

Why am I more likely to help one neighbor who is crowdfunding for a personal need than I am to expend the same or less resources when they could help hundreds of starving people somewhere else in the world? Why does our capacity for compassion become numb in the face of increasing need? And what can we do about it?

This year, TBI has received a grant from CLAL's program, "Scientist in Synagogues," for collaborative programming on the intersections of Jewish values and science, particularly moral psychology. Longtime TBI member, Dr. Paul Slovic, and I will work to provide this programming together. He is an internationally renowned moral psychologist, who has taught extensively on the limits of our moral imaginations and what might be done to more effectively counter "psychic numbing."

Judaism, too, has much to teach on this topic. On the one hand, in Bava Metzia 71a, the Talmud teaches that our obligations to those near and closely related to us take precedence over those farther away either geographically or emotionally. But Masechet Shabbat 54b also teaches that anyone who has the capacity to make a difference on a larger scale is expected to do so. While these two instructions are not in conflict, the reality is that for all of us, attention and resources are finite, so we all struggle with how to leverage our own capacities, and the question of what is enough.

It is my hope that the programming that Dr. Slovic and I will provide will help us refine those struggles and open a conversation in our community about the nature and limits of our obligations to each other and to strangers. At the end of June, Dr. Slovic and I attended a seminar in New York where we met with representatives from the 11 other grantee synagogues around the country. Beginning at the High Holidays, you will hear us teaching on these issues, and we'll be offering a monthly seminar in the late fall and over the winter. Please be on the lookout for more information about dates, times, and registration.