

## Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh: A Beautiful Concept Distorted

### I. Introduction

The phrase Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh—“All Jews are responsible for one another”—is often quoted in Jewish communities, schools, and shuls. But what started as a principle of communal care and spiritual unity has sometimes been weaponized into a tool of judgment, nosiness, or even collective punishment. This distortion has strayed far from the original meaning and intent of the phrase.

### II. The Sources

The phrase originates in the Talmud, in Sanhedrin 27b, derived from the verse in Vayikra 26:37, “V’kashlu ish b’achiv”—“Each shall stumble over his brother.” This is a derashah, not the literal meaning of the verse, but a homiletic expansion suggesting that one Jew is implicated in the sins of another when they failed to intervene.

The idea is echoed in:

- Ritva (Rosh Hashanah 20a:8): explaining how one Jew can fulfill a beracha obligation for another due to this mutual responsibility.
- Ran (Rosh Hashanah 8a:2): similar logic for mitzvah performance.
- Sefer Chassidim: applies the idea positively, as a reason Hashem should bless the entire nation.
- Shaarei Teshuva (3:195): touches on shared responsibility for sin, but with clear qualification—it applies only when someone had the opportunity to help or influence the other toward good.

### III. The Limits of Responsibility

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 27b makes the limits of this responsibility clear: only when one had the opportunity to intervene and refrained from doing so. It’s not a blanket license to micromanage others’ religious lives. It’s certainly not a call to ask intrusive questions like “Where did you daven?” or “Why did you do that?”

Furthermore, Chazal emphasize that tochacha (rebuke) must be offered only when it will be heard. As they say: “Just as it is a mitzvah to say something that will be listened to, it is also a mitzvah not to say something that will not be listened to.” (Yevamot 65b)

### IV. The Misuse

In many communities, the concept has been twisted:

- Used to justify invasive behavior, social policing, and judgmentalism.
- Deployed in schools to impose collective punishment—“If a few students misbehaved, everyone is responsible.”
- Turned into an excuse for gossip or control: “I’m asking you these questions because we’re all responsible for each other.”

But this is not areivut. This is bitul zman and bitul kavod—a waste of time and a loss of dignity.

True responsibility for each other is:

- Helping a fellow Jew through illness or financial crisis.
- Lifting someone up spiritually when they seek help.
- Providing quiet support, not loud interference.

#### V. What “Arevim” Really Means

The word arev (ערב) means a guarantor, like one who co-signs on a loan. It is an act of love and trust—not control. A guarantor doesn’t live inside the borrower’s house and breathe down his neck. He’s there in the background, ready to help when needed.

#### VI. Conclusion

The beauty of Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh is in our interconnection, not our intrusion. Our job isn’t to constantly criticize or monitor others—it’s to be there for each other with love, help, and humility. Turning that concept into a license to control or judge is not just a misinterpretation—it’s a betrayal of the very values this principle is meant to uphold.