

Yom Kippur 5779

Rabbi Alan Freedman

Social Justice

Today, on this most holy of days, our Sages paired a haftorah from the prophet Isaiah with the traditional Torah reading for this morning, that being chapter 16 of Leviticus. (That's not the one we read, but that's another sermon.) In the traditional reading, a full description is provided of the Yom Kippur expiation ritual performed by the High Priest on behalf of the Jewish people. Every aspect of the ritual is performed by the High Priest except for verse 31 which states that "it shall be a sabbath of complete rest (a Shabbat Shabbaton) for you and you shall practice self-denial; it is a law for all time." The role of the individual on Yom Kippur is to observe a day of rest and piety, particularly in the form of abstinence from food and other earthly desires.

The selection of the Haftorah, however, is meant to be a stark contrast to the message of the Torah reading. The prophet Isaiah, in his usual insistent Isaiah way, makes the point that piety is useless before God without accompanying acts of compassion towards those less fortunate in society. Speaking on behalf of God, Isaiah challenges the notion that fasting alone will win God's favor. Rather, he famously asks:

Is this not the fast that I desire—
To break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke;
To let the oppressed go free and release all the enslaved?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the homeless poor into your home
And never to neglect your own flesh and blood?

If we do these things, Isaiah says, then God will lift-up our journey on earth to the highest of places.

For centuries, these words have called to the Jewish people on Yom Kippur to pursue a fair and just society. On this day, when we seek a mixture of compassion and justice from God for ourselves, Isaiah's clear message is that the key to our obtaining justice and mercy from God lies in pursuing justice and mercy for others, particularly the less fortunate among us. Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof, we read in Torah, "justice, justice you shall pursue."

In fulfillment of these words of Torah and of Isaiah, I believe that it is critical for any religious community, especially a Reform Jewish congregation, to have a robust social justice agenda. It is who we are. It is the Reform movement that has the most acutely heard the words of the prophets, especially the prophet Micah's admonition to do justice, to love compassion and to walk modestly with your God."

After all, that is the ultimate trade-off of Reform Judaism—less emphasis on ritual observance but more emphasis on living Judaism in the world. It is why the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement was founded in 1961 and why its work as the legislative and political arm of the Reform Movement is so vital. It is also why Texas is one of a handful of states which has a member of the RAC team present to help organize at the state level. Rabbi David Segal lives in Houston but is helping clergy and lay leadership throughout the state to focus on statewide issues.

Social justice work simply must be on the agenda of this congregation if we are to fulfill our stated value of promoting social justice not only through social action but also by advocating for the marginalized in our society.

To this end, our temple has joined with Congregation Beth Israel in hiring a part-time social justice coordinator who will serve both of our congregations. Our objective is to organize

within our respective congregations to hear the voices of our congregants on the social issues of the day and to provide education and forums for an exchange of ideas within our communities. There will also be opportunities to participate in various actions taking a public stand on issues of social concern when that is deemed appropriate, but the primary focus of our efforts will be to create a source of light within our congregation about the most challenging issues of our day. Both congregations will also continue to be active members of Austin Interfaith and to continue to educate and advocate around the Austin Interfaith agenda. We believe that it is a religious obligation to participate in public affairs; for policy decisions made at the federal, but more importantly the state and local levels, directly impact not only our own lives but also the lives of those for whom we, as Jews, seek justice.

Now, normally this is where the rabbi's sermon would end. Maybe with another ringing call for justice, maybe something about mighty waters or a rolling stream; but that would be about it. Then there would be the predictable result. The liberal rabbi has once again called for social justice, whatever that means; and the call will be answered by the same good-hearted liberals seeking to reform society. And if that is what happens, the experiment I have just outlined will have been a dismal failure. In this community, if social justice is viewed as an activity for liberals only, then we have failed to hear Isaiah's words and God's call for justice.

I spent a good deal of my time on sabbatical reading about political theory from various points of view. In truth, I spent most of my time reading about how people who consider themselves to be politically conservative view the world so that I might be better able to see the world from a different perspective than my own. What I found was that, for the most part, the Jewish understanding of the aims of social justice are shared by liberals and conservatives

alike. Liberals and conservatives may not agree on strategies for achieving those ends, but that reality provides the potential for intellectual and spiritual growth on both sides of the political spectrum. That is only true, however, if our focus is on gaining greater understanding and moving toward solutions rather than to score political points.

I want to be clear about what is entailed in a Jewish social justice agenda. It seems that in some quarters the term “social justice” has come into disrepute because “social justice” has become associated with progressive calls for solutions which increase governmental power, and which involve plans for redistribution of wealth. This is not what Judaism means by social justice. Judaism’s call for concern for the welfare of the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the stranger reminds us that we have a personal responsibility to provide a basic level of justice for those who are disadvantaged in society. Whether any one issue requires the exercise of governmental power, private initiative or a public/private partnership is a strategic one, but it is important to recognize that we are capable of agreement on objectives, even when strategy is a matter of debate. For example, who here thinks our current immigration policy is fair to those wishing to immigrate to this country while adequately protecting our borders? That’s what I thought. Liberal or conservative; we share the same sense that our immigration system is broken and, while our proposed solutions may differ, we are united in pursuing a just system for all. Our objective in our social justice program will be to recognize issues of concern to our community, educate around them and, whenever possible, develop a course of action to move to solution.

It is also important to understand that the emphasis in Jewish social justice is on leveling the playing field, in creating equal opportunity rather than equal outcomes. This may take the

form of advocating for a more equal and effective way to fund Texas's public schools or it might mean advocating for a fairer distribution of government contracts among women and minority owned businesses. But in each instance, we need to carefully and honestly assess whether the steps being contemplated are really likely to bring about equal competition or provide a perpetual advantage to one group or another.

Nor is redistribution of wealth a primary objective of Jewish social justice. Judaism teaches that everyone has the right to secure shelter, enough food to eat and a sense of personal dignity. You might want to throw in decent medical care as well. But in a capitalist society, there will always be winners and losers. In fact, we count on that, it is our incentive to work hard and do well. Jewish social justice seeks to provide a social safety net that maintains incentives while assuring a decent life. And if a relative handful of folks gig the system, then that is the price we pay for knowing that a single mom working as a waitress, on her feet for 40 hours a week, can put a wholesome meal on the table, have someplace to take her kids when they or she gets sick, will have a job if she gets the flu and can't work for a few days and that her kids have a decent place to learn. Is there a place for personal responsibility in that formula, you bet there is, but the notion that somehow there are a whole bunch of people in this country turning down good jobs to stay on some sort of public dole is just so much mythology. The overwhelming number of people who receive food stamps have jobs and receive aid for a relatively short period of time.

Which brings me to my next two related points. True social justice is based on the search for truth. Political mythologies are there simply to generate fear or ignorance in service of one group or another. Climate change is not a hoax, there is no flood of criminal aliens

crossing our border nor do undocumented aliens commit crimes at a higher rate than American citizens, in fact the opposite is the case. There also is no discernable amount of voter fraud going on in the United States. To give credence to these myths not only sews the seeds of division and tribalism within our country but it also hinders the very real conversations we need to be having in order to achieve a just society. We need to find policies that balance climate change with economic growth. Every country needs secure borders and it is totally appropriate that an elaborate system be in place to ensure that those who are not eligible to work in this country do not take jobs from American citizens but our current immigration system is beyond broken and unfair; it is a Shanda, a shameful situation for all concerned. Most of all, we need to protect the rights of all our citizens to vote while taking appropriate steps to safeguard the integrity of our electoral system. We can't have these real conversations without a broadly shared sense of reality. In a related point, there is such a thing as expertise. My opinion on climate change is not as good as that of a climatologist, especially one whose opinion is backed-up by methodologically appropriate and peer-reviewed studies. Finding one outlier on the internet does not disprove all of science or of careful sociological study.

Principled conservatives and liberals seek ways to unite American society, not take advantage of its divisions. There is such a thing as an American culture but the beauty of American culture is that it is always evolving, always trying to take the best of who we are and discard our baser instincts. Cinco de Mayo is as American as St. Patrick's Day; Martin Luther King Day as vital to who we are as Presidents Day. Each honors who we are as a nation; a grand, albeit as yet imperfect, experiment in self-rule and in a society where there is always room for one more willing to help build a better future. As someone who is left of center, I may

differ with conservatives about issues of governmental power or the extent to regulate free markets. These are real differences but our ends are the same; the achievement of a just and fair society which provides opportunity for all. Liberals and conservatives may disagree about policy choices but all of us rely on what Jonah Goldberg has called the Miracle.

Jonah Goldberg is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a senior editor at the National Review, the official journal of American conservatism. While I share few of Goldberg's policy positions, I do share his reverence for our democracy and for personal liberty. In his recent book, Suicide of the West, he reminds us that the concepts on which America is based, that all men (now people) are created equal, that each of us are endowed with certain inalienable rights by our Creator, and that power flows from the people to the government by the consent of the governed; these ideas really have been in existence for an extremely small fraction of the time of human history. What's more, if not carefully tended to, they can easily be extinguished in our time. It is reputed that when Benjamin Franklin emerged from the Constitutional Convention, a woman approached him and asked, "Mr. Franklin, what form of government have we?" Franklin reportedly replied, "A republic, madam, if you can keep it."

The fact is that being part of a constitutional democracy takes work. It means understanding the issues, it means caring about the American future and doing something about it, it means speaking truth to power on social media, by email, in the halls of Congress, the State Capitol and City Hall, and even in the streets when the situation warrants. It means understanding that abstaining from our civic responsibilities is a choice; a choice to leave our nation in the hands of others who may not share our values of a free and open democratic society. And, at the very least, being a citizen means having the obligation to vote. If we fail to

do the most basic of all political actions, to vote, our apathy invites totalitarianism because the key to maintaining a totalitarian society is not having the people participate in their own governance. And we need not be reminded that Jews do not fare well in authoritarian states because those types of governments inevitably need some group to blame whenever something goes wrong.

But I have strayed from my original subject, that of social justice and our temple's renewed efforts in that aspect of temple life. As you have might been able to tell, my greatest concern is that the pursuit of justice involves everyone willing to lend a hand and that both liberal and conservative, as well as moderate (if there are any left), congregants find our temple to be a place where their ideas are respected and where they can feel safe expressing their views. I truly believe that we have much more in common than the loud voices of the moment would have us believe.

I recently saw one of those yard signs that are supposed to be so provocative. It read:

In this house, Black lives matter; women's rights are human rights; no human is illegal; science is real; love is love; kindness is everything. It struck me that what was provocative about the sign was the underlying politics that one imputes to it rather than the literal meaning of the statements themselves. So allow me to reframe those statements to reflect our vision of social justice:

In this house, our house:

Black lives matter because African-Americans are just that, fellow Americans with an equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of personal happiness as well as equal protection of the law. One can disagree about the merits of various forms of affirmative action but one

cannot disagree that the black and brown experience of America is substantially different than that of white America. The fact is that as much as Jews understand the plight of being a minority out of our own experience, for the most part we experience American society from the vantage point of being white. As ours becomes a more diverse society, it is important for us to understand why diversity matters; that diversity in all walks of life is not about quotas nor is it an end unto itself. Diversity is about having a political and social structure in which everyone's narrative is heard and respected.

Women's rights are human rights because in Genesis 1, God created women and men as equals and there is something profoundly unjust about having the limits of one's destiny determined at birth because of one's gender;

No human is illegal; human actions may be illegal but no human can ever be treated as anything less than human;

Science is indeed real and real science needs to inform our policy decisions;

Love is love because love is a gift from God which is beyond social convention. We can argue theology or the concept of religious freedom, but respect for the rights of those who have a sexual orientation other than our own is a simple matter of human dignity.

And kindness IS everything.

If you can sign on to these statements, then there is a place for you in our efforts to bring about social justice. Clearly, there are differing policy issues surrounding each of these statements but that is where the conversation begins, not ends. Whoever is ready to engage, as Rabbi Cohen reminded us at Rosh Hashanah, in a dispute for the sake of heaven, then come ahead. Let us also come together from a position of modesty about our own ideas. For as the

prophet Micah said, there is virtue in walking humbly with our God, for no one has a monopoly on justice and righteousness. Let us come together in the pursuit of justice as demanded by Torah and in fulfillment of the American vision of a nation with liberty and justice for all. Cain yehe ratzon.