

Is Judaism More Than Social Justice and Tikun Olam?

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
September 11, 2018*

In the hit song from the 1967 iconic movie “The Graduate” Paul Simon asks, “Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? Our nation turns its lonely eyes to you. What’s that you say, Mrs. Robinson, Jolting Joe has left and gone away.”

Paul Simon has explained that he wrote the line as an ode to the grace and dignity of the only professional baseball player to make the All-Star team every year he played in the majors and to express a nostalgic longing for a simpler time.

Were I as a rabbi, to compose a song today using the motif of a heroic baseball player, I would ask: “Where have you gone Sandy Koufax? Our people turns its lonely eyes to you.”

The notoriously reclusive Sandy Koufax is and was probably the greatest pitcher of all time. The statistics he compiled are amazing. In his twelve seasons in the majors he had a 2.76 ERA, earned run average. During the post season it was an unbelievable 0.95. With 2,400 strikeouts to his credit, he pitched an astounding 137 complete games, 40 of which were shutouts. Four of them were no-hitters. In a 9 year period batters hit a meager .203 against Koufax.

But I speak about Sandy Koufax today, not because of what an amazing pitcher he was and the astounding stats he accumulated, but because of something else he did, for which he will be remembered and what he is best known for, at least, among Jews. He sat out the first game of the 1965 World Series against the Minnesota Twins because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Koufax started the next day and pitched six innings in a game his team lost. In the fifth game, he pitched a complete game, a shutout. And then, despite fatigue and arthritic pain, he was called upon two days later to start the 7th and deciding game of the series. With only two days rest, he threw a three hit shutout in game 7, clinched the series for the Los Angeles Dodgers, and was named Series MVP.

A wonderful footnote to the story – Future hall of famer Don Drysdale who pitched the opening game that Koufax would have pitched, was removed after giving up 7 runs in 3 innings. When Dodgers manager Walter Alston came out to the mound to take him out of the game and bring in a relief pitcher, Drysdale said, “I bet you wish I was Jewish today.”

Coming only 20 years after the decimation of the Jewish people in the Holocaust, Koufax was willing to make a statement. He probably did not even realize at the time how galvanizing and unifying it would be. Perhaps precisely because Koufax was not a very religious Jew, what this secular Jew did was that much more extraordinary. He was admired by both Jews and non-Jews for asserting that in a conflict between professional obligations and Jewish religious practice he was willing to defiantly and proudly stand up for his faith and to stand with his people.

His courageous decision not to play resonated with Jews across the country who appreciated the expression of solidarity. Koufax showed that one could be American and Jewish, that it was ok to be different, that making it in America didn’t mean you had to give up your faith. Practicing

Judaism did not have to be viewed as a burden or something to hide. You don't have to be embarrassed or ashamed about being Jewish. It led many whose observance may be lax to observe the holidays. Jewish mothers had new ammunition for guilt trips. They could now tell their kids: "If Sandy Koufax can sit out the World Series because it was Yom Kippur, you can stay home from school on the Jewish holiday."

His decision 53 years ago made him a hero and inspired generations of American Jews to not be ashamed of their heritage, and to take pride in who they are. As Walter Sobchak says in the film, "The Big Lebowski", about his adopted faith, "Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax."

And so I ask, "Where have you gone Sandy Koufax? Our people turns its lonely eyes to you." At a time when we seem more fractured than ever, and more uncertain of ourselves, and our mission, I ask: Where is today's Sandy Koufax? Who is willing to have the confidence to stand up for Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish people?

Instead of Sandy Koufax making a statement of solidarity with his fellow Jews, and demonstrating respect for Jewish tradition even though he himself was not very observant, and thereby giving us a hero to emulate and look up to, the great American writer Phillip Roth, who is blatantly identified as a Jewish writer refusing to have any Jewish rituals at his funeral earlier this year.

It was revealed in a report in an Israeli newspaper, last week, that Iranian Foreign Minister Jarad Zarif admitted that Iran has been working closely for years to delegitimize and undermine Israel through a front organization founded and funded by Hungarian American Jew, George Soros.

An Academy award winning actress who is widely recognized as being Jewish and who was born in Israel refused to come to Israel to accept an award because she did not want to be on the stage with a Prime Minister the actress dislikes. While expressing her love for her "Israeli friends and family, Israeli food, books, art, cinema, and dance" her tweet condemned Israel for "mistreating people and causing suffering, atrocities, violence, corruption, inequality and abuse of power" which she says "is simply not in line with my Jewish values." I believe she is sincere when she denies that she supports BDS, but unfortunately the distinction and subtlety was lost on many, especially Israel's critics and detractors who seized upon her decision as vindication of their position. The founder of the BDS movement, Omar Barghouti lost no time in praising her. Notorious anti-Zionist Roger Waters of the musical group Pink Floyd applauded her for joining the ranks of those who castigate Israel for defending itself and hailed her as an ally in denouncing Israel.

The Hebrew Union College, my alma mater, the seminary which gave me my semicha invites Michael Chabon to speak at the graduation and ordination ceremony. Chabon's hostility towards Israel is well-known and he didn't disappoint as he used the platform to take swipes at Israel and express criticism of endogamous marriage because it creates a ghetto of two. (Funny, I always thought it takes more than two people to make a ghetto.) On the bema of a synagogue, at a ceremony ordaining rabbis, he called for the removal of all borders and boundaries that make distinctions, declared that he is against endogamy, does not care if his kids marry Jews or not, and says it wouldn't be such a tragedy if Judaism were to fade away.

Hebrew Union College refused to distance itself from the speech which according to reports, got a rousing ovation. Morin Zaray who was so appalled she walked out of her own graduation ceremony wrote, “For someone who presents himself as an intellectual — steeped in nuance — Michael Chabon has a remarkable ability to present a one-dimensional reality in which the Jews are evil oppressors and the Palestinians are powerless victims, with no agency, no responsibility and no blame.”

What is going on? Where is Sandy Koufax when we need him?

Thank God at least, for Wonder Woman, Gal Gadot, who proudly proclaims her support of Israel and the IDF. She posted a picture of her and her daughter lighting Shabbat candles when Israel was being besieged by Hamas rockets. As the conflict between Israel and Gaza worsened, she uploaded a photograph of herself lighting Shabbat candles and praying with her daughter Alma. “I am sending my love and prayers to my fellow Israeli citizens,” she wrote. “Especially to all the boys and girls who are risking their lives protecting my country against the horrific acts conducted by Hamas, who are hiding like cowards behind women and children...We shall overcome!!! Shabbat Shalom!”

But alas, her voice seems to be the exception. On college campuses well-funded groups, even some which have nice Jewish sounding names harass and intimidate Jews to turn them against Israel.

I am often asked about the problems of anti-Israel activity on college campuses – what to do about it, and why so many of our young people do not know how to respond and some get involved in anti-Israel groups.

I would suggest that the source of the problem is not just because our kids do not know enough about Israel or Zionism. Nor is it because we don’t tell them the whole story. No, the primary reason is because half the message of Judaism has been left out of what they hear and are taught.

I could not help but marvel as I listened to the Torah reading of *Kee Tavo*, just last week at how often the imperative to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger is repeated and emphasized. I take tremendous pride in studying the elaborate system of social welfare developed in the time of the Talmud to care for the poor and the sick. Our people put into practice the noble ideals expressed by our sages -- a shared sense of communal responsibility for each other. With this as a backdrop, it should come as no surprise that Jews hold universalistic values in such high regard, and are so often in the forefront of efforts to ameliorate society and the lives of others.

The concept known as *Tikun Olam*, improving and repairing the world, caring for others, Judaism’s embrace of the call to universalism has become the watchword of our faith today and the justification for a wide range of actions and progressive positions by American Jews. Deuteronomy’s call to pursue justice, the demand to have empathy for the stranger and teachings from other Jewish sources motivates and inspires our young people to work for a wide range of noble causes.

The directive to repair the world and to make it a better place, also helps to explain why Israel is the first to respond and to respond usually not just ahead of all other nations, but more effectively, whenever disaster strikes around the world.

We take seriously the words of Torah that proclaim that we will be a blessing, not just to ourselves, but to all of humanity.

There is something attractive about appealing to our highest aspirations. Tikun Olam is so ingrained in our psyche and so much a part of American Jewish culture and the American lexicon that politicians frequently use the phrase “tikun olam” when speaking to Jews and Jewish groups, and even when they explain their policies and positions to non-Jews as well.

A story is told that when a young American Jew went to Israel for the first time, he spoke of his passion for social justice, and asked his Israeli cousins, “How do you say Tikun Olam in Hebrew?”

DNA testing has become increasingly popular and accessible. The popularity of 23andme and ancestry.com DNA testing has caused me to wonder if there is such a thing as a “Jewish DNA”. If we were to try to identify what is in our DNA and attempt to determine who are we, and by that I mean, what are the essential qualities of what it means to be Jewish, what would it reveal – if there were such a test.

Please do not misunderstand – there is no such thing, as we are not a race, or even a purely defined ethnicity. We come from all around the world, and anyone willing to cast their fate with the Jewish people can become Jewish. But if we consider what is our essence, what is it that Jews share in common with each other, what would we come up with?

Surely the lofty ideals about our compassion and responsibility to others would be high on the list. This is a crucial, beautiful and integral part of Judaism. But if we define Judaism as only being about tikun olam, and convey that the sum total of our faith is an agenda defined exclusively by social justice, we are leaving out a great deal. If we profess that to be Jewish it suffices to support and work on social action, and neglect the rest of our tradition, we deprive spirituality and particularism of their historic role in Judaism.

A comprehensive analysis and description of who we are would also have to include our chutzpah, our sense of humor, our willingness to take chances and risks, to question assumptions and authority, our ethics, our devotion to family, and more. We might even find chromosomes that would explain our propensity to emphasize education and account for our love of bagels, lox, corned beef and reluctance to pay retail.

In an effort to reach out to millennials and to make our message appealing, we have reduced a complex sophisticated, multi-layered nuanced heritage to a two word sound bite: Tikun Olam.

To teach our children that Judaism is only about our obligation to the greater world, is to present a unidimensional view that overlooks and omits all of the other wonderful attributes which constitute our unique identity and persona. To do so deprives them of a full understanding of the magnitude of our faith. We do so at our peril, for it also raises the risk of endangering our own future.

I see the lack of connection to the part of Judaism that talks about preserving, defending and perpetuating our people when we ask our children to make a donation of their own money or gift money at the time of a bar or bat mitzvah to a worthy cause. We want to teach them the value of

tzedekah. While they always choose worthy and important charities and endeavors which reflect Jewish ideals, more often than not, the causes they choose to support have little if anything to do with the Jewish people.

We have forgotten the other part of Hillel's seminal dictum. While Hillel famously said, "if I am only for myself, who am I?" the first part of his statement, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me," should carry equal weight, along with the conclusion, "if not now, when?" He appreciated the balance and need for a dynamic tension between the polarities, the pull to practice universalistic values while also working to preserve our faith and heritage.

Our tendency to focus on others and the downtrodden, the underdog, and to overlook our responsibility to our people explains why kids neglect the needs of their own community, and why they go off to college thinking Judaism is only about advocating for others.

The emphasis on only one part of the equation may explain why they are easy prey, ill-prepared and susceptible to superficial, ungrounded unsympathetic portrayals of Israel as powerful and of the Palestinians which do not tell the whole picture. (The problem is not that they do not know enough about Israel. The problem is they do not know enough about Judaism.)

British journalist Melanie Phillips explains why there are those among us who see no problem being so openly and harshly critical of their fellow Jews, even if the accusations are not accurate and do not take into account the reality Israel faces. "Because Israelis take up arms to defend themselves against extermination and thus kill some of their attackers, they are viewed as aggressors. Jews can only be considered victims if they are passive, helpless and, above all, dead."

While caring about the principles of social justice, we should be equally concerned about the survival of Judaism as well. We should hold dear the teachings, *al tifrosh min hatzibur*: do not separate yourself from the community and *kol yisrael eiruvim zeh b'zeh*: all of Israel is responsible for one another. The elements that constitute Jewish identity and define who we are are the very source which allow us to pass the universalistic values on to the next generation, and allow the universalistic virtues held dear and so admired by all to be perpetuated.

We Jews hold many different beliefs about everything from God to what is the proper way to make *haroset*. Some of the teachings are inherently contradictory and paradigmatic. The same Torah that demands fair treatment of the stranger also calls upon us to wipe out the memory of the Amalekites. We are considered the "Chosen People" and called upon to be a nation of priests, but also to recognize that we are not superior to any other people. As I have often said – it is why we have Rashi and the Rambam. But for all our differences, what is not acceptable is to act with hostility and animosity towards our fellow Jews and to work for or promote the demise of the Jewish people or the Jewish state. We must care about our fellow Jews as much as we care about the fate of others.

As Yossi Klein Halevi writes, to be the forbearers of a 4,000 year tradition that has a sense of destiny and that "has thrived despite sometimes overwhelming hostility is a privilege and a responsibility. Our story has been a vital part of the human story, and I believe that humanity still needs the voice of Jewish history."

While self-preservation may go against the Post-Enlightenment effort to eliminate group identity, and its emphasis on universalism, individualism and self-fulfillment, the beauty of Judaism is that it actually integrates and reinforces all of these principles.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, “Identity is about groups, about Us and Them. But groups conflict. Therefore the Enlightenment sought a world without identities, in which we are all just human beings. But people can’t live without identities, and identity is never universal. It is always and essentially particular. What makes us the unique person we are is what makes us different from people in general. Therefore, no intellectual discipline that aims at universality will ever fully grasp the meaning and significance of identity.”

Rabbi Sacks writes that because of our holidays and rituals and customs, “No nation has ever given greater significance to retelling its collective story than Judaism, which is why Jewish identity is the strongest the world has ever known, the only one to have survived for twenty centuries without any of the normal bases of identity: political power, shared territory or a shared language of everyday speech.”

Chabon and others who want to eliminate the distinct characteristics of Judaism and emphasize only the universalistic, miss the point that the tension between the polarity of universalism and particularism is the source of the breadth, depth and strength of Judaism. Emphasizing only one part is like the sound of one hand clapping.

You may recall the derecho storm that ravaged our area in the summer of 2012 knocking down trees, and causing severe power outages for days. Tall trees which had been 40 – 60 feet tall, with huge trunks lay on their side, as if they were toothpicks knocked down by the flick of a finger. Upon closer inspection I noticed that the trees which fell and were uprooted were all ones that had weak, shallow roots.

The notion that all the world is judged on this day brings out the dual nature of our responsibility - to be part of a family and people whose values encompass all of humanity. The concept that we should be a blessing to both ourselves and humanity, converge on Rosh Hashana.

That is why on this day, we, the children of Abraham and Sarah celebrate the birth of Adam and Eve, of humanity. Today, when the fate of every living being is at stake, we pray not just for ourselves and our people, but for all creatures. I pray therefore that this year will be a year of blessing for you, your family, the world, and the Jewish people.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, MD
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org
Rosh Hashanah II -- September 11, 2018*