

Jews and the Dilemmas of Social Justice



AS WITH SO MANY of the world's big ideas, social justice—the term denotes the fair distribution of wealth, power, opportunity, and status within society—is a concept with deep roots in Jewish tradition and, at times, disquieting consequences in Jewish life.

Take many of the most prominent contemporary social justice movements, and they are shot through with militant anti-Zionism, if not unconcealed antisemitism.

In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives published a platform (since deleted) calling Israel “an apartheid state” that was committing “genocide” against Palestinians. In 2017, marchers carrying Jewish Pride flags were expelled from the Chicago Dyke March. In 2018, leaders of the Women’s March were revealed as proud sympathizers of Louis Farrakhan’s. In 2019, the U.K.’s Labour Party ran under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, a man who, as James Kirchick notes in our inaugural issue of *SAPIR*, petulantly denies

being an antisemite even as he delights in making common cause with them. In 2020, basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar courageously denounced the shocking indifference of so many social justice warriors to antisemitic outbursts from prominent black athletes and artists.

Examples such as these have persuaded Jews of the political Right and center that “social justice,” whatever it may be in theory, is profoundly hostile to Jewish interests in practice. And progressive Jews are themselves frequently dismayed by the degree to which movements that tout their tolerance and inclusivity are anything but tolerant and inclusive when it comes to Jews. In the progressive world’s new intersectional hierarchies of race and oppression, American Jews who enjoy economic privilege and “conditional whiteness” while participating, through their support for Israel, in the oppression of Palestinians are now considered leading malefactors in the American system of “white supremacy.”

Did it really have to be this way?



Rabbi Shlomo Brody reminds us here that “social justice is a foundational biblical value”—at least insofar as social justice is conceived as concern for the poor and vulnerable, fair treatment of workers, national solidarity in the face of common needs and challenges, and a belief in the dignity of every human being, regardless of wealth or status.

These tenets of Jewish moral identity, coming down to us from the prophets, would be developed over 19 centuries of diasporic life. As early as the 13th century, as Moshe Halbertal notes, Jewish communities in medieval Spain were pioneering early versions of a welfare state, complete with public education, provisions for orphans, and alms for the poor distributed from social funds. Over time, this sense of concern for the communal good would be matched by an ever-expanding sense of Jewish obligation to the world at large, in what

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Rabbi David Wolpe calls “an ascending spiral of insularity and openness” in terms of the locus of Jewish social concern.

This is not accidental. Other nations, with sovereign powers and normal politics, could aggressively pursue their interests with only glancing regard for moral issues. The Jewish nation, with neither sovereign powers nor normal politics until the creation of the State of Israel, had much less latitude as far as its interests were concerned, but more scope to explore its values. For better and worse, political powerlessness went a long way to spark Jewish moral imagination as well as indignation—a self-reinforcing process.

Consider the Jewish names associated with major social justice movements in the United States. Samuel Gompers (né Gumpertz) was the founder and longest-serving leader of the American Federation of Labor. Julius Rosenwald was the single greatest sponsor of public schools for African Americans. Lillian Wald was a pioneer in community nursing. Joel Spingarn was, next to W.E.B. DuBois, arguably the most influential early leader of the NAACP. Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan all but defined the modern feminist movement. Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were, with James Chaney, martyrs of Mississippi’s Freedom Summer of 1964. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in California.

Look elsewhere in the world—Léon Blum in France, Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, Nadine Gordimer in South Africa—and similar patterns emerge. To be Jewish is to belong to a justice-minded community of perennial social outcasts. Jewish concepts of justice and social justice have been entwined not only because of our

religious traditions but also because of our historical experience—because our struggle for individual justice as Jewish persons has been predicated on a collective struggle for justice as a Jewish people. Social justice, for Jews, has historically been at least as much about self-preservation as it is about altruism.

Similarly, it should come as no surprise that Jews have been at the forefront of championing social justice for other marginalized or oppressed communities. *Justice for me but not for thee* is not a Jewish value. When Jews fight for the rights of others, as we did so conspicuously and courageously during the civil rights era, we are also fighting to strengthen a moral and political order that is good for us. As Jeremy Burton argues in these pages, “it is profoundly within the Jewish self-interest to defend the American liberal project.”



Yet if intellectual honesty requires that we recognize the deep connection between Jewishness and social justice, honesty also requires noting the ways in which that connection has been profoundly problematic. The paradoxical essence of the problem is this: Social justice, as it is often conceived and practiced, is both too worldly and not worldly enough.

Too worldly: Social justice may be a foundational biblical value, but it is neither the only nor the central value. *Tikkun olam* is an evolving aspect of Jewish tradition, not the sum total of it, just as social justice can be only one component of true justice, not a substitute for it. One becomes a good Jew not by seeking to repair the world but by putting the commandments of personal decency ahead of the dictates of political ideology. The direction of Jewish loyalties flows from the inside out, in concentric circles that diminish as they expand: God, family, neighbor, community, and only then to a wider world. To the extent that many versions of social justice attempt to reverse those priorities—putting the interests

of the faraway stranger ahead of the beloved kinsman—they betray Judaism and Jews alike.

Not worldly enough: If the Jewish experience of social justice has been characterized by its sense of engagement and high purpose, it has also been marked by an often fatal innocence. The Jews who signed up (in characteristically disproportionate numbers) for the proletarian revolutions of the early 20th century did not see the Doctor's Plot coming. But that's what they got, along with decades of systemic Soviet antisemitism, brought about by an ideology that left-wing Jews believed would make antisemitism impossible. Many Jews who participated proudly in the civil rights movement of the 1960s believed it would be the birth of a beautiful partnership between Jews and African Americans. But, as Joshua Muravchik pointedly writes here, the friendship hasn't always been reciprocated and has often been betrayed. More recently, Jews are beginning to see how social justice concepts associated with critical race theory and ethnic studies have become backdoor routes to ever-more-virulent strains of antisemitism. As Pamela Paresky observes, "Jews, who have never been seen as white by those for whom being white is a moral good, are now seen as white by those for whom whiteness is an unmitigated evil."

This combination of earnestness and naïveté leads to another paradox: As social justice work became something of a substitute religion for many Jews—often making them, at least in matters of observance, "less Jewish"—it has not reduced their exposure to antisemitism and, in certain ways, has increased it.

A version of this story has played out when it comes to Jewish debates over Israel and its relations with the Palestinians. There are normal arguments, pro and con, to be made about the wisdom of Israel's efforts since the 1993 Oslo Accords to accommodate a Palestinian state. But it's also hard to deny that many of the arguments in favor of such an accommodation were only superficially about Israel's strategic needs, rationally considered. They were also an attempt to implement a vision of social justice, with all the pitfalls that vision entailed.

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The too-worldly desire to invest a moralistic fervor into achieving a peace agreement calamitously divided the Israeli public, weakened Israel's bargaining position, and gave rise to a new anti-semitic caricature—the evil "Likudnik"—whose misgivings about the wisdom of the process were treated as mindless lust for Palestinian land and blood. And, as Ethan Felson, Matti Friedman, and Einat Wilf each point out, it turned Israel into a blank canvas upon which outsiders could sketch their own social justice fantasies, with only superficial regard for the actual country they were talking about.

At the same time, the not-worldly-enough approach failed to appreciate how untrustworthy Yasser Arafat would prove to be, how Palestinian ambitions simply did not conform to Israeli needs, how brutally world opinion would turn on Israel after it had taken "risks for peace," how easily Israel's territorial withdrawals would be read by groups such as Hamas as evidence of weakness rather than reasonableness, and how little popular support the Israeli peace camp would be left with after its approach had failed strategically, politically, and diplomatically.

Again, the point here is not that Israel was foolish to explore the possibilities of peace with the Palestinians. It's that the process came to be driven by a set of aspirations that were treated as ends in themselves, irrespective of the way things turned out on the ground. This was social justice as foreign policy: Israel would earn

the acclaim of a doubting world, and put all future enmity to rest, by making its enemy's interests its own. In doing so, it would also justify itself to itself, putting to rest the gnawing sense of guilt that came with the exercise of sovereign political power.

It failed. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg observes, moral concepts drawn from religion and social justice theories may be a useful way of *critiquing* politics. They tend to be a foolhardy way of practicing it. Thundering prophets rarely make for good statesmen.



Where does this leave us?

The first point is that those Jews who want to erase social justice from the Jewish script are ignoring rich veins of Jewish scriptural and philosophical tradition, along with centuries of Jewish struggle for acceptance and equal rights. The second point is that those Jews who want to reduce Jewishness to a social justice calling are committing both an injustice to Judaism as well as injury to actual Jews, both in Israel and abroad.

In theory, it shouldn't be hard to reconcile these positions. The least socially progressive Jew should have no trouble acknowledging that, from the time of Abraham or Moses, Jews have been a nation of social reformers, for whom politics is inconceivable without a broad and insistent moral dimension. When Menachem Begin ordered the air strike on Iraq's reactor at Osirak in 1981, he did so in part out of recognition that allowing Saddam Hussein to get a bomb would not only put Israel in mortal danger of being attacked with nuclear weapons, it would also put Israel in moral danger of having to use nuclear weapons.

By the same token, progressive Jews — at least those who haven't become hard-bitten anti-Zionists — are coming to the realization that many of their fellow travelers on the left are traveling the road toward antisemitism, if they haven't arrived there already. For these Jews, the answer to this is not to endlessly try to prove their pro-

gressive bona fides, which will always be found wanting. It is to find recourse in a quiet but justified pride — pride in Judaism; pride in what Israel is and strives to become; pride in an intellectual tradition that offers the ability to criticize even what we love; pride in a moral inheritance that provides a richer articulation of what it means to be a just and righteous person than anything current ideology can offer.

Pride alone is not a program. But pride in fundamental Jewish principles is an essential bulwark against the twin threats of anti-Jewish calumnies that denigrate Jewish identity, and pseudo-Jewish concepts that aim to dissolve Jewish identity.

The essays in this issue of *SAPIR* are intended to inspire leaders of the Jewish community — particularly those engaged in its religious, philanthropic, educational, activist, and communal arms — to think more deeply as well as more pragmatically about how they can address these issues in ways that can unite us more than divide us. But we also aim to publish essays that allow readers to reach their own conclusions. As Kylie Unell, a doctoral student at New York University and the freshest voice in this issue, rightly says, “it is for each person to discover what God intends for us, as long as we are alive to help shape the world for the better.” *

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