

## Social Justice: A Religious Directive

Rosh Hashanah 2018-5779

Why are you here today? I am well aware that it is Rosh Hashanah; notice my white robe. I've been at services every year since I was about 7 or 8 years old. As a child it was "just because" and I spent a great deal of time running outside the building instead of remaining in the children's services.

(Shhhhs that's our little secret). During my teen years I was active in our youth group services. Even during college when some drift away from their Judaism I was still engaged and attended services.

I wasn't sure that I always believed in God. I did however want to be a part of the Jewish people and community on

these holy days. Before I started delivering messages to my congregations I hoped for and anticipated a meaningful sermon that spoke to me as a Jew, but what did that mean?

Many of you know that I did not grow up in a very ritualistically observant Jewish home. Yes, we belonged to a synagogue and my folks went to High Holy Day services but hardly ever attended on Shabbat or holidays. Education was important, so my siblings and I continued our Jewish education in Hebrew High School. We were all active in youth group and all of us went to Israel before entering college. However, the key component to our Jewish identities was a commitment to justice and righteousness in our world. These were values instilled by my parents and reinforced in my mind by Jewish education.

For me the connection between social justice activism and Jewish identity went hand in hand. I loved Pesach and the message that we and therefore others were not to remain enslaved. Pharaoh and oppression needed to be defeated. Our people and all people needed freedom.

As I continued my education and study of traditional texts I found that passages in the Tanakh, Talmud, and other traditional writings that spoke of justice, peace, and tikkun olam, repairing the world, were the religious ideals I cherished the most.

In truth, I never thought of this as partisan politics but as the foundation upon which our tradition rested and earned its moral stature in the world. Parts of Judaism were rituals and ceremonies. Some simply told us that we were doing

Jewish. Other rituals had underlying meaning that reminded of us what we needed to do in the world around us.

Ritual items such as the tzitzit, the fringes on our tallitot and the mezzuzah on the doorpost of our homes are there as reminders. Looking at the tzitzit is to remember that there are commandments, many of which have to do with justice, compassion and love for other humans. The mezzuzah is to acknowledge that God, the source of our ethical teachings is found in all places, whether in our homes or out in the streets. Even if one questions or struggles with the belief in God, a mezzuzah can point us to the teachings of the generations that directed our behavior to build a better society, a better world in which to live.

This year there has been a great deal of discussion among the rabbis as we prepared for these Days of Awe whether or not to preach politics from the bima. We have been flooded with the inundation of partisan politics in a less than civil way for the past 2 years, if not more. One voice, Rabbi Shai Held wrote, "Demanding that politics be kept out of shul is like demanding that Torah be kept out of shul."

Thinking about this and hoping to provide relevance and spirituality during these most holy days I decided not to speak about specific issues of which you can acquire in the news sources but rather to teach Torah. To me that means to present texts from the Bible, the Talmud, and other Jewish sources that teach us how to be holy and live our lives as we face the year ahead.

Let's start with two Torah teachings that are familiar to many of us. The first comes from the Ten Commandments.

The first commandment, אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים

"I the Eternal am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage".

I have even called this my favorite mitzvah, commandment. Some might ask, what is being commanded? It is the foundation of our existence as a people that God does not want us, or for that matter any people, to be oppressed. As God's agents that is our first responsibility.

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, wrote in an article, "Can Social Justice Save the American Jewish Soul?" [Judaism, Justice and American Life, P. 4-5]

"If the Exodus created an ethic/tribal consciousness among Jews, it was Sinai that invested in them an understanding of their mission in the world. Jewish existence was to be based on bringing tzedek and mishpat, righteousness and justice, to all God's children. The covenant forged at Sinai committed the Jewish people to a life of ethics and values. It was the spiritual/moral genesis of the Jewish people, and it was powerfully connected to the Jewish people's understanding of what God wants of them. The Torah's teachings about acting with compassion (chesed), protecting the stranger in one's midst (ahavat ger), and pursuing peace (shalom) and truth (emet) shaped the Jewish notion of how one should live in the world. Sinai consciousness is at the root of the Jewish understanding that to live true to

the covenant that God established with the Jewish people at Sinai is to live a life of social responsibility."

A second teaching is from Deuteronomy 16. צדק צדק תרדף, "Justice, justice you shall pursue". The repetition of the word justice, or righteousness of course brings emphasis to this concept. But the rabbis tell us it is not simply for emphasis. It indicates that our pursuits of justice must be done in a just manner. The legal system and government we establish to carry out that system must always act in a legal and just manner. The system and the officials are not above the law. Even the king was to follow the laws as presented in the Torah. The pursuit of justice with an honest judicial system was fundamental to establishing a home for the Israelites.

A system of justice was not only expected of Jews. In fact, the Talmud directs a set of 7 laws to the descendants of Noah, indicating all of humanity. One of the requirements is that any society is to establish courts of law. When a society does not have a system of justice for its inhabitants it is not fulfilling its basic obligation of being righteous.

The concept of justice is not simply a strict adherence to rules. It is also a formula for a society with compassion and consideration for others. It is not simply about the most powerful in the society but insures protection for those who don't have the influence in the community. And additionally, it is not only about those who are citizens of the society but also protects the outsiders and welcomes them into our midst.

We learn in the Talmud, (RH17b)

"It is written: "The Eternal is righteous [tzaddik] in all God's ways" (Psalms 145:17), indicating that God acts in accordance with the attribute of strict justice [tzedek], and then it is written in the same verse: "And kind [ḥasid] in all God's works," implying that God acts with grace and loving-kindness [ḥesed], going beyond the letter of the law. Rav Huna explained: Initially, at the time of judgment, God is righteous, but in the end, at the time of punishment, God is gracious.

Rabbi Elazar raised a similar contradiction: It is written: "But to you, O Eternal, belongs kindness" (Psalms 62:13), implying that God acts beyond the letter of the law, and then it is written in the same verse: "For You render to a person according to their deeds," implying that God rewards and

punishes measure for measure. ... God employs strict justice, but in the end, when God sees that the world cannot survive on judgment based only on truth and justice: "And abundant in kindness," i.e., God is merciful."

It is quite clear that the combination of justice and compassion, law and mercy is the Jewish way as found in the Torah and other basic Jewish teaching. The concept of pure justice with every transgression being punished or pure mercy, with every wrong doing being forgiven or excused would not allow a society to survive.

One might claim that the balance of justice and mercy is solely in the realm of God. The rabbis don't leave any doubt that one might miss the simple implication by teaching that

the descriptions of attributes connected to the Divine are for humans to emulate.

Here are four passages from various parts of the Bible:

Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

Zechariah 7:9-10 "Thus says the Eternal of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

Jeremiah 22:3 "Thus says the Eternal: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him

who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place."

Proverb 31:8-9 "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

In each of these passages there is a call for justice, but it is always coupled with a directive towards kindness, compassion, and a call to protect those who may not be able to protect themselves. And the verse from Proverbs reminds us that we must speak out and not remain silent.

For many of us who base our Jewish values and morals on the texts, we need to apply those teachings to what we see

around us. When we look beyond self, beyond our parochial interests and realize we are descendants of the ancestors who taught these words we need to apply the values to the world around us.

The following is one example of how we might apply an ancient text to the present realities. When Jeremiah teaches (7:5-6) (Boyer translation) "But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice. Only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans and widows." We might apply this when we saw that there was a separating of refugee parents from their children. Jeremiah continues, "only if you stop your murdering. " Many apply this thought to what they see when unarmed black people are killed in questionable circumstances.

As he continues saying, "and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshipping idols," we might interpret that to apply to the idol of greed for those who believe that their personal and corporate fortunes can come at the expense of their neighbors or the idols can be the quest for power or status. Jeremiah declares that *God says,* "then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors for all time."

How might you think about this verse in Psalms? (Psalm 82:3) "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. In your minds who are the weak? Who are the destitute, afflicted, and fatherless?"

On Yom Kippur we will read from chapter 19 in Leviticus. (vs. 33-34) "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him [or her]. (34) The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in "Faith and Future" commented on these verses. "The Hebrew Bible contains the great command, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18), and this has often been taken as the basis of biblical morality. But it is not: it is only part of it. The Jewish sages noted that on only one occasion does the Hebrew Bible command us to love our neighbor, but in thirty-seven places it commands us to love the stranger. Our neighbor is one we love

because he is like ourselves. The stranger is one we are taught to love precisely because he is not like ourselves." Within the American context, many Jews have interpreted the word "ger" stranger, as immigrant, refugee, or underprivileged minority.

Exodus 12:49 declares, "There shall be one law for both the citizen and the stranger who resides among you." This implies a society that treats both its citizens and the outsiders or strangers equally.

What do we need to do? What is our responsibility as we stand before the throne of judgement? Perhaps we need only to follow the ancient words of the prophets Hosea and Micah.

Hosea 10:12

Plant social justice for yourselves,

Reap according to covenantal love.

Break up your fallow ground,  
For it is time to seek the Holy One.  
Until God comes and causes justice  
to rain upon you.

Let's conclude with the famous verse from Micah, 6:8  
which answers the question of what our traditions dictates as  
the way to follow God. "God has told you, O human, what is  
good; and what does the Eternal require of you but to do  
justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your  
God?"

As we enter 5779 how will each one of us work to bring  
about true justice? How will we love kindness by acting with  
compassion? And when we do act, hopefully we remember that  
the path is through humility before the Eternal God.

