

More than 4 Questions with Ayala Emmett

Interviewers: Margie Searl and Josh Herz, via Zoom, March 10, 2022

Ayala was born in Tel Aviv to parents who had emigrated from Europe and came as pioneers, *Halutzim*. They felt that there was no future for Jews in Europe and were inspired by Herzl's vision of Jewish liberation, a homeland, a new/old chapter in Jewish history with a socialist promise of equality. Ayala grew up in a Zionist religious socialist community aligned with (the now extinct) political party *Hapoel Hamizrachi*, a religious pioneering and labor movement, with its distinct kibbutzim of religious workers that maintained a halachic way of life and social equality. As Ayala's father said, "Marx wasn't the first socialist, God was." It was at home, surrounded by grandparents, aunts, and uncles, Hasidim and socialists, where she learned about justice as a fundamental Jewish value.

Ayala served in the Israeli army and received her BA in Anthropology, Sociology, and English Literature at Hebrew University. She came to Rochester as a graduate student raising two daughters and received her PhD in cultural anthropology at the University of Rochester. She was offered a position at the university in the anthropology department where she taught courses on gender, class, and race. Her research and fieldwork were located in the United States and Israel. NIMH supported her research in the United States, and her fieldwork in Israel was supported by the Littauer Foundation. Ayala served as Anthropology Editor for the journal *Sex Roles* and received the Fiction Award from the *Society of Humanistic Anthropology*. After a long career at the University of Rochester she has retired as professor emeritus.

It took time for Ayala to connect with the Jewish American community. She missed being actively connected to her Jewish heritage and praying in community. It took some years to decide to become congregationally affiliated. Her first connection was with Temple Beth David, where she belonged for ten years; she was active on the ritual committee, and was the board president. Over time she wanted greater activism and commitment to social justice and was drawn to the institutional commitment of Reform Judaism. Ayala believes that social action is foundational to Jewish values and sought a congregation that acted on this. She first joined the TBK Sisterhood, because of the social justice work that they were doing. Gertrude Lind, Sisterhood's president who was committed to social justice, became her friend. After Rabbi Stein came, she became a member of the congregation. At TBK, she found a place for herself in its social justice work that has a long history of activism. TBK was well known for being involved in racial justice, in the civil rights movement and in working to alleviate poverty.

She went to her first URJ conference in Washington, DC in which RAC (the Religious Action Center) was very prominent. At the conference, each synagogue was asked to decide whether to join RAC and commit to activism of Tikkun Olam. Rabbi Stein led a delegation, and it was clear that TBK would pledge. It pledged to alleviate poverty, to help refugees, and to support Women of the Wall. Returning to Rochester, Rabbi Stein and the delegation presented the pledge to the Board of Trustees and the board gave its endorsement. Joining RAC and the Board's support demonstrated Ayala's belief in the importance of institutional support for Tikkun Olam.

Rabbi Stein and Dan Mendelson asked Ayala to chair the Social Action committee, and Ayala and the Rabbi moved forward to act on the RAC pledge. Women of the Wall, the group that has been fighting for religious equality since 1988, is mentioned in a special prayer at TBK on Rosh Hodesh, a time when the women in Jerusalem come to pray at the Kotel and are still physically attacked. Reciting the Rosh Hodesh blessing at TBK is a reminder to us who enjoy ritual equality to remember and support Women of the Wall.

At TBK and at Irwin Solomon's initiative, Social Action forged a partnership with *Keeping Our Promise* (originally *No One Left Behind*) to support Afghan and Iraqi refugees who were coming to Rochester. TBK offered partnership in a variety of ways, including forming supportive family circles and offering space for KOP events. In the pre-Covid years TBK invited KOP families to our Passover Seder to celebrate

freedom. The Social Action Committee also supported anti-poverty initiatives, including TEMPRO's important work of housing homeless families.

Ayala and the committee aimed to support any initiative, individual and collective that had to do with social justice. Ayala also believes that for effective Social Action in congregations to take place, the rabbis' supportive leadership is necessary and at the same time, for rabbis who choose to do justice work, the support of members who care and an open-minded diverse board are necessary. One area that she feels could be improved is Temple's commitment to race relations and racial justice; it needs to expand on the existing connections with Black churches and the Black community. "The Israeli/Palestine struggle widened the rift between the two communities and much more needs to be done to heal relations. Drawing on our history we have to remember that we used to be the 'Black people;' we became White in America, but only sort of; we still face anti-Semitism of the likes of White Supremacist racists. And we must remember that for hundreds of years we used to be the despised persecuted minority in European history. I can't be a Jew and not identify with Black people."

She recognizes that "some things that we didn't plan on enter our lives and we have to pay attention, like the current situation in Ukraine...Every time there is a crisis needs emerge, and we feel the Tzedek call. And the question is what can we do?" In her fieldwork with women's peace initiatives in Israel, she learned from Israeli and Palestinian women to ask a daily question, "What good will I do today? What good can I do for peace today? Every morning is a new opportunity to do something for peace and justice." Ayala is guided by the daily morning prayer, "My God, the soul you have placed within me is pure. You created it, you formed it, and you breathed it in to me." Every day is a new opportunity for acting in the world.

Ayala would like us to find ways talk to one another in a non-confrontational and not hateful way - we are not all in agreement but we should be able to talk about issues without rancor. "We are not the first generation in our history to disagree. From the time of Moses through the prophets, the loss of sovereignty, the Temple, and the entire Jewish history, we faced internal disputes and disagreements. But on justice, we as Jews cannot say we are not interested - our history requires that we have to be alike on social justice. We should be more honest, talk openly about divisions on Israel's position on human rights. Let's admit that we are stubborn and opinionated and then do the right thing."

Ayala's work has been infused with social justice, in personal projects and in her academic career. Much of her publications are about the politics of power, exclusions, marginality, privilege, and of social webs that bind human being. While she was teaching, a Black student asked her to join in encouraging kids in the inner city to talk/learn about culture and agency. After the summer encounter at a youth community center, Ayala with support of the anthropology department, created a foundation called *Seeds for College*. Minority students from the inner city came to the University several times a year to visit classes, talk to students and be inspired to finish high school and go on to college. The University of Rochester partnered with her; the UR handled the donations, Ayala's colleagues from across the campus met with the students and talked with them about their work. Ayala took the students to temple, to her Shabbat Havura, and they became aware of her being Jewish and an immigrant. When she retired the department of anthropology created a Social Justice Award in her name.

Ayala supported the early Israeli peace groups, hoping for justice, i.e., an agreement on two states and two people. Jews have a homeland in Israel, and she believes that Palestinians deserve the same. She speaks and writes about controversial issues like Israel/Palestine with a focus on suffering that knows no borders. And in Ayala's words, "Once you open your eyes to suffering, your eyes stay open. You see facts and truth." With historian Peter Eisenstadt and her writer sister in Israel, Matia Kam, she has founded *The Jewish Pluralist*, a digital publication engaged with living traditions of Judaism and the contemporary problems of both Jewish and non-Jewish life in America and Israel, locating itself within the long history of Jewish concern with justice, peace, and human dignity. <http://thejewishpluralist.net/>