

Tzedek U'Mish'pat

In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who served as the Chief Rabbi of England, "Judaism is a complex and subtle faith, yet it has rarely lost touch with its simple ethical imperatives. We are here to make a difference, to mend the fractures of the world, a day at a time, an act at a time, for as long as it takes to make it a place of justice and compassion where the lonely are not alone, the poor not without help; where the cry of the vulnerable is heeded and those who are wronged are heard."⁵

My grandfather was an immigrant who came to this country when he was young. He worked hard. He was a prime example of the American Dream. After selling his bakery, he bought real estate, some of his properties were

rented by businesses and others were apartments in the Bronx, and he liked stopping by each one on a regular basis just to schmooze. He rarely spoke about where he came from and felt fortunate to live in America. He cherished living in a free country that wasn't ruled by a czar.

My grandmother loved to travel. She made numerous trips to Israel, and went all over the country, every year to a different city for the annual Hadassah convention. But she always went alone. My grandfather refused to join her. He liked the routine of his life and didn't want to have to pack a suitcase or get on a airplane.

He was happiest staying home in the Bronx.

Until, she asked me to go to Israel with her. That's when my grandfather decided it was time to visit Israel. He had been giving money to support Hadassah's efforts for many

years and he just couldn't resist the idea of the three of us being there together.

In his late 80's, after living in this country for over 65 years, my grandfather applied for his first United States passport. Much to his surprise, **his application was denied. He was told that he wasn't an official US citizen.** He was so upset. He had been paying his taxes and voting all these years. How could this be? He took his civic obligations seriously and now he finds out he's not considered a citizen? It was shocking. He had been living as a proud US citizen for over 50 years, fulfilling his obligations, and now he was told that he wasn't.

It turned out that they had a friend who worked for the city of NY and they were able to locate the manifest of the ship he and his family took from Poland to Ellis Island. He had come over before he was 20 so he was on his parents

papers. After straightening out this bureaucratic glitch he was issued a passport and we had a wonderful time traveling together. If he hadn't been interested in traveling, not having a passport all those years really didn't have any practical impact on his life.

That could be why up until then I didn't really understand how much being a US citizen meant to my grandfather. I've been thinking about it lately.

I have been asking myself what it means to be an American. What **does** it mean to be an American? As we read the headlines and listen to the news, this question is so relevant to us today. From school shootings to the separation of families at the border, all across our country we see tragedy. As citizens of this country, what can we do?

And what does Judaism say about being a citizen? Does Judaism have anything to teach us about our obligation to fulfill the right we have to be active in our country's democratic processes?

In Genesis, chapter 18, we find the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We've already read about God wiping out most of humanity with the flood because society was filled with corruption. In this story, God gets Abraham involved in God's plan to destroy the two cities because these two cities have become violent and immoral. Early on in the story, we find God's soliloquy. God is thinking out loud, saying "now I know things are really off the rails in Sodom & Gomorrah and I think it would be best to get rid of all those people there, but maybe I should consult with Abraham first." Then God shares why it might be a good idea to get Abe's advice. "For I have chosen him, so that

he will direct his children and his household after him to keep my ways by doing what is **right and just**, so that I will bring about for Abraham what I have promised him.”

Those two words-right and just are essential. In Hebrew the words are tzedek and mishpat-right and just. This is why God chose Abraham. God trusted that Abraham would know what is right and just, and he would pass these values down to future generations. Here’s our first **clue**-as Jews, we are obligated to do what is **right and just**. The word mishpat is also connected to the word mishpatim, which means judgement. In this story, God is counting on Abraham, a human being, to stand for what is right and just, to have good judgement. Abraham argues with God about God’s plan to destroy the city and finally they agree that if God can find 10 righteous people, God will save the cities. As the descendants of Abraham, what

can **we** learn about our obligation to stand up for what is right and just? And how do we fulfill this obligation now? We must speak out and act to defend those who need our voices and our care for our world. We must challenge corruption and injustice. Our congregation has been involved in so many social justice causes. Just this past year we have been working on criminal justice reform, climate change, affordable housing and immigration. The end of June, we joined over 8,000 SC residents in the Families Belong Together march and rally. This year, our congregation joins Reform congregations all over the country in a campaign around voter engagement. As an American and as a Jew, I have an obligation to vote, it's a right and a responsibility. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of Jewry's most important legal authorities was asked

whether Jews have an obligation to vote in American elections, Rabbi Feinstein wrote:

“On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety. A fundamental principle of Judaism is hakarat hatov—recognizing benefits afforded **us** and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent on each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote.

This reminded me of my grandfather. He was so grateful for this country, that he felt it was incumbent upon him to pay his taxes and vote. He came from a country where

his family didn't have a right to vote. When I go to the polls this November, he and his family will be with me and so will my kids and grandkids.

Our voter engagement campaign is not about advocating for any particular candidate, but it is aimed at increasing our ability to advance policies that reflect our Jewish values. According to the Torah we are obligated to welcome the stranger, care for our environment and protect the most vulnerable among us. And one important way we fulfill these obligations is to vote in favor of leaders and laws that affirm these values.

Elected officials listen more to us when they know we are getting our members to the polls.

We will have an opportunity to meet with some of our elected officials at our COPA Assembly on September

30. We've been hearing stories about immigration, health care and housing in our COPA gatherings for the past 15 years. Our Assembly will be an opportunity to hear more stories, celebrate our victories and hold our political representatives accountable to our values. To act upon our Jewish values. I'll be there co-hosting what we hope will be 1,000 people gathering for justice. I'm asking you to join me.

When Wilma Gold invited us to join her for a house meeting with members of the Methodist Church in Watsonville to exchange immigration stories, many of you showed up. I sat in a circle with a young man who at the age of 13, walked all the way from Mexico to California. He was looking for a better life. It reminded me of my grandfather's story. This young man found work in the fields, married and has a wife and four children. His wife is

attending Cabrillo College. When he told us that he and his family, a wife and **four children**, live in a **one bedroom apartment** I couldn't imagine how they managed. They are in the process of becoming US citizens, but it isn't easy. Listening to him, someone who's family would benefit from our affordable housing work increased my commitment to helping pass the new affordable housing bond that will be on the ballot this November. Real people, with real stories, as familiar to me as those of my grandfather.

So today, we are signing people up to go to this Assembly, hear more stories, act together with our COPA community and hold our elected officials accountable to our values. We're registering people to vote, and to go out and

register others. Our Social Action team is at a table in the lobby.

Acting together, we have strength in numbers.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yitzhak taught, “A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted”

(Talmud, Brakhot 55a). To be sure that our voices and dedication to social justice are heard in the public sphere, we have to educate ourselves about current candidates, bonds and measures, register to vote and show up at the polls. We also have a responsibility to engage with our whole community to help increase access to voting for others.

Along with our responsibility to vote, we are urged to continue working for justice. My political and social activism is driven by my obligation as a Jew. Jewish

theology teaches about 'radical responsibility.' We are taught not to stand by the blood of a neighbor.

I ask you, on this first day of the New Year, what are you going to do to fulfill this obligation? What does it mean to you to be a Jewish American? How will you fulfill the responsibility to do what is right and just, tzedek and mishpat? In the words of Cornell West, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."