



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## PERSONAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Judaism has a message that the world very much needs to hear: a vital insistence on the intersection between personal ethics and social justice. Unfortunately, we live in a world of shattered fragments. We live in a world in which it is impossible to hold on to both virtue and lawfulness, and this tension threatens to destroy our society from within. Consider the following telling examples:

I remember being at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library outside of Boston and seeing a film clipping whose sole purpose was to glorify the deceased President. The clipping occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it began with President Kennedy calling the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey and also to the Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson. These two men were very important, very powerful, and their President called them in the midst of a national emergency. They get into the chauffeur-driven limo and are rushed to the White House. There, at the door, are guards to make sure that their security is protected. They emerge from the car. First, of course, comes the Vice-President who has been summoned by the Nation's leader at this time of crisis. He acts like any important man does at such a moment, which is to say that he gets out of the car and strides purposefully into the White House. The Vice-President is followed by the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey, who does the same thing. But as he gets out of the door, he catches himself, turns to the guard who opened the door, and says "thank you." Only then did he stride into the White House.

That little gesture is so telling precisely because it wasn't the point the film wanted to make, because Humphrey never made it into the White House as President, and because that example of personal ethics being the source of a passion for social justice is so rare.

Or consider President Clinton's failed appointment of Zoë Baird, back in the first few days of his new Administration. Baird was removed from consideration after it was revealed that she had hired an undocumented worker as her child's nanny. How is it possible that Zoë Baird, who earned half a million dollars a year couldn't find the money to pay for legal childcare? And the defense that was offered by the Clinton Administration was that other than that her record was blameless. Other than her crime, which she knowingly committed and hired a lawyer to defend, other than the crime she was strictly within the law. Let's leave aside that men in government are never asked how they got their childcare. One still has to inquire: how could a woman who cares passionately for the right thing, and is infused with a passion for social justice, not care

about oppressing someone who is here without papers by paying them too little to be able to have some retirement money later on? Or that President Clinton could so deceive his wife and the nation? Or that Judge Starr could so taint his office and publish pornography? How is that possible? What has happened is that in our secularized culture is we have decoupled justice and goodness, so that they now function as mutually exclusive categories. An authority on the big picture — the equality of human beings, the liberation of the world, freedom from hunger and want, and poverty — doesn't have time to say "thank you". On the other hand, too many of those concerned with individual acts of kindness and beauty think that politics is pointless, that all politicians are necessarily corrupt, and mendacity is the way of the world. To that bifurcation, Judaism says, "no, it cannot be". So long as we sever goodness and righteousness, both of them remain powerless to transform the world. Then we are truly trapped.

I asked the children in a bar mitzvah class to share with me who are their heroes. Sadly, I have to report that they don't have any heroes. From the puzzled looks on their faces, I'd have to assume that the very idea of heroes strikes them as hopelessly old-fashioned (even rabbinic). How is it possible to be a teenager and not have a hero? Granted the heroes that I had as a teen were not as heroic in reality as I had imagined. But what was important was not the heroes themselves, it was my image of them. How can a person grow up without an ideal? How can someone grow up thinking that, deep down, everyone is only looking out for number one? That nobody cares about decency any more? How is that possible? What kind of children are we raising in this amputated world?

That cynical assessment has nearly paralyzed Judaism as well. We are so use to accepting the paltry standards of our secularized culture that we take those standards as norms and then diminish and constrain our Judaism to fit inside that prison. We have abandoned what was truly breathtaking about our sacred heritage. Severing justice from ethics silences Judaism distinctive voice and robs its real message of a hearing. Think of the image (suggested by Rabbi Milton Steinberg, of blessed memory) of the ends of a string, each pulled in opposite directions. In our case, we have the tension of social justice on one hand, and personal ethics pulling in the other direction. Rabbi Steinberg said that the beauty of Judaism is to recognize that when opposing forces pull in two different directions, the only way to harmonize them is to introduce a third force, lifting up at the middle of the string. The upward lift removes the opposition — suddenly the two ends are united again, now pulling in the same direction. That lift up is God. Judaism insists that righteousness and social justice come from the same source because the living God commands both, and God cares how we treat each other both at the universal level and one-on-one. Both virtues gain coherence from the same source. The sovereignty of God is the basis for the dignity of all human beings. Every single one of us is a child of God. Every single one of us represents some unique facet of the divine that nothing and no one else can replicate. We need to train ourselves to see each person as a brand new source of knowledge of God, nothing less.

There are several implications to the sovereignty of God that remain pertinent today. The first the *religious* affirmation that "all people are created equal. That they are

endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights". Thomas Jefferson knew that people are not equal if you only use the here-and-now as your standard of measurement. Some people are better looking, some are brighter, and some are smarter, stronger, and more eloquent. Relative only to ourselves we are clearly not equal. Judged on the scale of secular materialism, human equality is a lie. What makes us of equal worth is our relationship to the Holy One Who made us, Who is so transcendentally beyond any of us. Relative to that God our differences become insignificant. We are equalized in God's parenthood. And so the Constitution and the Declaration are based on the recognition that it is God as creator that gives us our equal worth.

We need to return to that recognition. All of us are equal because God is equally concerned for all. If God is the creator of all, then we need to recognize that the world that we inhabit is not ours. It is not ours to do with exclusively as we please. We are not the only living creatures that matter, but that in fact the Creator clearly intended for this to be a rich and variegated world with all kinds of living things teaming over it. All of those creatures are part of the symphony of praise that God receives with each new dawn. We need to recall that when we endanger other living things, when we treat the world with scorn, we are slapping God in the face, as it were. We are scorning God's gift of creation, and a beautiful planet. That is not all: the sovereignty of God is the linchpin for that preciousness. Otherwise the world and other people are tools to be legitimately used for our own pleasure and short term gain.

Finally, the sovereignty of God implies that all people have an intrinsic dignity. Whenever you belittle the dignity of any other human being you are doing nothing less than belittling God.

The Torah makes those implications clear in several points. "Let us make people in our own image" says God. What does it mean to be made in God's image? Surely not that God shares my appearance, or yours. It means that our ability to distinguish good from evil, our ability to be compassionate and kind and loving, our ability to hurt when other people hurt, and our ability to cry at other people's pain and rejoice at other people's triumphs is a way that we can most Godlike.

The Torah tells us that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself". What a remarkable teaching that is! The Torah is not asking that we acquiesce in becoming someone else's doormat, not that we must give precedence to another person at the expense of our own human dignity. This passage from Leviticus expresses the remarkable idea that if all of us are God's children, and all of us are made in God's image, then we need to see that in divine image each other. Ultimately, if you cannot love your neighbor you will not love yourself.

The single most repeated rule in the entire Torah is that "you shall have one law for yourself and for the stranger who is in your midst". Rabbi Akiva comments in the ancient Midrash, *Sifra*, that this is the guiding principle of the Torah, the *klal gadol*. In our bifurcated world, we have split into two camps. We have one group of Jews who only worry about the big picture and let the details slip through their fingers. And then we

have another camp of Jews who worry exclusively about the little deeds of kindness and have ignored the big picture.

What we need is Jews who will stand up for both sides of the equation, for a Judaism of social justice *and* personal decency. What we need, in our day, is a return to a full-bodied Judaism. Surely in that richer, holistic Judaism, there is a symbol that can unite these dual, competing aspirations into one synergistic fusion?

According to the great scholar Gershon Scholem, there are three ideal models in the Jewish tradition, the *talmid*, the *tzaddik*, and the *hasid*.

The *talmid hakham*, the scholar, the sage. What the image of the sage teaches is that we can use our minds in the service of God. A Judaism that prohibits asking certain questions or thoughts is a perversion of what Judaism is to be. God demands of us the service of the mind no less than that of the heart. In fact, there is such openness to the life of the mind that it even extends beyond the borders of our own people and the borders of our own tradition. Midrash Rabbah affirms that if someone insists that there is wisdom among the nations of the world, we are to believe it. And Rabbi Moses ben Maimon instructs us to accept truth from any source.

What a remarkable heritage: a Judaism unafraid to face the truth no matter who articulates that truth, no matter what the context. A faithful Jew need not fear truth. To the contrary we have elevated truth to a sign of God: *hotmo shel ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the sign of God is truth. And yet, says the Midrash, if a person tells you that there is Torah among the nations don't believe that, because wisdom and Torah are not one in the same thing. There is a hallowed place for knowledge in the service of goodness. But a truncated wisdom, removed from a context of personal decency nurtures the perversions that are so rankle contemporary life: people who can be passionate about justice and not care about goodness, and of a next door neighbor who loves goodness yet doesn't bother voting.

The second Jewish role model is the *tzaddik*, a righteous person. The Talmud offers various degrees of righteousness. There is the run of the mill *tzaddik*, which can be any of us, and then there is the *tzaddik gamur*, the completely righteous person.

The *tzaddik* is the role model for all of us, a person who takes God's will as his or her own personal agenda. A *tzaddik* makes of the mitzvot her or his own pathway through life, seeking to become a walking *Sefer Torah* so that the black words on the white page lives through their actions and their deeds. Doesn't the Torah itself say that people should see the way we behave and, based on the way we act, they should say "what a wise people, what a loving God?" How many people can look at the way we conduct our daily lives and make that the inference? And yet that *tzaddik* is the very core of who we are to be. And even with the example of the *tzaddik*, our tradition refuses to be overly particularistic. According to one Midrash, the Prophet Elijah said "I call heaven and earth to witness that whether one be Jew or Gentile, man or woman, manservant or maidservant, the Holy Spirit will suffuse each in proportion to the deeds that he or she performs." Goodness is what defines a *tzaddik*. One who claims to be pious without being good is a fraud.

The third role model is a hassid, a religious enthusiast. A hassid is someone for whom God is the reason to wake up in the morning and is the reason to do one more sacred act, one more good deed. One who seeks to make every moment holy time, and who sees each new action as a chance to unite with God, such a person is able to cultivate the passion and energy needed to repair the world.

While there are unique qualities for the tzaddik, the hakham, and the hasid, the truth is they are not separate categories. Instead, they overlap in important ways. So that Rabbi Hanina ben Idi could ask: "why are the words of Torah likened to water? To teach you that just as water flows from a higher level to a lower level, so too the words of Torah abide only with one who is meek in spirit." In short you cannot be a sage unless you are also a tzaddik (although you can be a tzaddik and still be an ignoramus. Judaism values learning highly, yet values goodness even above learning).

These three types of holiness merge and enrich each other, leading us to Judaism's pre-eminent symbol for that fusion of the personal and the global, that blend of personal ethics, individual kindness, and social justice: the Messiah. It isn't necessary to believe literally that an anointed person is coming to see that there is value to a metaphor that is inextricably linked to the personal. Why does the Talmud speak of a Messiah instead of a messianic age? Specifically to prevent the bifurcation of what is politically right from what is personally compassionate. The Messiah is social justice personified. There is no justice indifferent to particular people.

The Talmud tells us that the Messiah will be found binding the wounds of the leper by the gates of the city. This is the same Messiah who is going to end depression and injustice, the same Messiah that will gather us to our homeland in peace. This Messiah of world peace and healing spends his or her time (we'll see soon enough) binding the wounds of sick individuals. The Messiah embodies the goal for all Jewish piety: the fusion of the general and the particular, of kindness with justice. Maimonides was absolutely right when he said it is a waste of time to speculate on when the Messiah coming or who the Messiah will be. The Messiah is to be understood as a hope, as an aspiration, as a dream. In that role, it is clear that the image of the Messiah must be irreducibly personal. Advancing social justice and caring about the individual needs of one human being at a time is the epitome of the personal dimension, a messianic act that summons us now.

Our role in that messianic age is curiously similar to what our role is our own time. The Talmud quotes from the Book of Psalms to inquire, "When will the Messiah come? Today, if you will only listen." In other words, we have to open our hearts now, acting as though the messianic age is already here. When our hearts are attuned to the point that we love all human beings, that we see in every individual person someone sacred, precious, irreducible and beautiful that is when the Messiah will come.

"Rabbi Zeiri said in the name of Rabbi Hanina that the Messiah will not come until the arrogant cease to be in Israel." The paradox is that when there are no longer any arrogant people, when the Messiah will be able to come, we won't need the Messiah, because the messianic age will already be here! If we live in such a way that we take

the wounds of other people to be our own to heal, if we live in such a way that one hungry person is an affront to our conscience, if we can't sleep so long as there is one homeless person and can't sleep because we were rude or cruel to someone — that day the Messiah will be too late because we will have brought the messianic age ourselves.

That is what the Talmud is telling us. When the King Messiah appears he will come and will make a proclamation to the people Israel and say “humble one, the time of your redemption is near”. In other words, the reality that will characterize the age of the Messiah is precisely the morality that must precede the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah waits for us to act messianic and won't come until we do.

What then can we do? I believe that the pertinent mitzvah is *lo tukhal le-hitalem*, you must not remain indifferent. A Jew who is indifferent is blaspheming against the memory of our people. A Jew who is indifferent to human suffering is denying God. Recognizing that God is sovereign of all our deeds, we must realize that human dignity in itself is a supreme religious value. Rabbi Joshua Ben Levy said, “when a human being walks on the road, a troop of angels walks in front of that person shouting ‘make way for the image of the holy blessing one’.” Can you image what a world it would be if we could train ourselves to hear those angels? If we could see the heavenly host standing in front of everyone here, pointing to each one of us and saying “this is the image of God?” Can you image how we would treat each other then? “Great is human dignity,” the Talmud says, “since for its sake we may violate a prohibition of the Torah”. Can you image the kind of world it would be if all of us took the negative commandments of the Torah seriously, and then took human dignity more seriously than that? If we were able to say that the dignity of the most repulsive human being is more important than a negative commandment in the Torah, and we could make our assertion mean something precisely *because* we revere the negative Commandments of the Torah.

“This is what the Holy One said to Israel: My children, what do I seek from you? I seek no more than that you love one another and that you honor one another”. Can you image a world in which we all loved each other? In which we all honored each other? Such a world would surely hasten the coming of the Messiah, the symbol of social justice with human decency. In such a world the children in my Bar Mitzvah class (and every child) would have no shortage of heroes. They would know that they, themselves, are called to be heroes and that they themselves must testify by their own actions that the hosts of angels are not liars. We would know that, just as the angels shout out that we reflect God's image, our deeds announce the same beautiful truth. In such a world, the coming of the Messiah would be redundant, and that is precisely the purpose of Judaism.

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