

# **MAH LA'ASOT**

**WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

**A BOOK OF ETHICAL AND JEWISH RESPONSES**

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**TORAH AURA PRODUCTIONS**

ISBN 10 #1-934527-38-6

ISBN 13 #978-1-934527-38-2

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Second Edition

Published by Torah Aura Productions

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# UNIT I:

## פְּקוּחַ-נֶפֶשׁ

### *Pikuah Nefesh*—The Drownings

#### **PROBLEM 1: THE DROWNING PERSON**



You and a group of your friends have ridden bicycles to a lake that is near a friend's house. After a while, you realize it is getting late and is time to go home. As you prepare to leave, you notice that one of your group is missing. You turn around to see him struggling in the water. He may be drowning.

*Mah la'asot?* What should you do? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your responsibility in this matter? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why do you have a responsibility in this matter? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# THE DROWNING PERSON — THE JEWISH ANSWER

**Problem:** If you see a person who may be hurt or killed, what should you do?

**Answer:** If you are not putting your own life at risk, you must try to save the other person.

**Reason:** The obligation to save another person is based on a principle in *Halakhah* (Jewish Law) called *Pikuaḥ Nefesh*, saving a soul. Protecting a human life is a major Jewish obligation.

Our rabbis learned this lesson from two different places in the Torah:

DO NOT STAND IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF YOUR NEIGHBOR. (Leviticus 19:16)

The first verse (Leviticus 19:16) teaches us that as Jews we are not allowed to stand by and watch someone else be injured or killed. That would be “STANDING IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF YOUR NEIGHBOR.” If someone is going to be hurt or killed, a Jew is responsible to try to prevent this injury or death.

YOU SHALL KEEP MY LAWS AND RULES,  
YOU SHALL ACT ON THEM,  
PEOPLE SHALL LIVE BY THEM. (Leviticus 18:5)

The second verse (Leviticus 18:5) teaches us a second lesson. The key words are “PEOPLE SHALL **LIVE** BY THEM.” Even though Jews are supposed to do all the *mitzvot* (because they are commandments), one should not perform a *mitzvah* if it would mean dying. This means that if it is likely that you will die trying, you should not attempt to save another person. If you don’t know how to swim very well, you should not swim out after a drowning person.<sup>1</sup>

**Why should a Jew try to save another person’s life?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**When should a Jew not try to save a person who is drowning? Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup>A person who is drowning often panics. Sometimes, he/she can drown the person who is trying to save him/her. If you haven’t studied lifesaving and you don’t know how to approach a drowning swimmer, you shouldn’t go in after one. It is much safer to throw the person a float, push a board out to him/her, etc. Not knowing how to help can easily put your own life at risk.

Jewish legal texts teach:

The phrase, "DO NOT STAND IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF YOUR NEIGHBOR" means "Do not watch without doing something while your neighbor's blood is shed." If you see someone in danger of drowning in the river, being carried away by wild beasts, or being attacked by robbers, you must try to rescue that person. (Sifra on Lev. 19:16)

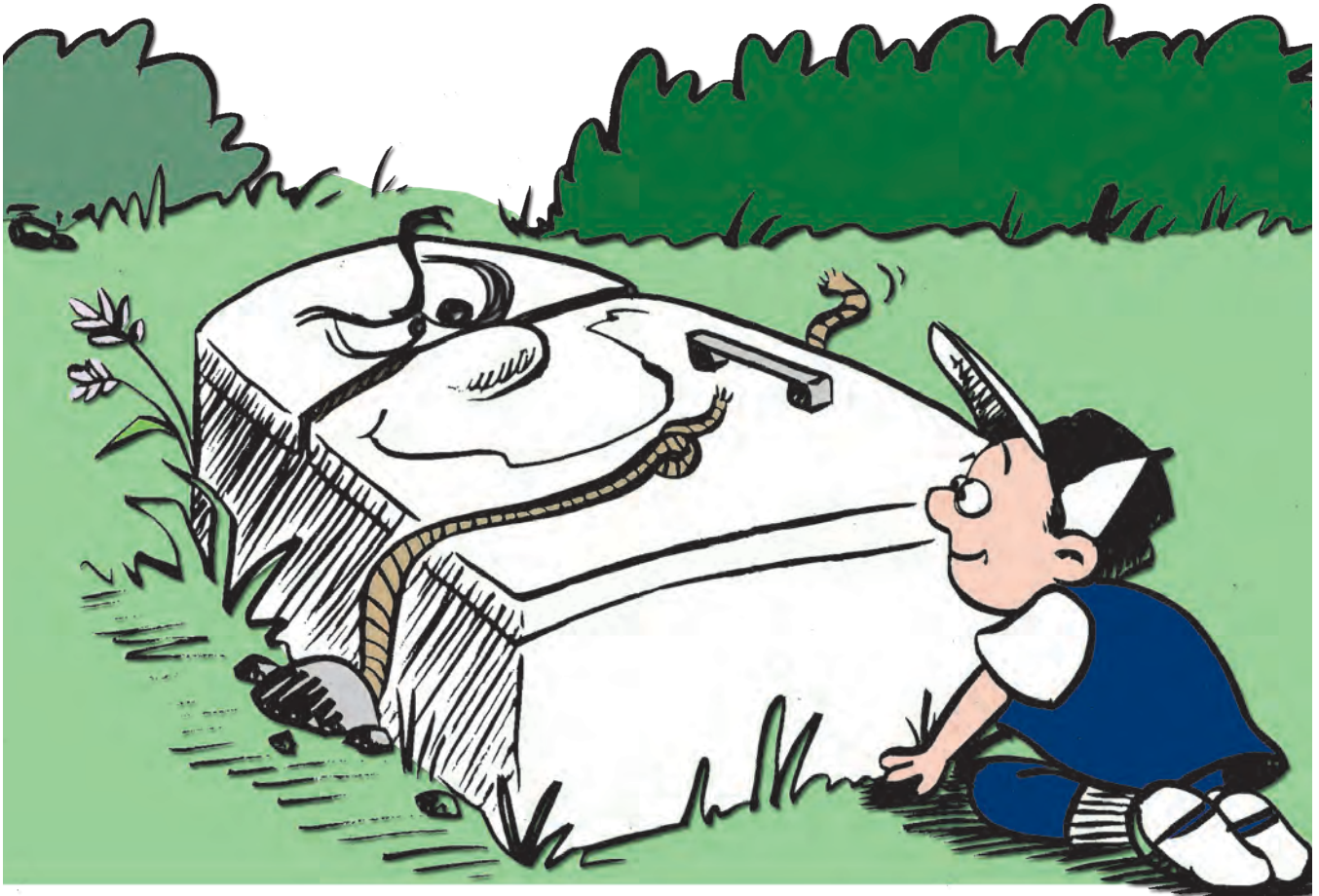
**Which of these people correctly practiced Pikuah Nefesh, saving a soul? Circle their numbers.**

1. Randy gave five dollars to the Cancer Society. Randy is nine years old.
2. Sam never learned CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). One day, when his little cousin fell into the pool and started to drown, Sam pulled her out. When Sam saw that she wasn't breathing, he did his best. He blew in her mouth and pushed on her stomach the way he had seen characters on television do it. Sam is fourteen years old.
3. Twelve-year-old Erica is driving with her mother. She sees a tattered street person lying on the ground. He appears to be unconscious. She tells her mother to stop. Her mother says, "No, he's just an old drunk."
4. Every year the synagogue has a blood drive to collect blood for the Red Cross. Every year, Debby's mother makes a point of being one of the first to sign up.
5. Aviva is a good swimmer. She is picnicking by the lake when she sees that Tom (who is also swimming) has a cramp and may be in trouble. Rather than jumping in to help him, she grabs the Styrofoam ice chest from the people on the next blanket, dumps out their food, runs out on the dock, and tosses the ice chest near Tom. It floats, he grabs it, and he catches his breath. Aviva is seventeen years old.
6. There is an automobile accident in front of Bob's house. Bob is out front playing on the steps. He sees that someone is hurt. He runs inside, calls 911 and reports the accident. Then he runs to the car to see if he can help. Bob is ten years old.



# PROBLEM 2: THE OLD REFRIGERATOR

*We know that we are responsible to save a person who is in danger, but do we have a responsibility to prevent possible danger?*



You are walking home from school one day. In the front yard of one of the houses down the street, you see an old refrigerator. The owner has not bothered to take the door off. Rather, he has just loosely tied a rope around it. You see that a bunch of little kids are playing hide-and-go-seek down the street.<sup>2</sup>

**Mah la'asot? What should you do?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have a responsibility in this matter?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>2</sup>Many children have died from playing in refrigerators. When the door is closed, a refrigerator is completely airtight. There is no way of opening the door from the inside. It most states it is illegal to put a refrigerator out without removing the door.