DO YOU PRIORITIZE HELPING THOSE CLOSE TO YOU (PROXIMITY) OR THOSE IN GREATEST NEED (URGENCY)?

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TEXT 1: Who takes precedence?

This text appears to be a rabbinic ethical thought experiment between (1) a system in which people are more responsible for some people than for others (2)a system where we distribute resources entirely based on urgency of need.

In the case of a cistern which belongs to the people of a town. [If there is enough water for only] the townspeople or others—the townspeople have precedence [in drinking the water] over the others. Others or the townspeople's animals—the lives of others have precedence over the animals. Rabbi Yose says that the townspeople's animals have precedence before the lives of the others. The animals of the townspeople or the animals of others—the animals of the townspeople have precedence to the animals of others. Drinking water for the others or the laundry of the townspeople—the lives of others have precedence over their laundry. Rabbi Yose says that laundry of the townspeople comes before the lives of others. The laundry of the townspeople or the laundry of others—the laundry of the townspeople comes first.

Tosefta Bava Metsia 11:33-36

KEY IDEAS:

1. There is a drought, and people from a nearby town ask for water from their neighbouring town. We do not know why one town has water and the other does not.
2. There are two positions—the majority opinion and that of Rabbi Yose—about when to agree to share the water.
3. The majority opinion suggests that the resources be distributed based on the urgency of need, and that only when need is equal should the townspeople have preference. Rabbi Yose suggests that the townspeople prioritize long-term survival, necessities beyond survival, or even communal thriving over the lives of others.
4. This relates to the discussion between Green and Singer as to whether and when it is more ethical to prioritize based on need and whether or when it is more ethical to prioritize based on proximity/relationship.

TEXT 2: Who takes precedence?

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein was a 19th-century Lithuanian rabbi who wrote Aruch HaShulhan as a code of law for Jewish communities. He is troubled by texts such as the one above, which would mean that a person might spend all their available resources supporting only the poor in their immediate family. He is concerned that poor people who do not have relatives with means will have no possible way to get support.

Now there is something fundamental about the details of the laws above that troubles me deeply. For if we explain the texts that I have cited according to their simple meaning—that certain groups are prior to others—they imply that [one may distribute the entirety of one's tzedakah money to one group within the established hierarchy] and need not give at all to those who fall outside of that specific group. But it is well known that every wealthy person has many more relatives who are poor, and how much more is that true for people whose charity funds are scant! And if this is the case, poor people without wealthy relatives will die of starvation. Now how is it possible to say this? Therefore, in my humble opinion, the explanation of [charity priorities] is as follows: Certainly, every person, whether of modest or significant means, is obligated to give a portion of their charity money to needy people who are not relatives. But to their poor relatives, they should give a greater amount than is given to those who are not related. And so on along the ladder of priorities.

Aruch HaShulhan, Yoreh Deah 251:4

KEY IDEAS:

1. Suggests that rather than prioritizing one's closer relationships absolutely, one should allot a percentage of one's resources to those who are not in one's inner circle. His idea of prioritization means giving a higher percentage to our closer relationships but still giving to those with whom we have less or perhaps no relationship.
2. Systems of divided responsibility are in trouble when there are some groups with no one who has any resources responsible for them. Although we owe more to those closest to us, we must give at least something to people who are far from us but in need.

TEXT 3: Who is part of one's community?
Rabbi Menahem Meiri was a medieval French commentator who had warm relationships with his Christian neighbors. His approach here is transformative

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The Rabbis established the principle of Do not wrong your fellow (LEVITICUS 25:17) and applied it to 'one who is with you in Torah and commandments'"… All who are from the nations that are guided by the ways of religion and serve God in any way even though their faith is far from ours … are exactly like Jews regarding these matters whether in lost articles or in business errors and in all other matters without distinction.

Menahem Meiri, Beit Habehira, Babylonian Talmud Bava Metsia 59a and Bava Kama 113b

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Key Ideas:

1. The category that used to refer only to Jews—"your fellow in Torah and mitzvot"— should now apply to all civil people.
2. As a result, in the previous source's story of the unnoticed precious stone, the students would have been required by Jewish law to return the lost stone to the person who sold the donkey.
3. Thus, the category of Covenant Ethics can include more people and groups than previously thought. Alternatively, Creation Ethics require more affirmative ethical responsibilities than previously thought.