Note: I delivered this d’var Torah to Sha’arei Orah in Bala Cynwyd, PA in 5778/2017. However, I did not complete “writing it up” to put online until before Shabbat Bereshit in 5779/2018.

I’d like to begin my d’var Torah today with an observation from my friend’s father, Leonard Wanetik, alav hashalom (peace be upon him). In his insightful book of studies on the parashah¹, he writes about how one of the themes of Parashat Bereshit is how God acts with compassion toward humanity even while insuring that they bear some of the consequences of their misdeeds. Thus, after Cain kills Abel, God tells Cain that he will be doomed to wander the earth but nonetheless gives Cain a mark so that others would know not to harm him.² Similarly, Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden when they eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but nonetheless God provides them with leather clothing.³

What is particularly striking about these episodes, I think, is that God is protecting these people from part of the consequences of their own misdeeds. Cain is in danger because he committed murder. Adam and Eve are aware of their nakedness and thus in need of the leather clothing *precisely because* they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and thereby became aware of their nakedness. Hence, we see that while God allows for people to suffer some of the consequences of their own misdeeds, God nonetheless approaches them with caring and compassion as well and acts to mitigate the harshness of the result of their actions.

In the Babylonian Talmud,⁴ we are told that when the Torah says, “לֹהֵיכֶם אַחֲרֵי תֵלֵכוּ walk after the LORD your God,”⁵ it means that we are to emulate God’s qualities. The first example the Talmud gives is that just as God clothes the naked in Bereshit, we, too, are to clothe the naked. From this, I would suggest, we could take an important lesson on how to approach people in need. Often, there is a temptation to seek to blame the person in need, to question the person’s life choices, work ethic, financial responsibility, etc. How often do we hear that impoverished individuals “only have themselves to blame” because there is always an opportunity for people to succeed? God’s example in Bereshit teaches that we should respond with compassion and caring regardless of whether the person in need contributed to her or his own distress. It seems to me that this is all the more true when one considers that many of the “choices” that

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¹ *Sedra Study for Everybody*, Jacksonville: Mazo Publishers, 2012. This book can be purchased at [http://amzn.to/2yHEU0v](http://amzn.to/2yHEU0v) (please note this link is through the UTJ’s Amazon Associates account. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for sites to earn advertising fees by advertising and linking to Amazon.com).

² Genesis 4:8-15.

³ Genesis 3, particularly verse 21.

⁴ Sotah 14a.

⁵ Deuteronomy 13:8.
people make are constrained by a litany of factors that were beyond the control of the individual, including socioeconomic background, physical and mental health, etc.

This lesson can also extend well beyond questions of economic need to other times when a person’s choices may have placed that person in some other form of need. For instance, what about a person who has alienated friends and family by his or her poor choices? God’s example would suggest that while we need not simply ignore the person’s misdeeds nor insulate the person from the consequences of those actions, we should be receptive when the person attempts to make amends and to reconnect with us. Similarly, a person whose life choices may have contributed to that person’s medical condition is still deserving of caring and compassion, and the mitzvah of בֵּכְרֵא חֵולים, caring for the sick, applies regardless of the cause of the person’s condition.

Our obligation to care for others is our own obligation and abides regardless of the root causes of a person’s distress. As God cares for all, regardless of the source of their troubles, we, too, have a responsibility for and compassion that calls on us not to ask who is to blame for a person’s state of need but rather to ask who is responsible to help alleviate that need. And the answer to the latter question is that the responsibility is ours.