

## The mission of Judaism

-Subject is mission of Judaism, not mission of mankind or purpose of Creation. (Judaism not clear on latter. Talmud is pessimistic:

-Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel argued, Beth Shammai saying that it would have been better if man had not been created, and Beth Hillel saying that it is better that man has been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it would have been better if man had not been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds [and make amends if he finds them at fault] or, as others say, let him examine his future actions [before committing them]. [Eruvin 13b] )

I.e., now that humanity is here, let's make the best of a bad situation.

### First, does Judaism have a mission?

Yes. Torah says Jews are the chosen people, and **chosenness** implies mission. Words God used when He chose us:

-For you are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people to Himself, above all peoples that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples; [Deut 7: 6-7; also Deut. 14:2]

-Understand therefore, that the Lord your God does not give you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people. [Deut 9:6]

So God “loves” us and “chose” us, not because we were numerous, and not because we were righteous.

-So Torah explicitly rejects innate superiority of Jews.

-Torah does not say why God chose us, nor for what mission

-Torah includes apparent criticism: We are “stiff-necked”

-Repeated 8 times in Torah [Ex. 32:9, 33:3, 33:5, 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 9:13, 10:16, 31:27].

Perhaps we were chosen BECAUSE we are stiff-necked? God was saying, in effect, “I need someone with the determination, the endurance, the staying power, to do what I have in mind.”

Implication: Mission is to do what God has in mind in spite of the resistance and inevitable persecutions that will ensue. So mission *requires* stubbornness, “stiff-neckedness”.

-The Midrash compares Israel to an olive. Just as the olive yields its oil only after being squeezed hard, so Israel must endure great oppression and hardship in order to yield its wisdom. [Ex. Rabbah 36:1]

Hints about our mission are dropped in the Torah:

*-Ve-atem tihyu li mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh*

And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [Ex. 19:6]

-We are called to high office

*-Kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani HaShem Elokechem*

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy [Lev. 19:2]

-We are chosen to imitate God.

“Holy” means “separated”, “distinguished”, “set apart”. Indeed:

*-Hen, ‘am levadad yishkon uva-goyim lo yit-chashav*

Behold, it is a nation that will dwell alone and not be reckoned among the nations. (Num. 23:9)

-We are on our own (among people) to fulfill our mission

## **So what is the mission of Judaism?**

-Not clearly in Torah -- other than “Follow the commandments”

-Implying “and let God worry about the rest”.

-Rest of Tanach, and Talmud, give at least three possibilities. They are not independent:

### **1-To spread Jewish teaching?**

Is our mission to spread God’s word, and perhaps commandments also?

Through the prophet Isaiah, God said he wanted us to be to be “a light unto the nations”

-I the Lord have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and offer you for a covenant of the people, for a light to nations [L’or goyim] [Is. 42:6]

-I will also give you for a light to the nations, so that my salvation may extend to the end of the earth. [Is. 49:6]

Clearly part of the mission is to spread the values of Judaism. But

- Spread by just living apart and unnoticed, and following commandments?
- Spread by making sure non-Jews see us, so we can give a good example?
- Spread by interacting with non-Jews, or even proselytizing?

-Proselytizing. Talmud:

-Rabbi Eleazar also said: The Holy One, blessed be He, exiled the Jews among the nations only so that converts might join them. [Pesachim 87b]

-At the time Rabbi Eleazar said this, Jews were actively proselytizing. Ten percent of the Roman Empire was Jewish [48 CE Roman census].

-But for most of the past 2000 years proselytizing would have cost us our lives, so we lost our appetite for it.

-We reinterpreted the Talmud to mean that we are to spread the values of Judaism, the wisdom of Torah, and at least the seven Noahide laws, to the entire world. These laws are binding on all mankind, and are in the Talmud:

-No idolatry, no murder, no blaspheming God's name, no adultery, no stealing, no eating live animals, and establishing courts of justice.

[Sanhedrin 56a]

-The goal is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, that we repeat at every service in the 'Alenu:

*-Vehayyah Hashem lemelech 'al kol haaretz; bayom hahu yihyeh Hashem echad ushmo echad.*

And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One, and his name One. [Zech. 14:9]

-Should Jews go back to full-scale proselytizing? [Discussion]

## 2-To excel for the benefit of mankind?

-Jews as a group excel at what they do. That is a fact. Judaism is a "package deal" that works. Which parts of the package can get credit for what achievement is a matter of dispute. Maybe the package is indivisible.

-Is our mission to excel for the benefit of all mankind? To be agents of change, of progress, of improvement?

-I will make you a great nation [Gen.12:2]

Jewish accomplishments:

-Spread knowledge of God and its attendant responsibilities

-Hitler: The Jews' greatest crime was to give the world a conscience

-Material wealth (creates jobs)

-Intellectual wealth (increases knowledge and solutions to problems)

-Only 1/3 of 1% of humanity is Jewish, yet Jews get 1/3 of Nobel Prizes -- 100 times more than their small numbers suggest

-Economic prowess

-Tiny Israel's meteoric rise in modern living and technology; became regional economic powerhouse with almost no natural resources

-Military prowess

- Tiny Israel victorious against large and mighty combined Arab armies -- or Greek armies, as the case may be
  - Disproportionate representation in the professions
    - Physicians, lawyers, industry leaders, teachers, researchers, etc.
  - Disproportionate representation among college graduates
  - Disproportionate representation wherever revolutionary ideas are brewing
    - Jews are in every camp, in every field, frequently in leadership positions; including camps in which \*I\* don't particularly care to find Jews.
- It is precisely these achievements that are the *sole* source of antisemitism -- but that's another subject.

### 3-To perform “Tikkun ‘Olam”?

Is the mission of Judaism “tikkun ‘olam -- the repair of the world” -- making the world a better place?

- Origin of term is in Mishnah. Rabbis would render rulings “*Mip'nei tikkun ha-'olam* -- for the sake of the repair of the world". They are not required by Torah, but deemed necessary to keep order in the world. [Example: Gittin 32a]
    - Implication of going beyond strict commandments
    - Used in Talmud only for technical matters
  - In the second half of the ‘Alenu (which some congregations omit), we hope for the day when we will be able to perfect the world under God's kingship.
 

*I'takken 'olam b'malkhut Shaddai*
  - In 16<sup>th</sup> century, concept expanded in Isaac Luria's mysticism: At Creation, a vessel holding divine “sparks of holiness” burst, and spread the sparks throughout the world. Jews were then made to wander far and wide just so they could gather these “sparks of holiness” and make them available to all. That is the needed “repair”. [Isaac Luria – the Arizal--,quoted in Petech Anayim by Chida, Yoma 38]
  - Traditional Judaism holds that the way to tikkun ‘olam is to perform commandments, both ritual and ethical. The more performance, the more the world will inch towards perfection in the Messianic age.
- Talmud:
- Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of R. Shim'on bar Yohai: If all Jews kept two Shabbatot according to all the laws of Shabbat, redemption will come immediately [Shabbat 118b]
  - Non-Orthodox Jews have expanded Mishnaic interpretation of tikkun ‘olam and put it at the center of their philosophy: Emphasis on social action/justice.

-Can non-Orthodox Jews and their descendants survive as Jews with emphasis on two secular enterprises, social action and the State of Israel, to the detriment of rest of Judaism?

-From a recent op-ed by Joel Alperson:

<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/07/27/3088736/op-ed-judaism-is-more-than-tikkun-olam>

[He is past national campaign chair for what is now Jewish Federations of North America, and says he is not Orthodox]:

#### **“Judaism is more than ‘tikkun ‘olam’**

-...Jews increasingly try to find their Judaic meaning in social/political causes (immigration reform, Supreme Court appointments, environmentalism, women’s rights, etc.). Putting aside the merit of the positions taken, let’s be honest: These “tikkun olam” pursuits might feel good and even do some good, but they do little to build Jewish communities.

...If Jews continue to prioritize these social/political efforts over proven religious practices, we must have the courage to acknowledge that we have substituted all these secular causes for Judaism... We might insist that tikkun olam and social justice are central to our Jewish way of life, but they are increasingly taking the place of serious Jewish education and Jewish practice.

...The Modern Orthodox largely swim in the same secular waters as other Jews: They own televisions, use the Internet, attend secular universities, and work and vacation in the secular world. But they also hold to a religious discipline that they believe is life-improving. They observe Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, and they study Jewish texts in far greater numbers than non-Orthodox Jews. They are more likely to have children, and their children are far more likely to marry Jews and make Jewish homes.

...It is the discipline of leading a traditional Jewish life that also reminds us how best to engage in repairing the world...Ironically, by overemphasizing tikkun ‘olam we could ultimately, through lack of Jewish knowledge and experience, lose the very impetus that put us in the tikkun olam business in the first place.

...We’ll be severely weakened if we don’t acknowledge that we must repair ourselves far more urgently than we must repair the world.”

-Need proper balance. Can’t have it all, all the way.

## **Conclusion**

-Perhaps Torah is intentionally vague about the mission of Judaism so all of the above might apply, in proper balance.

-Perhaps the most important thing is for Jews to continue to feel strongly that God chose them for SOME mission, so they can live their lives fully

and passionately, and, with the help of Jewish observance and values, perform for the betterment of all mankind.

-The Talmud summarizes it beautifully:

***-Lo 'alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo atta ven chorrin lehibatel mimmena  
-You don't have to complete the task, but you may not desist from it  
entirely either.*** [Pirkei Avot 2:21]

Translation: You must have goals and purpose in life, consistent with Jewish observance and values. You don't have to fulfill them completely, but you must HAVE them and work on them.