



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

SYNAGOGUES AS CENTERS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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" (*Deuteronomy* 16:20), "justice shall you pursue." 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 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 (*Sotah* 14a) 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. To perform deeds of lovingkindness 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, a Vice-Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, offers a broader approach when he claims 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.

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 “*shiksers*” 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. Hillel taught, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” It is time that our Movement welcome gay and lesbian Jews. 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. 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 wilder-ness 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. We may not have the answers ourselves, but we must convey our concern and our rejection of the nuclear terror 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 *New York Times* but to the injunction to love our neighbors, then some may fault our religion, but they cannot fault our responsiveness.

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.

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