

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Social Justice



Context

For much of the last 200 years, Reform Judaism has strongly identified with 'Prophetic Judaism' – the ethical voice of the biblical Prophets. Their exhortations to place moral behaviour and social obligation over ritual resonated strongly with the early Reformers as they struggled with the place of Judaism in the modern world. While ritual has grown in prominence in Reform Judaism over recent years, the importance of social justice has not declined.

*In this essay, **Rabbi Jeffrey Newman**, Rabbi Emeritus of Finchley Reform Synagogue, discusses the pace of social justice in our Jewish lives.*

Content

In July 1946, that is just one year after the end of the war and liberation of the camps, Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck gave his Presidential Address at the Fifth International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism in London. He called it 'The Task of Progressive Judaism in the Post-War World'ⁱ. Baeck says that the terrible ordeal which has "swept over the Jewish people and over humanity" has proved once again "that the Jewish people and humanity are inseparable from one another". The disaster came over mankind "because the moral enthusiasm and the moral passion were lacking".

And, he argues: "Judaism must not stand aside when the great problems which are reborn in every new epoch struggle in the minds of men to gain expression, battle in the societies of mankind to find their way. We must not, as Jews, deny ourselves to the problems of the time, nor hide ourselves, as Jews, in the face of them; they must not be something that goes outside our Judaism, in another sphere. We are Jews also for the sake of humanity; we have our questions to raise and have to give our answer. To rouse the conscience of humanity could here be our best title-deed".

Reform Judaism was born out of the enlightenment, that late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century explosion of science and rationalism which foresaw a new world of progress. However, we now see that this has turned out to be a simplistic, one-sided and utopian view, ignoring the negative side of colonialism, the dangers of hubristic over-reliance on science and the realisation that humanity's industrial revolution, dependent as it has been upon fossil fuels, may be leading to the sixth great extinction.

We now understand that our search for social justice and human rights, that is, in modern Jewish terminology, *tikkun olam*, the 'healing of the world', must be undertaken in humility - in a complex world only 'gentle action' can avoid unintended consequences. Otherwise, we can unwittingly cause great damage and distress, rather than the good we desire. Messianic idealism can be merely egoistic inflation, as was, perhaps, the case with Sabbatai Zvi.

However, as Baeck stresses, our concern for the world cannot be left aside. What enables us to take action - to work with the homeless, for example, to stand up for asylum seekers, the disabled in body or mind or those abused in domestic or sexual violence? How is it that some young Jews will join Tzedek, alleviating the extremes of poverty in the slums of India or Africa? Inequality between and within nations is both unjust and destructive. To speak out when others remain silent can demand great courage: in some situations, words are deeds. What inclines us to the calls of the heart over the more reasoned promptings of our brain?

No Jewish writer in modern times has engaged more deeply with such questions than Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose book *The Prophets*ⁱ makes the pain of these ancient teachers comprehensible and accessible to us so that their struggles become ours. The prophet, writes Heschel, is horrified by the everyday occurrences that we pass by, torn apart by the strength of his feelings and emotions. He rails, some might say hysterically, against corruption; he sees extortion and misery as catastrophes; he takes note of those ignored by others – women and children: “even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions”. Unfaithfulness to God is seen as bringing an end to the world”. What a contrast is this to our “incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures”.

Heschel summarises: “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words”.

Is Judaism therefore essentially social justice inspired by the prophets, as it once seemed? Or is that only one aspect of Jewish life and culture? Is over-emphasis on these values as much a distortion as ignoring them altogether? Certainly, as “partners of God in the work of creation” (in the formulation of *Siddur Kol Ha-Neshamah*, a Reform congregation in Jerusalem), our concerns need to be directed equally to life as a whole and not only the needs of human beings. Ritual, blessings, liturgical demands and particularly prayer and learning have their place in an integrated Jewish life. Judaism arises out of the affirmation that 'God is One' and this is above all else a demand for wholeness and inter-connectedness. It emphasises the sacredness of Being, of existence just as it asserts a holistic, systemic understanding.

Nevertheless, near the beginning of the Talmudic collection of Rabbinic sayings, *Pirkei Avot*, is the unexpected statement *Not study but action is the main thing* (Pirkei Avot 1:17)

What action is meant? In the context of Pirkei Avot, which is essentially concerned with ethics and behaviour, the teaching surely refers to the words of the prophets, who were constant in their focus upon right action, rather than ritual observance. Isaiah, in Chapter 1, provides a classic example when he contrasts Israel's preoccupation with prayer and sacrifice, Shabbat and the new moon with God's true concerns: *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow* (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Jeremiah goes still further. In a unique passage, rebuking King Jehoiakim, he equates right action with the knowledge of God. *Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He pleaded the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" Declares the Eternal* (Jeremiah 22:15-16).

Social justice is nothing other than the fulfilment of the Biblical statement that we are all created in the image of God, equal in God. The rest is commentary: go away, learn and practise!

Contemplation

In a world in which things sometimes feel more and more broken, it is easy to become disheartened, despite the encouragement of Pirkei Avot 2:21: “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it”. How do we retain a passion for social justice in our religious lives? What makes ‘doing good’, into ‘Tikkun Olam’?

ⁱ *The Task of Progressive Judaism in the Post-War World*; lecture delivered to the fifth international conference of the World Union of Progressive Judaism

ⁱⁱ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Prophets”, New York, 1962