When I was 15, I went on a trip with my shul to Manhattan. It wasn’t to a museum or a baseball game. Early on a Spring Sunday morning in 1987, a shaggy group of groggy Jewish teens piled into a yellow school bus in Spring Valley NY. We arrived in midtown to a remarkable sight — a mass of people, larger than I had ever seen, waving signs and banners.

The gathering had a name: “Solidarity Sunday.” Maybe you heard about it. Maybe you were there. It was a public demonstration, on behalf of Jews oppressed in the Soviet Union. All around us, Jews held posters with slogans, hoisting portraits of Jews tortured or detained while in Soviet custody.

I didn’t personally know any Soviet Jews at the time. But I felt the power of the moment just the same. Here were thousands of Jews, from hundreds of destinations — many, just like me, having arrived in yellow school buses — standing opposite the United Nations Plaza, to walk and speak and insist that people in power do the right thing.

More than anything that happened within the walls of my childhood synagogue, that march stands out in my memory as a religious experience.

It was a holy gathering, and a holy moment.

Last night, we talked about the value of *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba’zeh*, that “all Jews are responsible for one other.” Standing up for Soviet Jews, of course, reflects that value.

But since that sunny Sunday, I’ve felt this holiness in other places. Marching through the streets of Oakland, protesting extrajudicial killings of Black and Brown folks. Standing on a podium in DC, opposing the so-called Muslim Ban. Blocking the street in front of a Bay Area McDonalds, demanding fair wages for fast-food workers. Standing with some of you, at the ICE building in Burlington, at the JFK building in Boston, protesting inhumane deportations.

Each time, it felt sacred.

Which raises the question: what does it mean to be religious? What’s the point of a synagogue?

What’s the point of Jews?

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In a year in which we’re focused on Jewish values, I’m proud to say that, as a community, we’ve decided to include in our core values *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world,” as well as *tzedek*, “justice,” *shmirat ha’adamah*, guarding the earth, *ahavat ha’ger*, “loving the stranger, immigrant.”

Why did we decide that? Is it appropriate? Why is a synagogue the right place to do that work?

This year I want to answer that *why*. *Why* it’s essential that synagogues talk justice, write letters, lobby, demonstrate, march.

Because unless we’re clear about that why — the Jewish, *religious* basis for doing so — I don’t blame anyone for being skeptical.

So I invite you to come with me on a journey. We’ll start in Ur, with the first Hebrew man, Abraham. We’ll journey down the Nile, and jump over to the Red Sea. From there, we’ll spread across the world. And, if I do this right, we’ll end up back here.

Ready? OK.

Many people know the story of Abraham, arguing with God, over the fate of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even so, it’s worth repeating. The cities are so evil that, in God’s calculation, they must be annihilated.

Like any good Jew, Abraham has questions. Is *everybody* there evil? Aren’t *some* people innocent?

There’s a Hebrew phrase for when a person hears something they hope never happens: *chas v’chalilah*! Literally it means “avert and keep away!” — essentially, “God forbid!” For instance, your aunt might say, “it’s so humid out I’m gonna have a stroke.” And you would respond, “*chas v’chalilah*!”

And so it is, when Abraham learns of God’s plans for Sodom and Gomorrah, he shouts at God, *chalilah l’cha*! “Far be it from You” to kill innocent along with the guilty! Then Abraham says it *again*: *chalilah*! Finally, in an incendiary coda, Abraham protests, “the Judge of all the Earth isn’t making justice!”

Abraham’s brazenness is even more powerful when we realize: Abraham has no connection to these cities. No landholdings in Gomorrah, no timeshare in Sodom. Yes, his nephew Lot is hunkered down in Sodom, but his argument *never mentions Lot*. Abraham is making not a self-interested argument, but a moral argument, based on the principle that humans have inherent dignity, regardless of ethnicity or land or station.

Today we call that principle *tzedek*. Social justice.

If you know the story, you know it doesn’t end well. God cannot even find a minyan of menshes in Sodom and Gomorrah. Tragically, the cities are obliterated.

Which raises the question: *Nu*? What’s the point? Why would Torah waste precious time recounting, in great detail no less, a useless and failed argument?

The answer is that, while the argument fails, it’s far from useless. It’s Abraham’s *willingness* to have that argument that is essentially Jewish, a powerful answer to the question of what God wants from Abraham. And, ultimately, what God wants from Abraham’s descendants — you and me.

God is looking to us to make this kind of argument.

How can I say that so definitively? I know what God wants? I can say it because of what comes *before* the story. It’s even more important than the argument itself. It calls to all of us from across millennia.

It’s God’s only soliloquy in Torah. God wonders, “should I hide from Abraham what I’m doing” in Sodom and Gomorrah? The question is odd. Why should God care whether Abraham knows? Who is this mere mortal to God?

God tells us the answer. Abraham and his descendants, God declares, are entrusted with the obligation to keep *derekh Ado-nai*. “The Path of God.”

In many Orthodox communities, the word *derekh* is used colloquially to refer certain ritual observances, such as exacting observance of Shabbat and *kashrut* and rigidly regimented gender roles. Someone is considered “off the *derekh*” — off the path — when they depart from those practices.

But God’s soliloquy mentions none of these things. The “path of God” is not defined by keeping Shabbes or yontiff. Prayer isn’t mentioned. Not even Torah study.

What then *is* this “path of God?” The Divine monologue continues, God addressing both nobody in particular and everybody who will ever live. *La’asot tzedakah u’mishpat*. To walk the path of God is “to make justice and righteousness.” This is the eternal Jewish mission statement. It is spoken by God, about the paradigmatic Jew, to Jews for all time. Abraham’s household is to safeguard God’s path by doing justice. It is only in fulfilling this mission, God says, that the Divine promise will open itself to Abraham’s offspring.

And it is immediately after God concludes the soliloquy that Abraham steps forward. It is his first step on the Path of God.

“Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?”

In that moment, Abraham seals his — and our — destiny. According to some commentators, it’s only in this moment that Abraham proves himself worthy of being the progenitor of the Jewish people.

That teaching will be repeated again and again, emphasized in *mitzvot* throughout Torah. Protect the orphan. Plead for the widow. Demand love for the immigrant, fair wages, sustenance for the poor.

We may ask: what if doing so is, in modern parlance, “divisive?” What if it makes people uncomfortable?

“To seek justice,” wrote Orthodox Rabbi Eleizer Berkovitz, who escaped the savagery of Nazism in 1939, “is to relieve the oppressed.” Sometimes it means saying things that will upset someone. “But,” he asks, “how else [are] the oppressed to be relieved if not by judging the oppressor and the crushing of his ability to oppress?”

And on this day in which we seek forgiveness, the rabbi reminds us that forgiveness without repair makes a mockery of the power within *teshuvah*:

*History is not a Sunday school where the question is to forgive or not to forgive. The toleration of injustice is the toleration of human suffering… love for the righteous and concern for the stranger will be mere sentimentalism if injustice is permitted to be rampant. One cannot uphold the fatherless and the widow without at the same time protecting them against the overbearing arrogance of the mighty.*

The pursuit of justice is not a “nice” thing to do. It is an obligation, first taught us by Abraham, incumbent upon every Jew. Because to accommodate the oppression of God’s creation is an affront to that God.

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If we hadn’t already learned this from Abraham, we learned it through the history of his children.

Which brings us to the next stop on our journey — the land of Egypt. In Pharaoh’s Egypt, Israelites were conceived for labor, born for misery, and lived to be worked to death. This was the politics of the Egyptian regime, enforced by the whip. It wouldn’t be the first time we’d suffer under savagery.

Abraham’s descendent would escape that savagery through a march. Filing through the Red Sea, defying oppression, walking as one out of a death house — redeemed, because they walked into redemption.

We don’t think of it as a protest march, but it taught a message for the ages. For, in marching out of Egypt, the Israelites acted for more than just themselves. They acted for the generations. And they acted for God. The Exodus march, the public defiance of the obliteration of our humanity, was service to God.

Not through sacrifice or prayer. It was marching, in fact, that succeeded where *prayer was found wanting*. At the decisive moment of crisis, the Israelites poised at the edge of the sea and the Egyptians closing in, Moses cried out to God in a prayer of desperation. But, in that moment, prayer was not called for. “Why do you cry out to Me,” God asked the dumbstruck prophet. *Daber el b’nai Yisrael v’yisa’u*. “Tell the Israelites to march.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And march they did. The story’s so familiar, we might forget — they didn’t have to. They could have surrendered. In the fury of the moment, the sea threatened death. But by walking shoulder to shoulder, marching through the water, the threat of death was transformed into the reality of redemption.

Yes, per God’s instruction, Moses raised the staff and the sea parted, and yes, it was divine, miraculous.

But there would have been no reason for God to split the sea in the absence of marchers.

Echoes of Abraham’s bravery in challenging injustice reverberated within his descendants as they walked into the sea, slaves marching into freedom.

When we remember, we walk in their footsteps.

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Were they “being political?” Is this a political story? Or is it a religious story?

The answer, of course, is “yes.”

Jews gave a gift to the world — the *religious* message that there’s a God of justice who expects justice to be realized in the realm of policy and — yes, *politics*. A God that cares about human beings, cares about what happens to them, cares about how they treat each other.

Is that message religious? Is it political? It turns out there’s no word for “politics” in the Torah. There’s no word for “religion” either.

It’s just Torah.

It’s *all* Torah

And the Exodus informs the rest of the Torah, and informs the rest of Jewish existence, to this very day.

While we wring our hands over whether we should or should not discuss politics, the Torah has been calling to us for three millennia. If you want to stand with God, stand with the stranger. If you want to live a life of meaning, walk in solidarity with the poor. If you want your children to be Jews and live as Jews, and *be proud that they’re Jews*, remind them that they were slaves — slaves who walked through the very water they feared would be the site their destruction, a model of freedom for all time.

Liberation is never a matter of only politics or religion. It is *always* both. It is always a miracle, in both the realm of matter and the realm of spirit.

We can’t “mix “politics with religion,” because they were *never separate in the first place*.

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Which brings us to today. Just as the march into the Red Sea succeeded where Moses’ prayer failed, more American Jews are finding meaning in social justice — even when they’re not synagogue-goers — swelling the ranks of social justice organizations like Bend the Arc and T’ruah.

And in a time when synagogues are struggling to fill seats, many of the synagogues attracting local and national attention are those that are dedicated to justice work, shuls like IKAR in Los Angeles and the Kavana Cooperative in Seattle, Mishkan in Chicago and Kol Tzedek in Philadelphia, B’nei Jeshurun in New York.

Each of these thriving communities was built, in large part, on social justice foundations.

Still, not everyone is convinced. Is working for justice *really* Jewish?

After all, anyone can do it.

But our texts have always imagined us interacting with and, God willing, inspiring our neighbors. Many people know the phrase from the book of Isaiah calling Jews to be *ohr la-goyim*, a “light to the nations.” What is less well-known is the beginning of that same verse.

*Ani YHVH kritecha b’tzedek*.

“I YHVH called to you *in justice*.”

That’s what makes us a light. In Isaiah’s words, “opening eyes *deprived* of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That non-Jews have taken up this call is not a *diminution* of the Jewish spirit, but rather its *fulfillment*, proof that Isaiah had it right.

Jewish practice doesn’t become less Jewish just because someone else adopts it. Christians and Muslims now observe their own Sabbath days. Christianity and Islam have turned *tzedakah* into tithing and *zakat*. Muslims don’t eat pork. The pope wears a kippa.

We can be proud that the insistence on justice for all people stems from Jewish teaching. The demand that all people have basic sustenance is a Jewish demand. The teaching that all societies maintain courts of justice is a Jewish teaching. Insisting on these essential social foundations for ourselves and our neighbors is an elemental expression of Judaism and Jewishness.

Sure, when many people think of Judaism, they think of ritual. When we think of Yom Kippur, we think of fasting and forgiveness. And yet the prophet Isaiah, in this morning’s *haftarah*, mocks us for performing rituals that don’t change our social interactions. *Starving and bowing your head? Wearing a burlap sack and smearing ashes all over yourself?*

*Look who thinks their fasting!*

No, Isaiah says. *V’shalach r’tzuztim chofshim*. Set the oppressed free. Free your fellow citizens from bondage — oppression, incarceration, destitution, brutality.

That’s what I call a fast.

In a powerful *d’var Torah*, my friend Benjamin Epstein wrote that “the fasting, the suffering, the praying, is the *mechanism* by which you are supposed to be so obviously moved to help others.”

In other words, the ritual is the *means*, the vehicle to get us where we need to go.

I love Jewish rituals. But they’re rarely timeless. Isaiah never became a bar mitzvah — and, it goes without saying, neither did Moses. Apples and honey aren’t found in the Talmud. *Kol Nidre*? Nope. *Tashlich*, shaking off our sins, was mocked as a silly folk custom. How many of us give a single thought to the Yom Kippur ritual described in this morning’s Torah reading, the ritual of the two goats, on days other than Yom Kippur?

Even the most cherished Jewish rituals grow and expand and contract, get neglected and rediscovered, reformed, reimagined, and reconstructed. They change all the time. *What never changes is our people’s insistence on justice.*

That’s the work that makes us who we are. It always has. It always will *–*a people inspired by teachers of principle, born in oppression, liberated to follow *derekh* *YHVH*, the path of God, bringing righteousness into a world polluted by corruption and cruelty.

Of course it’s never easy. The work seems insurmountable. We’re not the first ones to feel that way*. Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*, it says in Pirkei Avot. “It’s not on you to finish the job” of making justice. *V'lo ata ben chorim l'hibatil mimena*. “But that doesn’t mean you can ignore it.”

To help us overcome our despair — in keeping with the evolution of Jewish ritual — I want to introduce you to a new ritual.

Joining with synagogues all over the country, we are taking part in a project called “Tzedek Box,” started by my friend, Rabbinical Student Andrew Mandel.

“In a Tzedakah box, we put coins,” it says on the Tzedek Box website. “In a Tzedek Box, we put slips of paper on which we've written our most recent contributions to a better world.” With the Tzedek Box app, you can choose which issues and actions most strongly speak to you, and receive alerts that match your preferences, so that we can show up for this holy work in acts of, in the words of the website, “sacred accountability.”

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Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews fled the former Soviet Union, some of whom — thank God — are members of this very synagogue. But my childhood synagogue, once busting at the seams, no longer exists. A few years ago, it folded into a synagogue a couple towns over. Rack it up to demographic shifts, perhaps.

But I sometimes wonder if it’s because there weren’t enough moments *within* the walls of the synagogue as gripping and immediate as what happened *outside*, in the streets of Manhattan, Jews marching for justice, on behalf of people they never met, on a sunny Sunday.

The good news? It’s not too late for us. “How wonderful it is,” Anne Frank wrote in her diary, “that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

How wonderful to be part of a people whose very mission is to see cruelty, injustice, brokenness, and respond with compassion and conviction.

What a blessing to hear that call.

What an even greater blessing to answer it.

1. Exodus 14:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 42:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)