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**Daniel Greenberg**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**17 August 2018**

**Reclining aircraft seats**

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Good morning.

Flying back from holiday this week I saw three kinds of behaviour when the seatbelt light went out after take-off. Some people pushed their seat back immediately with an air of entitlement. Some sat bolt upright throughout the journey. And some appeared to wait until they wanted to sleep, and then they looked over the back of their seat, and sometimes spoke to the person behind, before deciding what to do.

The aircraft cabin is a microcosm, a sealed community brought together for a few hours. In a world that concentrates increasingly on rights, I can concentrate on enforcing mine: I can push my seat back because I have a right to do so: if it cramps you, then pass on the pain and push your seat back into the person behind.

This reminded me of the Rabbinic writing – Ethics of the Fathers – where the Rabbis disagree about how to describe a person whose attitude to life is “I’ll keep what’s mine and you keep what’s yours” (or “I’ll look after myself and you look after yourself”). Most Rabbis describe this as neutral behaviour; but some describe it as the worst behaviour imaginable. Why such a fundamental disagreement?

One answer involves a variant reading of the Ethic. If one person says “I’ll keep what’s mine and you keep what’s yours”, that’s neutral; *aval yesh omrim* - but if lots of people say it, and it becomes the defining attitude of a community, then it becomes the worst behaviour imaginable in religious terms, simply because it makes the entire community pointless, or spiritually sterile. In Rabbinic terms, God didn’t create a world with lots of people only for us to ignore each other, or to focus only on enforcing our own individual rights.

The tiny ephemeral microcosm community of an aircraft can be a spiritually or morally neutral experience: or it can become a small but significant opportunity to think about each other’s needs as well as our own, and to create a community that radiates spirituality, or if you prefer, creates a useful social contract.

We all have different ideas about how and why we came to share this world. But perhaps we can all agree that if we see other human beings as an opportunity, and not simply as an obstacle to the full exercise of our own rights, our relationship with others can be the starting point for our own spiritual, ethical or simply human development.