

Judaism and the Politics of *Tikkun Olam*



HERE IS no one “kosher” Jewish approach to social justice, just as there is no single authorized Jewish response to any of the challenges we humans encounter and create for ourselves. Jewish texts contain a multitude of opinions, enough to support the presuppositions and political persuasions that almost any seeker could bring to them. One can write a purely socialist economic plan for society using only traditional Torah sources. One could also write a capitalist model citing another set of Torah sources.

I suggest we do neither.

Instead, I propose that we embrace Judaism’s multiplicity of perspectives, its real-world wrestling with human complexity and imperfection. As Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: “To live up to the Torah’s ideals, maximally, one must develop every human capacity and insight — and its opposite” (*Ohr Yisrael*, Letter #30).

The Jewish worldview enables us to reject simplemindedness and silver bullets. It embraces incrementalism over radicalism, even in striving toward revolutionary goals. Judaism’s approach acknowledges

the complexities of human existence. It puts forward flawed people as role models, rather than impossible ideals. And it moves, inexorably, though not always linearly, toward the perfection of the world.



Given the wide range of socioeconomic approaches in the tradition, it will come as no surprise that American Jewish politics has reflected Jewish sociology more than theology. Liberal rabbis have long emphasized prophetic ethical monotheism, while liberal congregations have often drawn upon Jewish ethics for a broader version of *tikkun olam*—not simply repair of the Jewish community but of the whole world. By contrast, more traditional (typically Orthodox) Jews have moved in an altogether different direction, emphasizing the importance of Jewish particularism in a way that often swims against the currents of mainstream culture. As one joke common in Orthodox circles has it: “There are two kinds of Jews, those who favor *tikkun olam* and those who understand Hebrew.”

Both poles of American Jewry draw upon Jewish sources. But to reduce a complex tradition to politicized, one-sided simplicity trivializes religion and debases politics. Politics works best when everyone understands that both sides have finite claims, conflicting needs, mixed interests, and negotiable positions that will need to be compromised. To place a religious stamp on positions makes them more rigid; the “absolute” claim of divine approbation restricts maneuverability and makes it harder to come to resolution. It is a kind of idolatry to wrap human policies in the fabric of divinity and eternity. What politics needs from religion is *critique*—the challenge that universal, transcendent values and ideas can bring.

I want to offer an alternate way for American Jewry to apply the Jewish tradition in the movement to expand social justice in America. Rather than cherry-picking sources to support one “side” of an issue or the other, let us consciously utilize both liberal and conservative elements in the tradition and offer a balance of the particular

and the universal, retaining a simultaneous focus on Jewish interests as well as on broader concerns. By appreciating that the tradition has much to say on many sides of these issues, I hope to enable both wings of American Jewry to find common language for engaging more constructively and respectfully.

Jewish religion is a covenantal partnership. God is a partner, but humans must do their share in repairing the world to bring about redemption. Judaism combines a liberal, utopian, universal vision of completely transforming the planet with a conservative, realistic, particularist method of transformation. The interplay between these elements advances revolutionary ideals while preventing runaway excesses or socially destructive overreach. Typically, this leads to gradualist, incrementalist steps toward ultimate perfection.

The central principle on which ethics and social justice turn is that every human being is created *b'tzelem Elokim*—in the image of God (Genesis 1:26; 5:1). As I explore in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*, this means that every human being is endowed with the intrinsic dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness. In the Talmud, Ben Azzai affirms that the image of God is the *clal gadol*, the great principle of the Torah (Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:4). All of the commandments and prohibitions derive from this recognition of the other as a precious creature, fully equal and uniquely valuable, without regard to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or any other political, economic, cultural, or other man-made distinction. Humans should be treated as such. It follows that people may not steal from each other, murder each other, exploit each other. They should honor one another, show solidarity, help the needy, and so forth.

The human calling is to work in partnership with God to repair the world so these dignities will be fully upheld in real life for everybody. This central teaching of the Jewish tradition sets the agenda for a Jewish community that works for social justice, for building a society free of discrimination.

The contemporary universalist approach to *tikkun olam* is a Johnny-come-lately in Jewish religion, although its underlying ideas

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are deeply rooted in the tradition. To bring about the messianic age, people must work to repair the material world. The prophets teach that we must overcome the enemies of life—poverty, hunger, oppression, war, and sickness—to reach an age in which human life, all life, will experience the full dignity and fair treatment to which it is entitled.

This work must balance many approaches. On the “liberal” side, upholding the dignity of equality and infinite value means that human life is worth more than any amount of money. No one should lack food, clothing, shelter, or medical treatment because he is poor. This validates the entire program of welfare for the needy. And yet, society does not have infinite resources, so policy must be negotiated around distributing limited resources effectively and reconciling the unlimited needs of all without systemic discrimination against any group.

On the more “conservative” side, the tradition glorifies *tzedakah*—private giving—and the active support of family in preventing descent into dependence. Maimonides writes: “We are obligated to carefully observe the mitzvah of *tzedakah* above and beyond all other positive commandments in the Torah” (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zeraim, Hilchot Matnot Aneeyim, 10:1). Yet, for Maimonides, the highest level of *tzedakah* was one that emphasized self-reliance. Giving someone a business partnership or a job or a loan upholds the receiver’s dignity and enables him to avoid becoming dependent on society. “When

you eat of the fruits of your own labor, you are happy and well off” (Psalms 128:2).

Thus we find a balance: building a more equal and just society through both government welfare and private initiative. This constructive interaction prevents the glorification of government action and excessive reliance on impersonal welfare by also validating personal initiatives and the web of human solidarity and civil society. This strand of tradition clears the way for the Jewish community to support the extension of the welfare state, while encouraging a central role for free enterprise and market forces in generating wealth and enabling self-determination. The two can—and should—coexist.

In recognizing the value and equality of the other, the covenantal method rejects coercion and tactics that intimidate through shame or diminishment. Exercising restraint in this process leads to advances via compromise and incremental change. It recognizes that people—especially the better-off—are more open to gradual changes in which they feel respected and included, as opposed to drastic, radical, sudden upheavals. While this approach is slower, it’s more sustainable and likelier to be accepted by the whole society.

This covenantal process of gradual adjustment has been the genius of democracy. By modulating the yin of change and the yang of establishment, the democratic process wins the trust and assent of the governed, while providing a steadier, more grounded social consensus that can withstand difficulties and setbacks. Imposed norms or dictatorial regimes are more fragile. They often move faster but then are slowed or reversed by backlash.



This brings us to the frontier of contemporary American social justice movements, especially racial justice efforts. A new understanding of structural racism, recognition of continued inequality, and high-profile incidents of the deaths of black people at the hands

of the police have led to demands for all-out efforts and drastic, extraordinary action, ranging from reparations for slavery to unprecedented levels of investment in and attention to black communities.

The time calls for serious action. The Jewish community should join in making the case for directing extra attention and resources to resolve areas of long-standing deprivation and inequality. Given the cumulative suffering of African Americans from centuries of slavery followed by systematic discrimination, their need for support to overcome deprivation deserves an out-of-the-ordinary response.

However, this work is so important that it should be guided by our own tradition, which upholds both justice and a process that shows fairness and respect to all groups. Significantly, it includes trying to prevent one-sided or extreme policies that will damage one group in service of another and that can erode the trust and mutual interests upholding democratic institutions.

A moderate approach is needed, because a more radical wing has emerged of late, usually called the “antiracism” movement. (This is not dissimilar from the phenomenon whereby a more radical black nationalist movement emerged from the liberal civil rights movement.) This group brings a new narrative that rejects the inherited story of America as a land of opportunity. This worldview holds, instead, that the true story of America is one of unalloyed exploitation and abuse, primarily of black citizens. It follows that all white Americans are beneficiaries of structural racism and are thereby implicated in this entrenched evil.

Aside from the unfairness of indiscriminately impeaching all members of a group—any group—this approach contradicts the hard-earned lessons of Jewish tradition that each person should be judged by individual behavior. Jewish tradition once demonized whole groups or tainted them by dint of their belonging to an evil community. However, as it matured, it eliminated such rulings because they violated the image of God of the “outcasts.” (Consider the neutralization of the laws to wipe out the seven Canaanite nations [Yoma 54a] or to execute the rebellious son [Sanhedrin 71a].)

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Such wholesale condemnations also undermined the checks and balances that govern action and prevent a just system from turning violent and destructive.

One of the most dangerous elements of this new ideology is many of its proponents' unwillingness to brook dissent. They label resistance, hesitation, critique, or proposed moderation of extraordinary steps as evidence of racism itself. If you are not an "antiracist" as the ideology defines it, you are necessarily a racist. The effect is to stifle discussion, damaging the integrity of political discourse and hampering our ability to create a broad consensus.

This approach violates the central covenantal principle of not imposing even good policies by force, out of respect for the dignity of the other. The delegitimization of dissent is nothing less than religious coercion disguised as upholding morality. Those who challenge or criticize are excommunicated: They are labeled "racist," which puts them beyond the pale, unworthy even of getting a hearing. Accepting this approach means that if anything goes wrong—which happens in any human system—there is no built-in review or check. A systemic warping and metastasis of abuses become inevitable and uncorrectable. All policies need independent feedback in order to function at their best.

The Jewish tradition was so opposed to creating an atmosphere

of intimidation and silence in important ethical matters that the Talmud required that death-penalty cases be brought before the 71-judge Sanhedrin (supreme court). There, the judges and advocates for the defendant were given priority to speak. If the Sanhedrin ultimately voted to convict the defendant unanimously, the case was thrown out on the grounds that unanimity could be caused only by a public hysteria that had silenced the defendant's voice. This background intimidation distorted judgment and disqualified the whole process.

While the new counter-narrative about America is justifiable according to the experiences of many black Americans, it contradicts the experiences of many Jews, Asian Americans, and other immigrant ethnic groups. (It's also not a perspective uniformly held in the black community.) For these groups, America has been a land of opportunity and promise, albeit an imperfect one. Yet the new narrative degrades these groups by turning them into partners in crime. The accusation is that they succeeded not by their own merit, as they themselves believe, but rather because of unearned benefits they have derived through their exploitation of others.

By so blatantly rejecting the sacred stories and values of other groups, this narrative creates a real danger of backlash. Indeed, the backlash is happening already: Entrenched groups and opportunistic politicians are recruiting those who are offended by these new tactics, people who might have been moved by a different kind of call for change but instead feel unjustly attacked. The demands of this wing violate the general principles of equality and justice by invoking counter-discrimination as part of the liberation process, and even suspending ethical judgment on the tactics or the leadership of the movement.

Some white Americans feel enough guilt to accept these terms. They are willing to reject the inherited American narrative, to shy away from holding antiracism movement leaders accountable for missteps, and they even refuse to acknowledge or condemn the violence exhibited by those who exploit marches

and protests to abuse and steal from others, destroying property, livelihoods, and lives.

This sort of reparative favoritism and double standard of morality threatens to undermine one of the strongest points of Jewish tradition and American ideals: equality in justice with respect for all. I predict that it will fail, starting at the ballot box, because it offends so many others. Popular resistance will block many of the desirable outcomes. The inevitable missteps or overreach will impugn the whole movement to expand social justice, and the most likely victims of the failure will be the deprived people it intends to help. The oft-quoted maxim *tzedek tzedek tirdof* (Deuteronomy 16:20)—usually translated as “justice, justice shall you pursue”—does not repeat the word *tzedek* simply for effect. The real point is that society must pursue justice justly.

Here the Jewish tradition has another lesson to teach us. On one hand, the Torah repeatedly warns about injustice to the poor: “You shall not pervert judgment of the poor in his cause” (Exodus 23:6); “you shall not elevate the person of might; judge your neighbor righteously” (Leviticus 19:15). The tradition even calls for special, additional help for the poor, for the vulnerable widow and orphan, for the outsider. As Maimonides asserts: The more a person lacks, the more we are commanded to help him (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zeraim, Hilchot Matnot Aneeyim, ch. 7, h. 3).

On the other hand, one must not pursue justice through unjust means: “You shall not favor a poor man in his cause [unjustly]” (Exodus 23:3); and “you shall not do unrighteousness in judgment [or policy]” (Leviticus 19:15).

The Torah is warning against twisting our basic moral code on behalf of the oppressed. We cannot compromise our principles to assert that the oppressed are just regardless of their behavior, simply because of their identity. Their race, gender, past colonial status, membership in a marginalized group, and so forth, do not *a priori* make their cause right and all opposition to it wrong. Where a free society ought to engage in policy debates, we instead

find ourselves in the midst of quasi-religious battles between good and evil.

We must do better. We must press toward more perfect application of our American ideals, which have been imperfectly applied. But giving a blank moral check to people corrupts them and destroys the moral landmarks that would keep them on—or help them get back on—the straight path. The Talmud speaks harshly of such a situation. If people, lacking guidance, act wrongly and bring disaster, then those who could have criticized and checked them but did not are blamed for the misdeeds and the resultant blows inflicted on society (Talmud Shabbat 54a).

Martin Luther King Jr. took a very different approach. His success in winning much of the country to the cause of black Americans was due, in large measure, to the fact that he called upon all Americans to live up to the highest ideals of the American democratic narrative and of human rights, many of which are drawn from the Jewish traditions outlined here. When King spoke of the American ideal that “all men are created equal,” he was tapping into the very principle of *tzelem Elokim*. He asked America to live up to its promises, an approach that American patriots of all backgrounds could embrace. To resist his arguments necessitated rejecting America’s own cherished values. Many did resist—but collectively, American society accepted his call.

This can be a moment of world repair and a breakthrough for American society to a higher level of liberty and justice for all. The opportunity can also be frittered away by resistance from entrenched interests, by widespread bystanding and indifference, or by allowing extremists to hijack the movement and turn it away from equal justice for all. American Jewry can make a special constructive contribution by illuminating the way for all Americans to wisely, realistically, empathetically, and fairly realize the Torah’s call to “love your neighbor as yourself.” *