

“Justice, Justice, You Shall Actually Pursue”

Yom Kippur 5779

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Over the past four years, I have had the honor of taking the Confirmation students from my previous congregation to the L'taken Social Justice Seminar in Washington, DC. Sponsored by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the L'taken seminar, which has also been part of CBI's 11th and 12th grade Post Confirmation program for many years, is really something to behold. For three and a half days, hundreds of Reform Jewish teens focus all of their attention on the intersection of Judaism and social justice, a partnership that has informed many of our Reform Jewish values.

During my last trip to this seminar, I was deeply inspired by Rabbi Jonah Pesner's Shabbat morning d'var Torah. He gave an impassioned and fiery sermon that spoke to the vast number of problems plaguing our society. He stood in front of a room full of teenagers and adult chaperones and animatedly discussed the importance of standing up for others. He shared personal stories of strife and frustration. He spoke with an air of hope, excitement, and awe about the transformative possibilities of this new generation. He captured the essence of

what many people have felt for the past few years, and he did so with an incredible amount of energy and exuberance.

And yet, he didn't seem to have the kids' attention. During a brief pause in his thoughts, I took a moment to glance around the room. This space was filled with teens from across the country, teens who traveled from near and far to attend this special event, teens who supposedly cared about the issues and wanted to affect change in the world. And yet, I stared in bewilderment at the number of kids who were on their phones, listening to music, talking to one another, or even sleeping. I couldn't help but wonder, have we created a generation of uninterested, disconnected, and unimpassioned teenagers? And what on earth will we be able to do about it?

As I sat in that room, growing increasingly concerned about the future of our country and our world, I wondered why these kids just didn't seem to care about Rabbi Pesner's words. How were they not fired up, ready to go? I knew it was Saturday morning, I knew they were tired from the night before, but these were the people who *chose* to attend a social justice weekend. After all, if THEY didn't want to hear about this, then who would?

Of course, the majority, if not all of the participants would later research and write wonderful presentations that they fervently delivered in the offices of their senators and House representatives, Monday morning on Capitol Hill. They lobbied for legislation on LGBTQ+ rights, campaign finance reform, climate change, and so much more. They shared personal stories and quotes from sacred Jewish texts, including Torah and rabbinic literature.

But did the energy of that weekend persist when the weekend was over? Sadly, I imagine that most of the teens returned to their homes, exhausted from the experience, but not overly eager to continue this important social justice work.

And then, barely three weeks later, the horrifying mass shooting took place at Margery Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As our country reeled from yet another school massacre, something astonishing and unprecedented happened. The students from Stoneman Douglas High School stood up and refused to stay silent. These kids created a movement that even now continues to shake up the status quo, months after that terrible day. Those teens are the same age and in the same cohort as the teens who attended L'taken. In fact, some of those Parkland teens DID attend a L'taken weekend in the past. So, what transformed those Florida students into activists, while their

peers at L'taken that weekend tuned out, distracted and uninterested in hearing an eloquent call to action by one of the great social justice leaders in American Reform Judaism?

Well, it turns out I was wrong. In fact, I was VERY wrong. It wasn't that the teenagers were apathetic or passionless. Truthfully, these young adults are filled with a desire to change the world, but like us in the adult world, they are so overwhelmed by the multiplicity of problems we face that they get trapped in a kind of paralysis, not knowing where to begin.

How *do* you decide what to focus on? How can you choose one issue to give your attention to when the perilously thin dam that's holding our society together keeps springing leaks? It's not that the teens didn't care. It's not that they weren't listening to Rabbi Pesner on that bitterly cold Saturday morning in the lower level of a large hotel in Alexandria, Virginia. I honestly think that the younger generations have grown desensitized to the overwhelming number of issues facing our country, just as many of the older generations have. What can we do when there are just too many problems to repair?

For the Parkland students, it took a terrifying act of violence to help them find their voice. Emma Gonzalez, one of the survivors of the shooting, and now one of the organizers of the students protesting gun violence, has been at the forefront of much of the publicity surrounding the aftermath of this incident. She said in one of her speeches, “[W]e are speaking up for those who don’t have anyone listening to them, for those who can’t talk about it just yet, and for those who will never speak again. We are grieving, we are furious, and we are using our words fiercely and desperately because that’s the only thing standing between us and this happening again.”

You see, these students did not want to spend the rest of their school year fighting gun violence. They didn’t choose to sit in deep despair and sadness at their friends’ and classmates’ funerals. They never planned to drive to Tallahassee shortly after this shooting to encourage their elected officials to make life-saving changes to Florida state law. But they did. And they continue to fight today. And they continue to travel around the state and country pleading with others to create consensus around solutions.

During a time that feels so divisive and painful, I want to think about why we need to continue fighting for others, and how we might approach this sacred work.

Long ago, the Jewish community, specifically the Reform Jewish community, embraced social justice as one of our most crucial values. We lovingly poured the ideal of Tikkun Olam, repair of the world, into acts of prayer, teaching, and everyday living. We asked how the work we do will better our community and country, how it will positively impact the world. We planned events throughout the year that focused on standing up for others, giving voice to the voiceless, fighting for the rights of strangers, fighting for the rights of our neighbors, and more.

Here at CBI, we devoted an entire weekend to welcoming the stranger this past year, a weekend that brought the plight of immigrants arriving in the United States to the forefront of our hearts and minds. And, we will continue to remember the difficulties faced by so many in our country, not just immigrants, but those suffering from poverty, homelessness, hunger, unequal rights to citizenship, and beyond. Why do we keep fighting for others? Because we are commanded over and over in Torah to, “uphold the rights of the stranger, and the [most vulnerable] among you” (Deuteronomy 24:17).

When it comes to pursuing social justice work as individuals, we can be overwhelmed not only with the multiplicity of the crises we face, but also with our limited time, energy and expertise. With so many people in need of help, how do we prioritize and triage the suffering of our fellow human beings?

A passage in our Shabbat and weekday prayer book, Mishkan Tefillah, points the way toward an answer. It reads:

Standing on the parted shores of history
we still believe what we were taught
before ever we stood at Sinai:

That wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
that there is a better place, a promised land;
that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness.

That there is no way to get from here to there, **except by joining hands, marching together.**

The students of Stoneman Douglas High School found strength by teaming up with one another to share their message with the world. They banded together, united, to work toward their goal as one, giving support and courage to each other. Perhaps it will feel more manageable if we unite as one voice to work towards creating a world filled with peace.

Additionally, we are so fortunate here in Texas to have a valuable, new resource at our fingertips. The Religious Action Center, founded in Washington, DC in 1959 by the then UAHC, now URJ, has spent decades fighting for the rights of people in the United States and around the world. An organization dedicated to lifting up the values of *Tikkun Olam*, *g'milut chadasim*, and *derech erez* (respect for humanity), the RAC has recently established field offices in several states, in an effort to provide support and resources to the Reform Jewish community on the state and local level. We are so blessed that the RAC has recently branched out to Texas and has employed Rabbi David Segal of Houston to organize the Texas Reform Jewish community to continue speaking up for those without a voice. Along with Rabbi Segal and other community members from across the state, Congregation Beth Israel and Temple Beth Shalom here in Austin have entered into a financial partnership and hired our own member, Lori Adelman as the Social Justice Fellow for the Reform Jewish Community of Austin. Together, we will be able to continue to make Austin a safe, inclusive, and kind community ready to open its doors to all in need.

In addition to the Texas Religious Action Center and CBI's and Beth Shalom's partnership, my rabbinate is informed heavily by the work of social justice. In 2016 I participated in the RAC's Rabbi Balfour Brickner Social Justice Rabbinic Fellowship. Through this program, I learned the many multifaceted ways of bringing social justice advocacy to Reform congregations. The Brickner Fellowship gave me a deeper understanding of the different elements of social justice, which include education, advocacy, and action. My goal is to further the work that CBI has already been instrumental in providing to Austin and the entire state of Texas as a whole. But, I can't do that work alone. I invite you to join me during this critical time in our history, a time that has been defined by division and anger, frustration and pessimism. Please, come share your thoughts with me. What issues are you passionate about? How would you like CBI and the Austin community to work together? What can we do to make our world whole again, a true *Kehilah Kedosha*?

As we begin this new year, we have to ask what I like to call the 5 w's about the intersection of Judaism and social justice. Who? Who is you, me, all of us. What? What is the work of creating a world of peace and wholeness. When? When is now. Where? Where is here, in our sacred community. Why? Because our lives depend on it.

Rabbi Tarfon said, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Together, we can make our world a brighter, bolder, and better place. Together, we can work to bring equality and fairness to our society. Together, we can mend broken bridges and broken hearts. Together, we can create a world filled with *shlemut* and *shalom*, with wholeness and peace.

Ken Yihi Ratzon, Be this God’s will.

Amen.