

The Wicked Son

Contributed by [Latino-Jewish Student Coalition](#)

Source: Jeffrey Goldberg in The New American Haggadah

The wicked son is not wicked in any of the usual ways. He is not violent or sexually immoral; he does not keep slaves or steal. His wickedness is that he is indifferent to the fate of the Jewish people. "What is this to you?" he asks. "To you," not "To me." What he is saying, in effect, is "The fate of my people is not my concern." Here is a vexing demand sometimes made of young Jews by their elders in America today. You should worry about the Jews more than you worry about non-Jews. In the shtetls of the Pale, or the ghettos of Morocco, this was not such a difficult thing to ask, because who had a choice? Jews were sequestered from the world, so why should they have cared about its problems? But in America, this unique Diaspora nation, a place that comprehensively accepts, even embraces, its Jewish citizens, this becomes a more troubling proposition. Which is why **a war rages in the souls of American Jews, the war between the universal and the particular.** It is not a form of chauvinism to declare that the fate of Ethiopian Jews is an overriding concern of the American Jewish community, but what happens to non-Jewish Ethiopians is only a marginal concern?

This question arises anew in each successive generation. Those Jews who were college students in the 1980s experienced this dilemma rather directly. Two liberation movements then preoccupied many campuses: the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and the fight to free Soviet Jewry. Both were righteous causes. But one benefited Jews directly, and the other didn't. Many Jews made the struggle against white South Africa their cause. This was to their everlasting credit, as Jews and as moral beings. But what would have happened if no American Jew had made the cause of Soviet Jewry his own? Here is the same question put another way: Was it parochial or chauvinistic of the nations of sub-Saharan Africa to fight apartheid with singular focus?

There are so many challenges embedded in Judaism, but perhaps this is the greatest one of all: How do we balance our faith's demand to care especially for our fellow Jews, and care especially for the entire world, at the same time?