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"Is whistleblowing a Jewish obligation?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

The Talmud (Eruvin 45a) asks whether the residents of a city under siege can break the Shabbat to defend itself. The answer is that if the siege is launched with the intention of killing the city's residents, then they must pick up arms to defend themselves, even on Shabbat. Moreover, says Maimonides (Laws of Shabbat 3:23), it is forbidden to delay bringing help until after Shabbat.

What if, instead, an employee learns about a company's illegal practices, particularly those that pollute the environment, which, in effect, have the consequence of "killing the city's residents." Then, we might conclude, that whistleblowing is mandated and should be done right away.

Or consider a different situation that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 72a) also took up on the matter of self-defense: If someone comes to kill you, you should rise up and pre-emptively kill the other person first. This ruling is grounded on two principles. First, we want to stop an evil-doer, for his own sake, from perpetrating a sin or a crime. Second, we want to act with self-preservation in mind.

Of course, potential whistleblowers may be reluctant to act lest they lose their jobs or their lives be made harder, which is why there are there are "anonymous tip lines" they can call. They may also cynically think that mega-corporations don't care about the ethics of their deeds or the repercussions of getting caught. Still, we ought to have the courage to act, and to act speedily, before any more damage can be done.