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Walking with Justice

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

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A wide range of organizations is actively pursuing agendas of social justice; our congregants are often among the leaders of those activist groups. Why, with such a plethora of other opportunities for involvement, should the Jews, as part of the Jewish community, become involved in questions of social justice? Why should religious organizations get involved in political controversies? And what should our agenda be if we do feel impelled to become involved?

Jews frequently turn to our religious traditions for a life cycle event, for a history lesson, or for deepened spirituality. But our political convictions generally emerge from contemporary political theories, as though our ancient heritage has no wisdom to contribute to the question of how people ought to live together, or how to establish God's sovereignty on earth. In deriving our politics from Adam Smith or from Karl Marx (or even from John Maynard Keynes), we deprive ourselves of historical depth and Jewish authenticity, even as we accede to the reduction of the human animal to an economic pawn.

Most modern theories of political organization begin with the assumption that human happiness is to be found in economic justice, that people are motivated primarily by economic questions, and that oppression is primarily an issue of economic relations. Such a mono-dimensional view of humanity and of human society ignores the tremendous complexity of each of us and of our societies. Our motivations - whether emerging from patriotism, jealousy, idealism, or bitterness, often have little to do with economic theory and a great deal to do with the difficulties of being truly human.

It is precisely here, in wrestling with our own impulses, in learning how to cultivate our own better natures, that economic and political theories have least to offer. And it is precisely here that Torah has been working to transform and to elevate the Jewish People for millennia.

Our concern for social justice is legitimately Jewish - and psychologically adequate - only when it is the result of our loyalty to the Torah and to mitzvot. Social justice is a mitzvah, neither more nor less obligatory than the mitzvah of observing the Sabbath or of observing Kashrut. The same God who commands that we fast and pray on Yom Kippur also insists that we show deference to the aged. Recorded in the same Torah are the mitzvot of circumcising firstborn males and of prohibiting wanton destruction of the earth's natural resources. Both ritual profundity and acts of social justice are expressions of our obedience to the *M'tzaveh*, the Commander whose authority, presence, and passion permeate the Torah and later rabbinic teachings as well.

One cannot claim to be a servant of God without a commitment to make this world more just, more compassionate, and more godly. Doubtless you have often heard rabbis quote the mitzvah, "*tzedek tzedek tirdof*" - "justice shall you pursue."¹ As stirring as those words are, they have become muted through overfamiliarity.

I prefer to derive the impetus for Jewish social justice from another commandment found in the same biblical book. Deuteronomy 22:3 commands "*lo tukhal lehitalem*," - "you must not remain indifferent." The essential insight here is that the opposite of good is not evil. The opposite of good is indifference. And indifference - to human suffering, to human isolation, or to human hatred - contradicts everything that the Torah represents, everything that Judaism holds sacred.

As Conservative Jews, as people who look to our ancestral traditions not merely for some ethnic color or occasional comfort but as a pathway of response to God, as a tool for infusing sanctity and holiness into our own lives and into the world around us, our involvement in social issues must emerge from those traditions themselves. In other words, our context is the Heritage of Torah.

It is no coincidence that the commandment most often repeated in the Torah is that "you shall have one law for you and for the stranger in your midst." It is surely not chance that the most frequently repeated refrain is that "you were slaves in the Land of Egypt." Religious Jews must be involved in questions of social justice because our Torah records a passionate concern with social justice. The very core of our tradition - the story of our liberation from Egyptian

¹ Deuteronomy 16:20



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

slavery - is a story about freedom and liberation, a story of a God who fights for the oppressed and for justice. To accurately reflect the priorities of the Torah, then, means that we must also become zealous on behalf of those who are excluded, downtrodden, or despised. A midrash in the Babylonian Talmud remarks that the first and last deeds recorded in the Torah were both deeds of kindness, deeds of justice: God made clothes for Adam and Eve when they had no clothes, and God saw to the burial of Moses when there was no one around to bury him.² To perform deeds of loving kindness is to make the world more compassionate and more just. To walk in God's ways is to act on political concern.

Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold of the Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel once offered a yardstick for evaluating the Jewish content of any practice. Noting the observation in the Book of Genesis that humanity is made in God's image, he insisted that any practice which enhances or illumines God's image in other human beings is properly Jewish, and any standard which obscures or diminishes the reflection of God's image is anti-Jewish – regardless of its source or its antiquity. We act as good Jews when we cultivate the image of the Divine in our fellow human beings.

Rabbi Simon Greenberg, founding President of the American Jewish University and a Vice-Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, offered a broader approach when he claimed that the central task facing all of God's servants is to vindicate God's judgment at the end of Creation that the world is "very good." When we bolster that claim, we enlist as God's partners in the ongoing task of perfecting creation.

We must not remain indifferent.

A JEWISH AGENDA FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Given that a part of a religious Jewish commitment is to be passionate about social justice, we still must ask about the details of that commitment.

I would suggest that a religious Jewish agenda of social justice would include the following:

- Given that all human beings are made in God's image, we must actively support the equality of women. Women also reflect the Divine image, and any diminution of women is a derogation of God. The dignity of women in the workplace and in the home, the right of individual women to control their own reproductive capacity, the right to childcare and equal pay for equivalent work - all these flow out of our Torah's conviction that there should be one law for all.
- That same conviction mandates that racial and ethnic prejudice cannot co-exist with God's rule on earth. The practice of discrimination based on race - in housing, employment, social opportunity, or education - strikes at the heart of the Torah's message of social justice. As religious Jews, we must speak out clearly and consistently for the dignity of all human beings and all human groupings. That insistence also means that the age of the jokes about the "goyishche kop" and remarks about "shiksés" and "shgotzim" are no less offensive and improper than jokes about "jewing someone down" for money or comments about Jewish American Princesses. Characterizing and slandering ethnic, religious, or racial groups must be seen as no less than a rebellion against God and Torah, a violation of our covenant of peace.
- How easy it is to pretend that some people matter more than others, that some are more fully human than others. People with special needs are the canary in the coal mine, the early barometers of the extent of a commitment to human dignity and human equality. The Torah relays the commandment, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall revere your God: I am The Holy One."³ If our institutions exclude them (actively or passively by not accommodating individual special needs), or render them invisible by simply ignoring them, we violate this commandment, as well as the mitzvah to love our fellows as ourselves and to enhance the divine image in every person.

² *Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a*

³ *Leviticus 19:14*



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

- Hillel taught, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” Conservative Judaism has begun to struggle to welcome gay and lesbian Jews, but there is much work yet to do. For too long, such people (and their parents, siblings, friends, and relatives) have been isolated by the all-encompassing silence or hostility of our communities. Estimates of one out of every ten in the population as homosexual preclude our ignoring our fellow human beings any longer. Just as we demand to be accepted as we are by the larger world, so gays and lesbians have a right to acceptance and understanding within the synagogues and communities of their childhood and their future. There are too many eager Jews among them who want to live Jewishly and who desire to contribute to Jewish life for us to continue a de facto policy of silent neglect.
- “*Ein Am Ha-Aretz Hasid*,” the Mishnah records.⁴ One cannot be pious if ignorant. Our Jewish traditions depend on the centrality of learning. In fact, Judaism may be unique among the world’s religions in insisting that study is itself a form of worship. Consequently, the level of education available to the public, and the public disdain of scholarship and intellect, are matters of Jewish religious concern. Judaism cannot survive, let alone flourish, in a culture that does not cultivate learning. The mediocre quality of the nation’s schools and colleges are a religious matter for us: “*Talmud Torah k’neged kulam*” – “the mitzvah of learning equals all the rest.”
- A midrash teaches that God instructed the first humans to care well for this world, since there would be no creations to replace it. We demonstrate gratitude for the gift of life and the marvel of creation by living responsibly with the rest of nature, by assuring that our children’s children will also have clean air, water, food, and wilderness in their own time.
- Finally, and arching above all the rest, we must involve ourselves in the mitzvah of “*rodef shalom u’vakesh shalom*” – “seek peace and pursue it.” Humankind now has the power to reject all of creation, to undo the very foundations of biological existence on the earth. It is our duty as Jews and as human beings to pressure our government to seek solutions to the constant possibility of nuclear annihilation and a too ready recourse to resolve political differences through bloodshed. We may not have the answers ourselves, but we must convey our concern and our rejection of the nuclear terror or the facile turn to warfare as a continuing way of life.

This list could go on and on: the security of the State of Israel, the fate of the homeless in our urban centers, oppressed Jewry in Ethiopia, Arab lands, and elsewhere. So long as our agenda reflects the clarion call of Torah and mitzvot, so long as we are responding not to the Los Angeles or the New York Times but to the injunction to love our neighbors, then some may fault our religion, but they cannot fault our responsiveness.

REFLECTIONS ON JUSTICE AND POLITICS

To avoid discussing social problems is as great a denial of the relevance of halakhah, of the authority of God, as to refrain from discussing kashrut or marriage. God is not merely concerned with ritual, but also in *mitzvot bein adam le-havero*, commandments between people. The Prophet Isaiah makes it abundantly clear that we have a Jewish obligation:

..to loosen all the bonds that bind men unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry; take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn away from people in need.⁵

It is, therefore, more than just permissible to discuss political issues from the bimah. It is obligatory to bring out the Torah’s perspective on any social question involving morality.

The American attitude toward religion is basically Christian. Jesus, when he told his followers to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s”⁶ was implying that there could be something that belonged to the state, over which God had no authority. Much of subsequent Western history has been built on that notion. Some

⁴ *Mishnah Avot 2:5*

⁵ *Isaiah 58:7*

⁶ *Matthew 22:21*



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

of the consequences have been good, such as the concept of the separation of church and state. Yet this idea that we must limit religion only to matters of the spirit has also produced a sickly, superficial view of the role of religion. With such restrictions, Judaism cannot survive. The Jewish people was not formed through individual decisions to believe in God. Judaism emerged out of a corporate act — we, as an entire people, agreed to transform our societies into religious communities. We agreed to sanctify our laws, to become a nation of priests, an *am kadosh*.

Consequently, Judaism has something to say about all aspects of life. It is a responsibility of every rabbi to alert the community to the Jewish insistence on justice, on peace, and on the implications of the fact that all people are created in the image of God.

Rabbis and other Jewish leaders have an obligation to God to use the *bimah* as a forum to address the pressing social problems of our time, to educate the community about the parameters beyond which a person's views would violate the priorities and values of Jewish tradition. I am not saying that there is only one Jewish response to issues such as war and peace, poverty, or the environment. But there are limits on both sides of any issue, beyond which Judaism says, "No." It is the job of the rabbis to give their congregants enough information on how the Torah sees the issue so they can then incorporate that viewpoint into their own. This implies, among other points, that a rabbi should not tell the members of the community explicitly how to vote. But we can make it clear what are the special concerns of Torah and the Sages.

Rabbis have greater learning in Torah, but they don't have a special tie to God. Because of our own human limitations, I approach the *bimah* self-consciously and with humility. It is inappropriate for a rabbi to endorse a specific candidate from the *bimah* (although, no less than any other citizen, she or he is free to do so in the press or in campaign literature). To give an endorsement in the setting of the synagogue or Jewish agency would be to falsely imply that the candidate has the approval of God — something even rabbis lack the power to bestow.

Politics, while important, is also seductive. Rabbis would be well advised to avoid over-involvement, the sense that they have to address every public question. The rabbi's primary focus should be the moral and religious vitality of the community. To the extent that Judaism takes moral stands on an issue being discussed generally, the rabbi is obligated to make the Jewish position and concerns public.

Judaism is not content merely with decorous and vibrant synagogues. Judaism aims to mend the world and to transform the streets. To be servants of God is to care. We cannot remain indifferent.

PERSONAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Judaism has a message that the world very much needs to hear: a vital insistence on the intersection between personal ethics and social justice. Unfortunately, we live in a world of shattered fragments. We live in a world in which it is impossible to hold on to both virtue and lawfulness, and this tension threatens to destroy our society from within. Consider the following telling examples:

- I remember being at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library outside of Boston and seeing a film clipping whose sole purpose was to glorify the deceased President. The clipping occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it began with President Kennedy calling the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey and also to the Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson. These two men were very important, very powerful, and their President called them in the midst of a national emergency. They get into the chauffeur-driven limo and are rushed to the White House. There, at the door, are guards to make sure that their security is protected. They emerge from the car. First, of course, comes the Vice-President who has been summoned by the Nation's leader at this time of crisis. He acts like any important man does at such a moment, which is to say that he gets out of the car and strides purposefully into the White House. The Vice-President is followed by the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey, who does the same thing. But as



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

he gets out of the door, he catches himself, turns to the guard who opened the door, and says, “thank you.” Only then did he stride into the White House. That little gesture is so telling precisely because it wasn’t the point the film wanted to make, because Humphrey never made it into the White House as President, and because that example of personal ethics being the source of a passion for social justice is so rare.

- Or consider President Clinton’s failed appointment of Zoë Baird, back in the first few days of his new Administration. Baird was removed from consideration after it was revealed that she had hired an undocumented worker as her child’s nanny. How is it possible that Zoë Baird, who earned half a million dollars a year, couldn’t find the money to pay for legal childcare? And the defense that was offered by the Clinton Administration was that other than that her record was blameless. Other than her crime, which she knowingly committed and hired a lawyer to defend, other than the crime, she was strictly within the law. Let’s leave aside that men in government are never asked how they got their childcare. One still has to inquire: how could a woman who cares passionately for the right thing, and is infused with a passion for social justice, not care about oppressing someone who is here without papers by paying them too little to be able to have some retirement money later on? Or that President Clinton could so deceive his wife and the nation? Or that Judge Starr could so taint his office and publish pornography? How is that possible? What has happened is that in our secularized culture is we have decoupled justice and goodness, so that they now function as mutually exclusive categories. An authority on the big picture — the equality of human beings, the liberation of the world, freedom from hunger and want, and poverty — doesn’t have time to say “thank you.” On the other hand, too many of those concerned with individual acts of kindness and beauty think that politics is pointless, that all politicians are necessarily corrupt, and mendacity is the way of the world. To that bifurcation, Judaism says, “no, it cannot be.” So long as we sever goodness and righteousness, both of them remain powerless to transform the world. Then we are truly trapped.
- I asked the children in a bar mitzvah class to share with me who are their heroes. Sadly, I have to report that they don’t have any heroes. From the puzzled looks on their faces, I’d have to assume that the very idea of heroes strikes them as hopelessly old-fashioned (even rabbinic). How is it possible to be a teenager and not have a hero? Granted the heroes that I had as a teen were not as heroic in reality as I had imagined. But what was important was not the heroes themselves, it was my image of them. How can a person grow up without an ideal? How can someone grow up thinking that, deep down, everyone is only looking out for number one? That nobody cares about decency any more? How is that possible? What kind of children are we raising in this amputated world?

That cynical assessment has nearly paralyzed Judaism as well. We are so used to accepting the paltry standards of our secularized culture that we take those standards as norms and then diminish and constrain our Judaism to fit inside that prison. We have abandoned what was truly breathtaking about our sacred heritage. Severing justice from ethics silences Judaism’s distinctive voice and robs its real message of a hearing. Think of the image (suggested by Rabbi Milton Steinberg, of blessed memory) of the ends of a string, each pulled in opposite directions. In our case, we have the tension of social justice on one hand, and personal ethics pulling in the other direction. Rabbi Steinberg said that the beauty of Judaism is to recognize that when opposing forces pull in two different directions, the only way to harmonize them is to introduce a third force, lifting up at the middle of the string. The upward lift removes the opposition — suddenly the two ends are united again, now pulling in the same direction.⁷ That lift up is God. Judaism insists that righteousness and social justice come from the same source because the living God commands both, and God cares how we treat each other both at the universal level and one-on-one. Both virtues gain coherence from the same source. The sovereignty of God is the basis for the dignity of all human beings. Every single one of us is a child of God. Every single one of us represents some unique facet of the divine that nothing and no one else can replicate. We need to train ourselves to see each person as a brand new source of knowledge of God, nothing less.

⁷ “To Hold With Open Arms,” in *Jewish Reflections on Death*, Jack Riemer, ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1976, pp. 134 – 140



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

There are several implications to the sovereignty of God that remain pertinent today. The first the religious affirmation that, “all people are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights”.⁸ Thomas Jefferson knew that people are not equal if you only use the here-and-now as your standard of measurement. Some people are better looking, some are brighter, and some are smarter, stronger, and more eloquent. Relative only to ourselves we are clearly not equal. Judged on the scale of secular materialism, human equality is a lie. What makes us of equal worth is our relationship to The Holy One Who made us, Who is so transcendently beyond any of us. Relative to that God our differences become insignificant. We are equalized in God’s parenthood. And so the Constitution and the Declaration are based on the recognition that it is God as creator that gives us our equal worth.

We need to return to that recognition. All of us are equal because God is equally concerned for all. If God is the creator of all, then we need to recognize that the world that we inhabit is not ours. It is not ours to do with exclusively as we please. We are not the only living creatures that matter, but in fact the Creator clearly intended for this to be a rich and variegated world with all kinds of living things teeming over it. All of those creatures are part of the symphony of praise that God receives with each new dawn. We need to recall that when we endanger other living things, when we treat the world with scorn, we are slapping God in the face, as it were. We are scorning God’s gift of creation, and a beautiful planet. That is not all: the sovereignty of God is the linchpin for that preciousness. Otherwise the world and other people are tools to be legitimately used for our own pleasure and short term gain.

Finally, the sovereignty of God implies that all people have an intrinsic dignity. Whenever you belittle the dignity of any other human being you are doing nothing less than belittling God.

The Torah makes those implications clear in several points. “Let us make people in our own image,”⁹ says God. What does it mean to be made in God’s image? Surely not that God shares my appearance, or yours. It means that our ability to distinguish good from evil, our ability to be compassionate and kind and loving, our ability to hurt when other people hurt, and our ability to cry at other people’s pain and rejoice at other people’s triumphs is a way that we can most Godlike.

The Torah tells us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁰ What a remarkable teaching that is! The Torah is not asking that we acquiesce in becoming someone else’s doormat, not that we must give precedence to another person at the expense of our own human dignity. This passage from Leviticus expresses the remarkable idea that if all of us are God’s children, and all of us are made in God’s image, then we need to see that in divine image each other. Ultimately, if you cannot love your neighbor you will not love yourself.

The single most repeated rule in the entire Torah is that “you shall have one law for yourself and for the stranger who is in your midst.” In our bifurcated world, we have split into two camps. We have one group of Jews who only worry about the big picture and let the details slip through their fingers. And then we have another camp of Jews who worry exclusively about the little deeds of kindness and have ignored the big picture.

What we need is Jews who will stand up for both sides of the equation, for a Judaism of social justice and personal decency. What we need, in our day, is a return to a full-bodied Judaism. Surely in that richer, holistic Judaism, there is a symbol that can unite these dual, competing aspirations into one synergistic fusion?

According to the great scholar Gershon Scholem, there are three ideal models in the Jewish tradition, the *talmid*, the *tzaddik*, and the *hassid*.¹¹

The *talmid hakham*, the scholar, the sage: What the image of the sage teaches is that we can use our minds in the service of God. A Judaism that prohibits asking certain questions or thoughts is a perversion of what Judaism is to be. God demands of us the service of the mind no less than that of the heart. In fact, there is such openness to the life of the

⁸ From the United States Declaration of Independence

⁹ Genesis 1:26

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:18

¹¹ “Three Types of Jewish Piety,” *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 176 – 190



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

mind that it even extends beyond the borders of our own people and the borders of our own tradition. Midrash Rabbah affirms that if someone insists that there is wisdom among the nations of the world, we are to believe it. And Rabbi Moses ben Maimon instructs us to accept truth from any source.

What a remarkable heritage: a Judaism unafraid to face the truth no matter who articulates that truth, no matter what the context. A faithful Jew need not fear truth. To the contrary we have elevated truth to a sign of God: *hotmo shel ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the sign of God is truth. And yet, says the Midrash, if a person tells you that there is Torah among the nations don't believe that, because wisdom and Torah are not one in the same thing. There is a hallowed place for knowledge in the service of goodness. But a truncated wisdom removed from a context of personal decency nurtures the perversions that are so rank in contemporary life: people who can be passionate about justice and not care about goodness, and of a next door neighbor who loves goodness yet doesn't bother voting.

The second Jewish role model is the *tzaddik*, a righteous person. The Talmud offers various degrees of righteousness. There is the run of the mill *tzaddik*, which can be any of us, and then there is the *tzaddik gamur*, the completely righteous person. The *tzaddik* is the role model for all of us, a person who takes God's will as his or her own personal agenda. A *tzaddik* makes of the mitzvot her or his own pathway through life, seeking to become a walking Sefer Torah so that the black words on the white page lives through their actions and their deeds. Doesn't the Torah itself say that people should see the way we behave and, based on the way we act, they should say "what a wise people, what a loving God?" How many people can look at the way we conduct our daily lives and make that the inference? And yet that *tzaddik* is the very core of who we are to be. And even with the example of the *tzaddik*, our tradition refuses to be overly particularistic. According to one Midrash, the Prophet Elijah said, "I call heaven and earth to witness that whether one be Jew or Gentile, man or woman, manservant or maidservant, the Holy Spirit will suffuse each in proportion to the deeds that he or she performs."¹² Goodness is what defines a *tzaddik*. One who claims to be pious without being good is a fraud.

The third role model is a *hassid*, a religious enthusiast. A *hassid* is someone for whom God is the reason to wake up in the morning and is the reason to do one more sacred act, one more good deed. One who seeks to make every moment holy time, and who sees each new action as a chance to unite with God, such a person is able to cultivate the passion and energy needed to repair the world.

While there are unique qualities for the *tzaddik*, the *hakham*, and the *hassid*, the truth is they are not separate categories. Instead, they overlap in important ways. So that Rabbi Hanina ben Idi could ask: "Why are the words of Torah likened to water? To teach you that just as water flows from a higher level to a lower level, so too the words of Torah abide only with one who is meek in spirit."¹³ In short, you cannot be a sage unless you are also a *tzaddik* (although you can be a *tzaddik* and still be an ignoramus. Judaism values learning highly, yet values goodness even above learning).

These three types of holiness merge and enrich each other, leading us to Judaism's pre-eminent symbol for that fusion of the personal and the global, that blend of personal ethics, individual kindness, and social justice: the Messiah. It isn't necessary to believe literally that an anointed person is coming to see that there is value to a metaphor that is inextricably linked to the personal. Why does the Talmud speak of a Messiah instead of a messianic age? Specifically to prevent the bifurcation of what is politically right from what is personally compassionate. The Messiah is social justice personified. There can be no justice indifferent to particular people.

The Talmud tells us that the Messiah will be found binding the wounds of the leper by the gates of the city.¹⁴ This is the same Messiah who is going to end depression and injustice, the same Messiah that will gather us to our homeland in peace. This Messiah of world peace and healing spends his or her time (we'll see soon enough) binding the wounds of sick individuals. The Messiah embodies the goal for all Jewish piety: the fusion of the general and the particular, of kindness with justice. Maimonides was absolutely right when he said it is a waste of time to speculate on when the

¹² *Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu* p. 48

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit* 7a

¹⁴ *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin* 98a



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

Messiah is coming or who the Messiah will be. The Messiah is to be understood as a hope, as an aspiration, as a dream. In that role, it is clear that the image of the Messiah must be irreducibly personal. Advancing social justice and caring about the individual needs of one human being at a time is the epitome of the personal dimension, a messianic act that summons us now.

Our role in that messianic age is curiously similar to what our role is our own time. The Talmud quotes from the Book of Psalms to inquire, “When will the Messiah come? Today, if you will only listen.”¹⁵ In other words, we have to open our hearts now, acting as though the messianic age is already here. When our hearts are attuned to the point that we love all human beings, that we see in every individual person someone sacred, precious, irreducible and beautiful - that is when the Messiah will come.

“Rabbi Zeiri said in the name of Rabbi Hanina that the Messiah will not come until the arrogant cease to be in Israel.”¹⁶ The paradox is that when there are no longer any arrogant people, when the Messiah will be able to come, we won’t need the Messiah, because the messianic age will already be here! If we live in such a way that we take the wounds of other people to be our own to heal, if we live in such a way that one hungry person is an affront to our conscience, if we can’t sleep so long as there is one homeless person and can’t sleep because we were rude or cruel to someone – that day the Messiah will be too late because we will have brought the messianic age ourselves.

That is what the Talmud is telling us. When the King Messiah appears he will come and will make a proclamation to the people Israel and say, “Humble one, the time of your redemption is near”. In other words, the reality that will characterize the age of the Messiah is precisely the morality that must precede the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah waits for us to act messianic and won’t come until we do.

What, then, can we do? Recall that the pertinent mitzvah is “*lo tukhal lehitalem*” - you must not remain indifferent. A Jew who is indifferent is blaspheming against the memory of our people. A Jew who is indifferent to human suffering is denying God. Recognizing that God is sovereign of all our deeds, we must realize that human dignity in itself is a supreme religious value. Rabbi Joshua Ben Levy said, “when a human being walks on the road, a troop of angels walks in front of that person shouting ‘make way for the image of the Holy Blessing One’.”¹⁷ Can you image what a world it would be if we could train ourselves to hear those angels? If we could see the heavenly host standing in front of everyone here, pointing to each one of us and saying “this is the image of God?” Can you image how we would treat each other then? “Great is human dignity,” the Talmud says, “since for its sake we may violate a prohibition of the Torah.”¹⁸ Can you image the kind of world it would be if all of us took the negative commandments of the Torah seriously, and then took human dignity more seriously than that? If we were able to say that the dignity of the most repulsive human being is more important than a negative commandment in the Torah, and we could make our assertion mean something precisely because we revere the negative commandments of the Torah?

“This is what The Holy One said to Israel: My children, what do I seek from you? I seek no more than that you love one another and that you honor one another.”¹⁹ Can you image a world in which we all love each other? In which we all honor each other? Such a world would surely hasten the coming of the Messiah, the symbol of social justice with human decency. In such a world the children in my Bar Mitzvah class (and every child) would have no shortage of heroes. They would know that they, themselves, are called to be heroes and that they themselves must testify by their own actions that the hosts of angels are not liars. We would know that, just as the angels shout out that we reflect God’s image, our deeds announce the same beautiful truth. In such a world, the coming of the Messiah would be redundant, and that is precisely the purpose of Judaism.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Midrash Tehillim 17:8*

¹⁸ *Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 19b, Shabbat 81b, Shabbat 94b, Erwin 41b, Menachot 37b*

¹⁹ *Tanna de-Vei Eliahu 26*



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 1

דברים כב:א-ג

א לֹא-תִרְאֶה אֶת-שׁוֹר אָחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת-שֵׂינֵי נֶדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲשֵׁב תְּשִׁיבָם לְאָחִיךָ: ב וְאִם-לֹא קָרֹב אָחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יִדְעָתוּ וְאָסַפְתוּ אֶל-תּוֹךְ בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ עַד דָּרַשׁ אָחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהִשְׁבַּתוּ לוֹ: ג וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְחֹמְרוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְשִׁמְלָתוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל-אֲבֹדֵת אָחִיךָ אֲשֶׁר-תִּאֲבֹד מִמֶּנּוּ וּמִצֵּאתָהּ לֹא תִּוְכַל לְהִתְעַלֵּם:

DEUTERONOMY 22:1-3

You shall not see your brother's ox or sheep wandering around and ignore them; instead, return them to your brother. And if your brother is not close to you, or you do not know him – then you must take them into your house and keep them with you until your brother comes and asks for them, at which point you should return them to him. You must do the same with his donkey, and with his clothing, and with anything your brother might lose which you subsequently find – you cannot ignore [them].

רש"י

(א) וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ. כּוֹבֵשׁ עֵין כְּאִלּוּ אֵינוֹ רוֹאֶה: לֹא תִרְאֶה וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ. לֹא תִרְאֶה אוֹתוֹ שֶׁתִּתְעַלֵּם מִמֶּנּוּ, זְהוּ פְּשׁוּטוֹ.

RASHI ON DEUTERONOMY 22:1

And ignore them – conquering his eyes as if he does not see it/him

You shall not see...and ignore – the plain meaning here is that you shall not notice only in order to ignore.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why is the first verse phrased, 'you shall not see' when you clearly do?
- Why does it say 'ignore them' in the first instance, but just 'ignore' in the second?
- Who is 'your brother' and why does that matter?
- How might this text apply to our quest for social justice?



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי סוטה יד:א

וְאָמַר רַבִּי חֲמַא בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינְא, מַאי דְכָתִיב: (דְּבָרִים יג) אַחֲרַי יִי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ; וְכִי אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְאָדָם לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרַי שְׂכִינְהּ? וְהֲלֹא כָּבֵר נֶאֱמַר: (דְּבָרִים ד) כִּי יִי אֱלֹהֵיךָ אִשׁ אוֹכְלָה הוּא? אֵלֶּא לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרַי מְדוּתָיו שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה, מִהּ הוּא מְלַבֵּישׁ עָרוּמִים, דְּכָתִיב: (בְּרֵאשִׁית ג) וַיַּעַשׂ יי אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיִּלְבְּשֵׁם, אִם אֵתָּה הַלְבִּישׁ עָרוּמִים הַקַּב"ה בִּיקָר חוֹלִים, דְּכָתִיב: (בְּרֵאשִׁית יח) וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יי בְּאֵלוֹנֵי מְמֵרָא, אִם אֵתָּה בִּיקָר חוֹלִים הַקַּב"ה נִיחָם אֲבֵלִים, דְּכָתִיב: (בְּרֵאשִׁית כה) וַיְהִי אַחֲרַי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבַרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ, אִם אֵתָּה נַחֵם אֲבֵלִים הַקַּב"ה קָבֵר מֵתִים, דְּכָתִיב: (דְּבָרִים לד) וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּגֵיא, אִם אֵתָּה קָבֵר מֵתִים.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *SOTAH* 14A

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of the verse, 'You shall walk behind The Holy One your God' (Deuteronomy 13:5)? How can a human being walk behind the *Shekhinah* [the manifestation of God's presence in the world]? Haven't we already been told, 'For The Holy One your God is a consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24)? Rather, [it means that] a person should imitate the righteous ways of the Holy Blessing One. Just as the Lord clothed the naked – as it is written, 'The Holy One, God made tunics of skins for Adam and his wife, and dressed them' (Genesis 3:21), so too you should¹ supply clothes for the naked. Just as the Holy Blessing One visited the sick – as it is written, 'The Holy One appeared to him [Abraham] at the terebinths of Mamre' (Genesis 18:1), so too you should visit the sick. Just as the Holy Blessing One comforted mourners – as it is written, 'After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son' (Genesis 25:11), so too you should comfort mourners. Just as the Holy Blessing One buried the dead – as it is written, 'And he buried him [Moses] in the valley' (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too you should bury the dead.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Do you agree with Rabbi Hama about how to interpret the verse? Why/why not?
- Are there other examples of The Holy One's 'behavior' that we might follow? What are they?
- Does the way we translate the examples (see footnote) make a difference? What is it?
- How might this text apply to our quest for social justice?

¹ The Hebrew syntax could be translated 'must' as well as 'should'



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 3

תהלים לד:ב-כ

יב לכו־בָּנִים שְׁמַעוּ־לִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךְ־מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם יִגְמַלְךָ־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׁפֹּטֵנוּ וְיִשְׁפֹּטֵנוּ מִדְּבַר מִרְמָה: טו סוּר מִרָע וְעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב בִּקְשׁ שָׁלוֹם וְרַדְּפֵהוּ: טז עֵינֵי יְהוָה אֶל־צַדִּיקִים וְאֶזְנוֹ אֶל־שׁוֹעֲתֵם: יז פָּנֵי יְהוָה בְּעֵשִׂי רָע לְהִכָּרֵת מֵאֶרֶץ זָכָרִם: יח צַעֲקוּ וַיהוָה שָׁמַע וּמְכַל־צָרוֹתֵם הַצִּילְכֶם: יט קְרוֹב יְהוָה לְנַשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב וְאֶת־דַּכְּאֵי־רוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ: כ רַבּוֹת רָעוֹת צַדִּיק וּמְכַלֵּם יַצִּילֵנוּ יְהוָה:

PSALMS 34:12-20

...Come, children: I shall teach you how to respect The Holy One.
What kind of man desires life, loves length of days, that he may see good?
Restrain your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile –
Turn away from evil and do good: seek peace and pursue it.
The Holy One's eyes are upon the righteous, and [The Holy One's] ears are attuned to their plea;
The Holy One's face is turned against evildoers so as to cut their names off from the earth.
When they cry, The Holy One is listening, and rescues them from all their troubles.
The Holy One is close to the broken-hearted and brings deliverance to those whose spirit is crushed
The righteous undergo many evils but The Holy One will save them from all of them...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Does this passage tell a story as it develops? If so – what is the story?
- What, according to this passage, are the main tasks of being human?
- What is the relationship between the righteous and the evildoers? Why is it important?
- How might this text apply to our quest for social justice?



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 4

תלמוד ירושלמי נדרים ט:ה

וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל בְּתוֹרָה שְׂאֵם תִּשְׁמֹר מִצְוָה זוֹ תִּינָצֵל מֵהַרְבֵּה עֲבִירוֹת. בֶּן עֲזַי אָמַר (בְּרֵאשִׁית ה') זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם לְלִמְדָּה שְׂכוּלָם בָּאוּ מֵאֵב אֶחָד זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל מִזֶּה חָשׁוּב יוֹתֵר מִוְּאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד, כִּי בְּסוּף הַפְּסוּק נֶאֱמַר: בְּדַמּוֹת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אוֹתוֹ, וַיִּכְשִׁיתְבוֹנֵן הָאָדָם בְּזֶה, יִזְהַר מְאֹד בְּכַבּוּד חֲבֵרוֹ. וְאָמַר שְׂכָלֵל זֶה חָשׁוּב יוֹתֵר לְפִי שֶׁהוּא כּוֹלֵל שְׁנֵי עֵינֵינוּ. מְכַשְׁנֵזְהַר בְּכַבּוּד חֲבֵרוֹ לְחוּס עַל כְּבוֹד קוֹנֵנוֹ שֶׁהוּא בְּדַמּוֹת אֱלֹהִים, אִזְ קו"ח שְׂיִזְהַר מִלְּמַעוֹל מַעַל בָּהּ וְיִהְיֶה זָרִי בְּעִשְׂיֵית הַמִּצְוָה לְכַבּוּד וְתִבְרָךְ.

JERUSALEM TALMUD, *NEDARIM* 9:5

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18) – Rabbi Akiva says, this is the fundamental principle of the [whole] Torah, because if you keep this commandment, you will be saved from multiple transgressions. Ben Azzai says, ‘This is the book of the generations of man’ (Genesis 5:1) – so as to teach you that all human beings came from a single parent – is a greater fundamental principle than ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’, since at the end of that verse it says, ‘In the image of God he made him [man].’ When a person [lit. man] considers that, he will take extreme care for the dignity¹ of another person. The reason for this principle being more important is that it is bipartite: a person who takes care for another person’s dignity, aware of the dignity of that person’s creator (since the person is in the image of God), will take care all the more not to defraud God, and will be energetic to perform commandments in order to honor The Holy One.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between Rabbi Akiva’s view and Ben Azzai’s?
- What does it mean for all human beings to have come from one parent?
- What exactly is the bipartite process described at the end of the text?
- How might this text apply to our quest for social justice?

¹ This word could also be translated, ‘honor’



SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין צח:א

רבי יהושע בן לוי אשפח לאליהו, דהוי קיימי אפיתחא דמערתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי, אמר ליה: איתנא לעלמא דאתי? - אמר ליה: אם ירצה אדון הזה. אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: שנים ראיתי וקול שלשה שמעתי. אמר ליה: אימת אתי משיח? - אמר ליה: זיל שייליה לדידיה. - והיכא יתיב? - אפיתחא דרומי. - ומאי סימניה? - יתיב ביני עניי סובלי חלאים, וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא, איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד. אמר: דילמא מבעינא, דלא איעבב. אזל לגביה, אמר ליה: שלום עליך רבי ומורי - אמר ליה שלום עליך בר ליואי. - אמר ליה: לאימת אתי מר? - אמר ליה: היום. אתא לגבי אליהו. - אמר ליה: מאי אמר לך? - אמר ליה: שלום עליך בר ליואי. - אמר ליה: אבטחך לך ולאבוך לעלמא דאתי. - אמר ליה: שקורי קא שקר בי, דאמר לי היום איתנא, ולא אתא - אמר ליה: הכי אמר לך [תהלים צ"ה] היום אם בקלו תשמעו.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD SANHEDRIN 98A

R Yehoshua b Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R Shimon ben Yohai's tomb. He asked him, "Will I go to the World to Come?" Elijah replied, "If the Master wants you to." Rabbi Joshua b Levi said, "I saw two, but I heard the sound of three!"¹ Then he asked, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go and ask him!" "Where is he staying?" "At the gateway [of the town²]." "How will I recognize him?" "He is sat among the poor, who are suffering and sick; everyone else unties all [of their bandages] at once and then rebandages them one by one, but he unties and rebandages one [wound] at a time, because he is thinking: "Perhaps I will be needed, and I must not be late!"

So he [Rabbi Yehoshua b Levi] went to him [the Messiah] and said, "Greetings to you, my rabbi and my teacher." The Messiah replied, "Greetings to you, son of Levi." He asked him, "When will you come, Master?" The Messiah replied, "Today." He [Rabbi Yehoshua b Levi] went back to Elijah, who asked him, "What did he say to you?" Rabbi Yehoshua b Levi replied, "He said, 'Greetings to you, son of Levi.'" Elijah said, "That assures [both] you and your father a place in the World to Come." "But he lied to me," said Rabbi Yehoshua b Levi, "he said he would come today, and he didn't come." Elijah replied, "What he said to you was: *Today, if you will hear his voice.*"³

¹ This probably means that he only saw himself and Elijah but heard the sound of the Shekhinah - God's presence in the world.

² The Aramaic here is unclear

³ Psalms 95:7



SESSION SUGGESTIONS – SOCIAL JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

You will need to take time, in this initial session, to introduce yourself to the participants, and the participants to each other. Depending on timing, you might also need to make a choice in this session whether to use the chavruta texts *or* the group study text: if this turns into an issue, we suggest that you move directly to the text for group study.

Set out the aims of the course: what you would like participants to do, and the outcomes you hope they will achieve after the twelve sessions (see “How to Use This Book” for what is involved).

Decide how your group is going to compile its manifesto – will participants note individually, or will they compile a narrative, or music? (Again, see “How to Use This Book” for suggestions). You can refer participants to the playlist at the back of the book, if they would like to listen to music to enrich each session – or you may decide to integrate the music into the sessions yourself.

ESSAY

Hand out the first essay and allow participants to read it. You will probably need to allow at least 30 minutes for this part of the exercise.

CHAVRUTA STUDY

Divide the group into smaller groups and hand out the chavruta texts; after time for study, allow the groups to report back their answers. The final question on all of the texts is the same, which should help you focus the group’s conclusions.

GROUP STUDY

The Messiah text has been chosen because of the author’s idea that the Messiah represents the meeting point of personal will and social justice. Let the group consider the message/moral of the text - why is the Messiah engaged in healing the sick, why did the Messiah not come ‘today’? Could the story have ended differently, and if so, how? Are the locations important, and if so, why? This is a good text to roleplay – if you do it more than once, you will find the speech will bear multiple interpretations.

You might then wish to ask participants to envision the Messiah. A man, a woman, an angel? How old? Does the Messiah look, or behave, in a special way? Do you have participants who, instead of seeing an objective figure, look for the Messiah – or the sparks of the Messiah – inside themselves? What would happen to the world if we heard the Messiah’s voice ‘today’? How can we become more like Messiah, and what does it mean for our personal will to meet the issue of social justice?

You might also wish to introduce a practical aspect to the project. The theme of “what can we do??” will permeate the study, and so you might need time to discuss/suggest areas in which the group can be, or become, active for the duration of the project.

CONCLUSION

Allow participants to make the first entry in their manifestos. Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.



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MUSICAL PLAYLIST TO ACCOMPANY EACH SESSION

Compiled by Noam Raucher

You can use any or all of the songs in the suggested sessions. They are listed in the order of title-artist-album, and all are available on iTunes. Please note that one or two have explicit lyrics – these are clearly marked.

Introduction

How Come – Ray LaMontagne – Trouble
For What It's Worth – Buffalo Springfield – Buffalo Springfield
If I Had A Hammer – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary
What's Going On – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On

The Prophets and Social Justice

Fuel – Ani DiFranco – Little Plastic Castle
Chimes of Freedom – Bob Dylan – Bob Dylan: The Collection
Keep On Rockin' In The Free World – Neil Young – Greatest Hits

The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism

Talkin' Bout A Revolution – Tracy Chapman – Tracy Chapman
Blowin' In The Wind – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary
Down By The Riverside – Waste Deep In The Big Muddy And Other Love Songs

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Right?

Hands – Jewel - Spirit
The Times They Are A Changin' – Bob Dylan – The Essential Bob Dylan
We Are One – Safam – Peace By Peace

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Left?

He Was My Brother – Simon and Garfunkel – Wednesday Morning, 3AM
Oxford Town – Bob Dylan – The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan
A Change Is Gonna Come – Sam Cooke – Ain't That Good News

Environment

The Horizon Has Been Defeated – Jack Johnson -On and On
Holy Ground – The Klezmatics – Wonder Wheel
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On
Big Yellow Taxi – Joni Mitchell - Dreamland

Business Ethics

Working Class Hero – John Lennon – Working Class Hero: The Definitive Lennon
Carpal Tunnel – John O' Conner – Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways
We Do The Work – Jon Fromer - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

International Economic Justice

We Are The World. – USA For Africa – We Are The World (Single)
Outside A Small Circle of Friends – Phil Ochs – The Best of Phil Ochs
El Salvador – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary

Special Needs

What It's Like – Everlast – The Best of House of Pain and Everlast – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Wendall – Arrested Development – 3 years, 5 months, and 2 days in the life Of...
The Boy In The Bubble – Paul Simon – The Essential Paul Simon

Kashrut

All You Can Eat – Ben Folds – Supersunnyspeedgraphic, The LP – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Greed – John Fogerty - Centerfield
We Just Come To Work Here, We Don't Come To Die –Anne Feeney - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

Israel

Hope: Pray On – Sweet Honey In The Rock - 25
Yihyeh Tov – David Broza – Things Will Be Better, The Best Of David Broza
Misplaced – Moshav Band

Afterword

With My Own Two Hands – Ben Harper – Diamonds On The Inside
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder – Number 1's
Redemption Song – Bob Marley - Legend



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