in a position and condition to do so (a very important lesson for caregivers of sick or disabled people to learn). So in looking after our own welfare as we make New Year’s resolutions we are carrying out an important Jewish value. Now may we only fulfill our resolutions!

For more on this topic, see Elliot N. Dorff, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), especially Chapter 5, and see generally Elliot N. Dorff, *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself: A Jewish Approach to Modern Personal Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

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