



Protecting Children — Our Fundamental Moral Responsibility

— RABBI DAVID INGBER

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In this essay, the author explores the relationship between holiness and guardianship, framing the work of protecting our children as a fundamental moral responsibility for Jewish communities. A version of this essay was originally published as the introduction to the Jumpstart Report, *Child Safety First*.¹

At the core of Judaism is an understanding that holiness inheres in three dimensions of human life: sacred time, sacred space, and sacred person. In the idiom of the rabbinic tradition, this is known as *olam* (world or space), *shana* (year or time), and *nefesh* (soul or person). This fundamental Jewish teaching is accompanied by another one, namely, that all holiness requires safeguarding. The sacred must be watched over and protected. The sacred requires that we be its stewards. Holiness, that which is precious and pure, demands *shmirah*, guardianship.

We are introduced to each of these holy dimensions and our responsibility as *shomrim* (guardians) in the first chapters of Genesis. Sacred space is revealed in the Garden of Eden story: the Garden's beauty and bounty are given to humanity for safekeeping. Sacred time is presented in the form of the Sabbath, a day separate from other days, made special and unique, a day set aside to honor what is most of ultimate concern. And sacred personhood is shown in the human form; that each of us is imbued with nothing less than the Divine Imprint or Image itself. Each of us is holy, unique, distinct, deserving of respect and dignity.

As communal leaders, we strive to build institutions that honor those who enter our halls. Our fundamental responsibility to our community, in particular to parents who have entrusted us as *shomrim* with the bodies and souls of their children, is a pledge and promise that we are worthy of that trust—that

we are worthy shomrim, that we know how to make our spaces sacred and safe. Sacred space, sacred time, and sacred human beings require sacred protection.

When Cain murdered his own brother Abel, the Torah records his incredulous question.

השמר אחי אנכי?

Ha'shomer akhi anokhi?

Am I my brother's guardian?

Cain's question resounds through time and space, as we have repeatedly failed as a species to be shomrim, to watch over and protect one another, and most tragically, the most innocent and the most vulnerable among us, our children.

Imagine a world where children are safe, where they never need to fear physical or sexual abuse, where they mature and grow in Jewish institutions that put child safety at the top of their priorities, taking responsibility for each child's physical and emotional well-being. Together, let us build a community which ensures that our children are protected in our own institutions. The time has come for us to answer Cain's cynical and rhetorical question with our own clear call: Yes. We are shomrim for one another. Yes. Each child is as important as my child and each one is my responsibility.

Childhood is meant to be a time of growth and safety. The organizations who care for our children are supposed to be spaces of healthy community and ethical behavior. Children themselves deserve to be free, secure, and confident people as they mature into strong and caring adults. The holiness of that time, those places, and the souls of the next generation are ours to protect. Such protection requires more than just words and public commitments, but action — mandating training, developing or enhancing our safeguarding policies, and facilitating continuing dialogue, so that this *shmirah* is prioritized at every level of our organization. Together, we must serve as true *shomrim*, watching over and protecting our children.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to say that holiness is inherent in each person?
2. What would it look like in practice for you as an individual to be a shomer, to watch over and to protect other human beings, especially children? Can you think of experiences when you have felt that way, not only about children for whom you had explicit responsibility as a parent or caretaker?
3. What policies would you want to introduce in groups, organizations, and institutions that you are a part of to better protect children?

Endnotes

Child Safety First: Closing the Gap in Best Practices for Prevention and Response to Sexual Abuse of Minors in Jewish Organizations. Jumpstart Labs, Summer, 2017. Available at: <http://jumpstartlabs.org/offering/research-reports/jumpstart-reports/child-safety-first/>

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