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Social Justice for Moderns

MODERNITY is a balancing act for Jews between particularism and universalism. Since the ghetto walls burst open in the 19th century, arguments on each side have been bolstered by reference to Jewish texts and history. The particularists highlight the many rabbinic and medieval sources that insist upon caring first for one's own community. The universalists point to the prophetic traditions of attending to the least privileged in society. As Rav Kook pointed out in his address at the dedication of Hebrew University in 1925: "Two tendencies characterize Jewish spirituality. One tendency is internal and entirely sacred … the second … served to disseminate Jewish ideas and values from the private domain to the public arena and the universe at large."

To hold fast to the dual mandate of the Jewish people is our difficult and demanding task. Programs and projects to shore up Jewish life are essential, but they are validated in part by attempts to join hands with and improve the lot of our non-Jewish neighbors. Judaism is an ascending spiral of insularity and openness.

God, the Talmud tells us, leads you in the path you wish to go. In a polarized age, each side is increasingly pushed to extremes, so regrettably the Jewish community has become Janus-faced: The particularists look only to other Jews; the universalists gaze almost exclusively on the non-Jewish world. Some of the emphasis arises from risk assessment. If Jews are in ever-present danger, helping others feels feckless and even disloyal. If Jews are relatively secure, then turning away from others is a species of callous privilege. Some modern rabbinic authorities have expressed a rough equivalence. Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik says, "It is obvious that, from the Judaic perspective, righteousness is to be practiced equally towards Jews and non-Jews." The most vocal and influential, however, seem to heavily weight the scales to one side or the other.

In our communicative age, we see the differences in a terminological tug-of-war. Certain phrases are colonized and conquered. The best example, and the most ubiquitous, especially on the Left, is *tikkun olam* — repairing the world.

The concept of repairing an imperfect world has a long history. In Ecclesiastes 1:15, the world is called a twisted thing that cannot be made straight or repaired (the Hebrew is *litkon*, from the same root as *tikkun*). Already we have a sense of the despair that the term will later be intended to allay, presaging Immanuel Kant's famous declaration that from the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight can be made.

Kant might aptly have commented on the crooked timber of *tikkun* itself. The growth of *tikkun olam* into a concept started with the Talmud and expanded in the Kabbalah. The Talmud discusses the concept of "for the sake of repairing the world" in the tractate concerning laws of divorce (Mishna Gittin 4:2), and it is tied as well to other social legislation. In the Kabbalah, particularly in the hands of R. Isaac Luria, *tikkun* becomes repair for the catastrophe of *shevirat hakelim*, the breaking of the vessels, that occurred at the outset of creation. Certain meditations, prayers, and observance of the mitzvot will bring repair, not only in the material world but

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also in God's own self—a daring idea that has made Kabbalah both attractive and anathematized. *Tikkun* thus developed from a social concept to a supernatural one, and there it rested until the modern age when it returned to social dynamics with a vengeance. To quote the French poet Charles Péguy, "everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics."

The evolution of *tikkun olam* from prayer and mitzvot intended to help God into acts to bind up the social fabric of the world—within a conceptual framework of brokenness and healing—suits an age of advocacy. Speakers now call upon the concept as a rationale for addressing whatever they deem broken, from environmental regulations to economic inequality to all manner of social policy. That we live in a broken world is indisputable. But the cure, reinforced by the weight of the tradition, invariably falls in line with the speaker's political predispositions. One person's *tikkun* (repair) becomes another's *shevirah* (brokenness).

We see the concept invoked most frequently on the Left, but to associate the ideology of *tikkun olam* with liberal sources and causes alone would be a mistake. As the Orthodox scholar and economist Meir Tamari has written, traditional Judaism has much to say about protecting the poor, the essential kinship of all human beings, and the "economics of enough." In a telling, surprising comparison, Tamari points out that while there are 24 regulations in the Torah about what to eat (i.e., how to keep kosher), there are more than four times as many about how to deal with money.

In any long and complex tradition, there will be sources to favor all sides of an argument. Louis Ginzberg, the renowned scholar of midrash, was fond of saying, "The devil can quote scripture to his purpose, and if he were more learned, he could quote the Talmud too." Increasingly a prop for political positions, *tikkun olam* has become so ubiquitous as to be almost drained of significance. When an idea becomes the presumed property of either side of the debate, it is discounted by the other, and new grounds for the particularist/universalist struggle must be unearthed.

We see the modern struggle between particularism and universalism in charitable organizations as well, especially as the increasing prosperity and security of Jewish communities meant that Jewish organizations could afford to cast a wider net, to expand beyond helping only Jews. Immigration is a clear case in point. In the mid-19th century, American Jews established charitable and benevolent societies to help German Jews immigrating to the United States. Toward the beginning of the 20th century, these organizations multiplied and expanded and were instrumental in helping new, massive waves of Polish and Russian Jews. As immigrants' fortunes stabilized, they formed *landsmanschaften*, mutual aid societies centered on their towns and cities of origin, through which they sent money to help people from their "hometown" come to America.

In time, many similar organizations, such as the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, expanded far beyond their Jewish origins and framing to embrace immigrants as a whole. (It even universalized its name simply to "HIAS.") Founded in 1881 with the particularist aim to help immigrant Jews, HIAS since the 1970s has expanded its mission to assist refugees and immigrants of all religions, ethnicities, nationalities, and backgrounds. The *olam* part of *tikkun olam* has predominated.

The point where justice becomes "social" depends upon how far one zooms out. For philosophers such as Martin Buber and

Emmanuel Levinas, the origin of ethics is found in the single other. Buber believed in the dialogical imperative, the need to engage the other, however difficult that may be, and whomever the "other" was. His willingness to travel back to Germany after the war met with strong opposition; and while living in Israel, he became a rare, early advocate of a binational state. Dialogue was the only path forward, he believed, and mutuality an absolute ethical demand. Even more so after the Shoah, when the otherness of Jews doomed so many to suffering and death, the suffering of any other human being could not be dismissed as being from an "out-group."

The shattering events of modern Jewish life, the Shoah and the birth of Israel, proved to be catalysts for both sides of this debate. (Indeed, a renowned theologian of the Holocaust, Emil Fackenheim, even titled one of his books "To Mend the World.")

For the particularists, social justice meant protecting a Jewish community shattered by the Shoah. They supported Israel, rescued Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, and built institutions like Jewish schools and federations. If Israel and the Jewish people were to be a light to the nations, they needed to exist, be strong, thrive. If, in early *haggadot*, the exemplar of the wicked son was often drawn as a soldier, in the new age, the Israeli soldier was the obverse: a representation of the self-assertive power that not only protected Jews but also provided a salutary model to the world of the dignity and renewal of a small people. Social justice sometimes comes with a sword.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the particularist state of Israel is also a beacon of Jewish universalism. IsraAid and other similar organizations send emergency workers to war-torn and disaster-stricken regions, all in the name of Israel and Jewish values. This is a kind of platonic ideal of particularism; as Cynthia Ozick put it so beautifully, the shofar has a broad end and a narrow end. If you begin by blowing in the broad end, you hear nothing. But begin by blowing in the narrow end, and you get a sound everyone can hear.

An example of this duality—the particular leading to the universal—is eco-kashrut. Building on the particularist laws of keep-

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ing kosher, some activists have suggested that vegetarianism (or veganism) is an ecologically responsible way of maintaining a commitment to eating as a sacred activity—for the universal benefit of the world. The Talmud tells us that one who eats without making a blessing is a thief; modernity tells us that one who eats without attending to the impact of what he eats, or the animal suffering involved in what he consumes, is a brute.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is invariably invoked in estimations of how a substantive engagement with Judaism leads to a fight for (universalist) social justice. Contrary to what many believe, Heschel did not favor the mixing of politics and the pulpit. "Sermons, indistinguishable from editorials in the *New York Times*, ... will hardly inspire us," he argued. While synagogues exist to "inspire the soul and instruct the mind," political organizations "serve the self-interest of the group" they represent. Yet Heschel's championing of civil rights, his work with Martin Luther King Jr., and other leaders in the movement, and his declaration that during the civil rights march he felt "as though my feet were praying" are justly a great cause of pride among Jews. It was an instance of a *she'at ha'dechack*—a time of urgency, when usual strictures must be set aside. Heschel accomplished this despite institutional derision from his colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Few understood

his passion. But for Heschel it was derived from the prophetic legacy — the subject of his dissertation — and from the Hasidic tradition that was his birthright.

So what is the responsibility of the Jew in a modern age? There are still many Jews who live in poverty and want throughout the world, whose physical safety is also sometimes at risk. (In travels with the Joint Distribution Committee, I have often been shocked at the conditions of Jews in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.) Yet for the most part, Jews occupy a strange middle space: a prominent, accomplished people who are also the subjects of serious and sustained threat. Jews do not fit neatly into social justice binaries.

Passionate declarations of "justice" are insufficient. Despite Solomon Schechter's warning that being a "prophetic Jew" was like living on oxygen alone, many liberal Jewish movements for social justice borrow the thundering pronouncements of Amos and Isaiah, but do not anchor them in distinctively Jewish practice or learning. On the other side, insular but deeply committed Jewish traditionalists may do little or nothing to influence the world around them, ignoring groups that have traditionally been marginalized or excluded. Too often their political conservatism is an excuse for indifference to the plight of others. We have learned repeatedly that if "never again" does not mean the struggle against genocide in places other than Nazi Germany, it means nothing.

Judaism cannot be captured or limited by political traditions of either side. Jews who dismiss the reality of racism because of the flaws of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Jews who do not acknowledge the real antisemitism that exists on the left, wield axes in place of scalpels. Jews who rail about the Right's extremism and do not acknowledge its stalwart support for Israel are similarly blinkered.

Jews are called to heal, to bind up the wounds of those who are bereaved, bereft, frightened, alone. You cannot be a light for others if you do not shine at home. But if you shutter your windows, no light escapes. It is our task to build schools, educate Jewish youth, strengthen camps and informal activities, create opportunities for single Jews to meet and marry. It is also our task to call out cruelty and genocide around the world, ameliorate the sufferings of people who are in places of deprivation and disease, to give our community opportunities to show Judaism's goodness to the world. Hillel's ancient admonition endures — *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet if I am only for myself, what am I?* Notice that one who is only for himself is so debased that Hillel cannot even find the words to describe him.

Janice Kamenir-Reznik grew up at Sinai Temple and is one of the co-founders of Jewish World Watch, along with Rabbi Harold Schulweis *z"l*. In traveling to the border outside the Congo, she was confronted by women who had been terribly abused, who had seen their families murdered before their eyes. One of the women asked Kamenir-Reznik, a Beverly Hills attorney, "Why are you here?" She did not say she was Jewish, since neither the Christian nor the Muslim women knew what a Jew was. So she explained, "I am a member of an ancient tribe. And we believe every human being is created in the image of God. And in order to deserve that privilege, we believe that we must partner with God to do acts of righteousness in God's world."

The ancient definition has not been improved: "To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). ✳