Erev Shabbat Sh’mini, April 17, 2020

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Most of us have heard the beloved dictum from the Talmud proclaiming that “one who saves a single life saves an entire world.” We love our ancient Rabbis for telling us that each and every human life is precious. If that concept wasn’t entirely clear in the Torah itself, it became so by the time the Rabbis had refashioned the whole of Judaism.

But did the Rabbis mean *any* life? Didn’t they have a sense of the *relative* worth of individuals based on their ability to contribute to society? To the economy? To the quality of life in general?

In a word, no. That is, yes. Yes, they meant *any* life. No, they did not measure people in *relative* terms according to what they could contribute to the whole. Unless, of course, you consider what they meant by contributing.

Look at the first verse of our parashah, *Sh’mini*. “And it came to pass on the eighth day that Moses called to Aaron and his sons, as well as the elders of Israel.” The context is the preparation for the ceremony that will inaugurate the Mishkan, the wilderness Tabernacle, and especially the sacrificial altar. Of course Moses needs to call Aaron forward, because he is the High Priest designate. Of course he needs to call Aaron’s sons as well, because they are the priests in waiting, the ones who will inherit the mantle of priesthood and perpetuate it for generations to come. They are the youth, the future, the hope of tomorrow. Why, then, does Moses also need to call the elders of Israel? That’s what the Rabbis want to know.

Midrash Rabbah approaches it as follows: “Said Rabbi Akiva, ‘Israel can be compared to a bird. Just as a bird cannot fly without its wings, so too Israel cannot do a thing without its elders.’”

What Rabbi Akiva is telling us, I think, is that the “value” of our elders cannot be measured in terms of what work they can do; what they can make; what they can carry uphill or across a field; what they can shoulder of the responsibilities of community and society. The value of elders is that they constitute a presence, a collective memory and wisdom, a reservoir of meaning for everyone else. They know what none of us can know, but they know what we all *need* to know if we are to proceed wisely through the challenges ahead of us.

There were those who, when learning that COVID-19 might be particularly dangerous to the elderly but not so much so for younger individuals, they proposed that it was worth it to sacrifice the health of the elderly in order to keep businesses and schools open and the economy running.

Suddenly, someone remembered Rabbi Akiva, or the secular equivalent. Someone remembered to read between the lines of our Torah. Someone realized that when Moses calls the youth forward to prepare themselves for the future, he also calls the elders of Israel. He calls the bird *and* its wings. He calls all of us to notice the value of every human life, and to embrace the treasure that is our elders. We would be wise to do the same.