

## Judaism, Justice and Holiness

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

About 20 years ago I started to ask my audiences an audacious question. “What is the purpose of Judaism?” I would ask. Not: “Name three Jewish holidays”. Not: “Name three Jewish rituals.” But “What is the purpose of Judaism?” Even audiences that were well versed in Judaism got thrown for a loop. The reason is: Too much of our educational training is focused on the what of Judaism and not on the why. I am far more interested in the “why” of things.

I became so attached to the impact the question had that I used it as the heading for chapter 1 of my book, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*. The book is an extended answer to the question. Today, I want to give you the outline of how I answer that question.

I argue that there are two primary purposes to Judaism, and they are exquisitely juxtaposed, one to the other. One purpose is “justice” and the other purpose is “holiness”. To understand the relationship between the two concepts we need to look at their origin in the Bible.

The idea of justice gets introduced to Judaism in one of the first encounters between Abraham and God in Genesis ch. 18. Even in the sparse narrative of the Bible, the scene reminds me of the old TV series Mission Impossible with Peter Graves playing Mr. Phelps. If you remember it, Mr. Phelps heads up a team of agents who, week after week, saves the world from some evil design. But it is in the opening three minutes of each show that Phelps gets his marching orders from his boss, a disembodied voice, usually in a phone booth (if you can recall what those were!). Mr. Phelps would hit the “play button” and the voice would say: “Good morning Mr. Phelps. Your mission, should you decide to accept, is: ..... We would then hear what danger is about to befall America or the world. Mr. Phelps would then choose the agents he needed for his team from his portfolio. And then there is a cut to a commercial.

In Genesis, God plays the disembodied voice. Of course. Abraham plays Mr. Phelps. And the line: “your mission, should you decide to accept” is classic Jewish theology. We call it *brit* or covenant. In Judaism, the covenant is the mutually agreed upon understanding between God and the children of Israel. Because Abraham is the first Jew, the mission he accepts shapes Judaism for the rest of history. The mission that God gives Abraham in Genesis 18 is only three words:

*la'asot tzedakah umishpat*, “to do righteousness and justice”. My, more expansive translation of those three words is: “to extend the boundaries of justice and righteousness in the world”. This is Judaism’s primary purpose.

You may be wondering: Not bad. Isn’t that enough? Well no, it isn’t. Abraham is also the father of Christianity and Islam. All three Abrahamic traditions share the commitment to justice. It is a universal principle. In Judaism, that universal principal has to be paired with a particular principle, which is holiness. Lev. 19:2 proclaims: *kedoshim tehihu*, “you shall be holy”, “you shall be unique”. The root of word *kdsh* means separate and apart. Chapter 23 of the Book of Numbers states about the children of Israel, *Am levado yishkon*, you are a nation that will dwell alone! I like to translate *kedusha*, not as holiness, but as sacred apartness. There is a certain wisdom in our tradition that tells us that to bring a unique message into the world, you need to take the road less travelled. You cannot follow the crowd. The world may go one way, the Jews go another.

Thus, we have two core principles that answer the question: “What is the purpose of Judaism?” They exist in sublime paradox with one another because “justice” requires full engagement with the world while “holiness” requires Jews to stand sacred and apart from the world. And yet, each principle needs to be in balance with the other.

### The Roots of Social Justice in Judaism

I like to explain the centrality of social justice to Judaism by looking at the theme from the perspective of Torah, history and the responsibility of privilege.

The number of verses in the Torah that focus on social justice number in the hundreds. Let’s look at three.

1. *v'ger lo tilchatz*- (Ex 23)
2. *vahavta lereacha kamoca* (Lev 19)-Golden Rule
3. *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* (Deut 16)

History: The case could easily be made that the theme of Jewish history is *m'avdut l'cherut*, “from slavery to freedom.” It is the theme of our Exodus story from Egypt, forming the basis of our annual commemoration of Pesach. We see the same theme when we think about the State of Israel arising out of the ashes of the Holocaust. Similarly, I could cite the decades-long struggle to free some 3 million Soviet Jews who were neither free to practice their religion in Russia nor free to emigrate from that country. And the same could be said about the rescue of

Ethiopian Jews, when Israeli military jets brought one of the ten lost tribes back to the land of their prayers, the land of Israel.

Again and again in Jewish history, we see the master story as one that took the Jewish people from slavery to freedom. And the message implicit in each of those stories is that righteousness and justice can and will prevail.

The responsibility of privilege: A little less obvious is the third way that the mandate to advance “justice” weaves through the Jewish heritage. This is particularly relevant over the last 75 years as Jews have climbed the ladder of socio-economic success. Nonetheless, because of our history, we Jews think of ourselves as outsiders and it is with that mindset that Jews have often allied with the oppressed. As early as 1950, the *Commentary Magazine* essayist, Milton Himmelfarb, quipped that “Jews earn like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans.” Coming as it did from a neo-Conservative, it was not a compliment. Himmelfarb was arguing that Jews vote against their economic interests, thereby defying the conventional wisdom of most political scientists. Indeed, Jews can and should take some pride in the fact that Jews give of their time, wealth and intellectual capital to social justice causes far out of proportion to our numbers in American society.

We do know that the Biblical prophets repeated many times the importance of allying with the *ger, yatom and almana*, “the stranger, widow and orphan”. This principle got passed down through the values matrix of multiple Jewish generations so that those who have had some good fortune feel obligated to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable in their midst.

In the current discussion about racial justice, there is a newfound focus on the meaning of “privilege”. One popular definition suggests that it is: “an invisible package of unearned assets that one can count on cashing in each day, but about which we remain somewhat oblivious” (P. Macintosh). American society grants this privilege to people who present as “white”; Blacks and POC in America live a very different reality. I was recently at a Black Lives Matter rally where I saw the following sign: “Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem for you.”

Jews continually struggle with the tension between what we do for ourselves and what we do for others. We can’t do much better than to attempt to live out the famous framing of Hillel, the first century rabbinic scholar who said: “*im ayn ani li, me li? Ukesheani l’atzmi, mah ani?*” The quote is a classic formulation of how

we need to balance self-interest with altruistic pursuits. Almost 2000 years later that wisdom gets re-framed by an African-American minister named Martin Luther King Jr. when he said: “life’s most persistent question is: what are you doing for others?”

### The Roots of Holiness in the Jewish Tradition

You probably know that the 613 commandments are divided between *mitzvot beyn adam l'chavero* and *mitzvot beyn adam l'makom*. The former are essentially ethical commandments whereas the second category are ritual laws whose observance has the effect of separating Jews from the other nations of the world.

Historically, some believed that Judaism would be better off without such ritual practices. “Why separate ourselves from others?” they would ask. Certainly, that was the position of early Reform Judaism which believed that too much ritual would get in the way of the desire by most Jews to fully partake in secular society. Over the last few decades, the Reform movement has moderated its critique of Jewish ritual and it is not uncommon to see Reform Temples incorporate Jewish practices (e.g. *kipot* and *talitot*) that would have been unheard of in many Reform Temples just one generation back.

The rabbinic tradition clearly believed that every ritual commandment in the Torah was the word of God. They did not need more than that to make it required behavior for Jews. But, in our own day, even if you are skeptical of the claim that these rituals are the “word of God”, one can appreciate them on the behavioral level. Common practices bind people together. That is why Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, liked to refer to ritual as “folkways”. It is the particular way that Jews behave which keep us connected to our past and to other Jews in the world today.

But rituals do more than just connect us to history and to other Jews. They are also vehicles through which we convey values. Let’s look at three specific examples:

- *shabbat*- abstention from technology and commerce to appreciate that which is non-material (e.g. family, nature, conversation with friends, time to study and reflect, etc.)
- *kashrut*- eating as an ethical activity. Awareness of where our food comes from and how it gets to our table. Locally grown food. Sustainability. Labor practices associated with food. Over-consumption.
- prayer
  - (*amida*) *umekayem emunato lsheynei afar*- homelessness

- (*shacharit*) *umechadesh btuvo bchol yom maasey breishet*- stewards of God's creation
- (*ashrei*) *poteach et yadecha umasbiah lchol chay ratzon*- food insecurity in the world (and in our backyard)

-The words we say in prayer are meant to shape our attitudes and behaviors.

For over 20 years I ran a national program for Jewish teens called *Panim el Panim*. We brought groups of teens to Washington DC from all over North America and used Jewish values to inspire a higher commitment to social activism. Each year, at our annual gala, we gave an award to the Young Jewish Activist of the Year. One year the winner said the following: "PANIM didn't teach me to be good. It gave me a vocabulary with which to connect my idealism with a people, my people, and a history, my history, that gave my actions and behavior some transcendent value."

This Jewish teenager put her finger on the essential message of the word *kedusha*, sacred apartness. She understood that all religions have a social justice message that urges adherents to ally with the poor and the vulnerable. But she came to understand that values were more likely to be honored and practiced if the ethnic or religious group from which it emanated had a certain amount of social cohesion.

When I drive from my synagogue to my home on shabbat after services, I drive through an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. What I observe, week after week, are families walking together having been invited to each other's homes for shabbat lunch. The practice takes place because the majority of the members bought homes within walking distance of the shul so that they did not have to drive on shabbat. I actually know a fair number of members of that Orthodox shul. I can tell you that over half, drive cars on shabbat. But they love the practice of hosting and being invited to shabbat lunch. The social cohesion leads to the higher level of observance of a Jewish custom. This is a classic example of *kedusha* as sacred apartness.

## CONCLUSION

The Jewish tradition, in quite a brilliant way, includes both justice and holiness, in our Jewish identity knapsack. The ritual piece reminds us that it is not at all inappropriate for the Jewish people to remain sacred and apart from the rest of the world if that path allows us to bring forward a unique worldview to the rest of humanity. And that worldview is in the service of the original covenant with

Abraham, *laasot tzedakah umishpat*, to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world.

I once heard a talk by Elie Wiesel in which he talked about the right lessons and the wrong lessons that we must take from the Shoah. The right lesson is to recall that the Jewish people have enemies in the world and, if we are not alert, vigilant and pro-active, we will not survive. The wrong lesson it to think that this—defensive and reactionary perspective--is the main driver of Jewish life. It is not.

The future of the Jewish community will be determined by whether our generation and our children will live up to our tradition's legacy and mandate to be champions of justice and exemplars of holiness in the world.

Friends: Judaism says that with your life you can make a difference. You are the daughters and sons of prophets named Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos. You are destined to do this work. The only question is: when are you going to get started?

Hillel answered that question 2000 years ago. *Im lo achshav, aymati?* If not now, when? The time is NOW!

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