

WHO IS WISE? HE WHO LEARNS FROM EVERY MAN,
AS IT IS SAID: 'FROM ALL WHO TAUGHT ME HAVE
I GAINED UNDERSTANDING' (PSALMS 119:99).
— PIRKEI AVOT 4:1

SUMMING UP



LEARNED the concept of “resilient listening” on an Encounter trip to meet with Palestinians in the West Bank several years ago. Engaging views that were contrary to my own stirred confusion, compassion, and, at times, fury. It challenged me to open my heart and mind. It also strengthened my analytical abilities and clarified my own perspectives.

The years I’ve spent in the Jewish philanthropic world, often working to harmonize differing opinions, have reinforced my belief that being willing to change one’s mind is an essential element of leadership — not to mention of *menschlichkeit*. Embracing free expression and free inquiry helps us to create more resilient, diverse, flexible, and open communities.

The goal of SAPIR is to speak to those who are open. To that end, each issue will offer a final summary of the essays’ key ideas and recommendations that can inform conversations among Jewish communal leaders.

We invite you to share your thoughts with us at SapirJournal.org.

— Felicia Herman, *Managing Editor*



THE FRAUGHT POLITICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The volume begins with four provocative essays on the challenges inherent for Jews in contemporary social justice movements.

Pamela Paresky and James Kirchick explore the thicket that is contemporary antisemitism on the left, examining movements that claim to treasure diversity and inclusion, yet often prove to be astonishingly hostile to Jews.

Paresky analyzes the still largely unacknowledged manifestations of illiberalism in critical race theory (CRT) and its fashionable by-product of “antiracism.” In arguing, for example, that unequal outcomes are evidence of systemic bias, the advocates of these ideologies posit that disproportionate success, such as that achieved by Jews, must be a sign of unmerited privilege or outright discrimination. CRT’s concept that society is driven by forces of “greed, appropriation...and hidden power” also echoes long-standing antisemitic conspiracy theories. Add in the argument that American Jews have been willing partners in white supremacy by “opting into” whiteness, as well as a resistance to logical analysis and empiricism (as markers of “whiteness”), and you get a worldview “that does not merely make it easy to demonize Jews...it makes it difficult not to.”

What to do? Paresky offers important suggestions: Jews should refuse the victim/oppressor binary and its attendant glorification of victimhood; “denounce the ascription of moral virtue or blame” to race; seek truth and embrace complexity and critical thinking; preserve core liberal and pluralist values; and “articulate a Jewish social justice story...that allows agency even for victims, forgives rather than shames, and embraces rather than condemns.”

James Kirchick widens the lens both historically and globally as he explores the paradox that defines left-wing antisemitism: namely, that those who practice it also deny that it exists. He also explains its durability. The screenwriter Ben Hecht observed in the 1940s that, by accepting the covenant with God, Jews agreed “to think as an individual in the teeth of all Kings and Causes.” This mission would forevermore leave them “unimpressed,” as Kirchick describes, with earthly rulers. Their commitments lay elsewhere. This provoked unending resentment—antisemitism in all its forms, a response to the Jewish refusal to conform.

Jews can resist left-wing antisemitism, Kirchick writes, by being unafraid to acknowledge it, by being honest about its dangers, and by being willing to “graduate” from abusive liberal institutions and build new ones that “maintain the purported but abandoned values of the old.” Above all, he urges, Jews must re-

tain their “skepticism toward the promises of their fellow men.”

Jeremy Burton and Joshua Muravchik bring these ideas into the realm of practice by exploring the complex, evolving, and sometimes difficult relationship between black and Jewish Americans. Although they come from different sides of the ideological spectrum, the authors share fundamental premises. They agree that black and Jewish communities share a profound interest in preserving the American liberal project. They urge us to resist ideologies that demonize and delegitimize America’s ideals and institutions, however incomplete or flawed they may be.

As with all relationships, this one must be characterized by honesty. The romanticization that frequently attends discussions about black-Jewish relations obscures its complexity, as does the reluctance to acknowledge diverse viewpoints, especially hostile ones. Black and Jewish leaders need to strengthen those who would build bridges, while calling out those who would burn them. Ignoring black antisemitism and Jewish racism is not only dishonest; it also prevents authentic connections and real solutions.

The essays do differ in emphasis. Muravchik’s focus on calling out examples of black leaders’ antisemitism is not to make the case that Jewish racism does not exist; it is to note the considerable harm caused by the prominence of overt antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Refusing to denounce these views as unacceptable erodes what ought to be a storied, enduring alliance. Burton agrees, but he also exhorts us not to let the most extreme voices on either side define the relationship, or to see the Jewish fight against racism as transactional or conditional. It is in the best interest of all Americans for us all to fight racism and antisemitism alike.

JEWISH TEXTS, JEWISH HISTORY

The five essays in *SAPIR* that discuss the prominent place of social justice in Jewish texts and history offer a path forward for Jews who

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want to embrace these ideals without compromising their integrity or succumbing to political fashions.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg takes us back to a *clal gadol*, a core principle, of the Torah: that all human beings are created in the image of God. This means that they are “endowed with the intrinsic dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness.” Not surprisingly, given its centrality to Jewish thought, several pieces in the issue reference this idea.

By this standard — does it respect the image of God in *everyone*? — Greenberg finds much of today’s “antiracism” movement wanting. We must judge movements not only by their goals but also by their tactics. Greenberg calls out some of the most serious problems: the propensity to label dissent evil (i.e., “racist”); a call for radical change over incrementalism; stereotyping and shaming entire groups based on skin color; and promoting a legal and social system that would create different rules for different groups.

The oft-quoted *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, Greenberg points out, does not mean only “justice, justice shall you pursue”; it also means “pursue justice justly.” The ends do not always justify the means.

Rabbi Shlomo Brody draws out eight primary social justice principles from biblical texts to demonstrate the ways that the tradition builds a “just and righteous” society by harmonizing

what we would today consider to be liberal and conservative views. Equality under the law, human dignity for all, empowerment and self-reliance, solidarity and mutuality through shared ideals, empathy with the vulnerable, the careful emendation of the law to account for unintended consequences, and a model for moral leadership that embraces righteousness at its core: These principles ought to guide communal leaders in policy debates.

Moshe Halbertal and Rabbi David Wolpe mix Jewish thought with Jewish history, ethical principles, and the quandaries of application. Halbertal’s essay demonstrates that medieval Jewish communities responded to nearly unrelenting hostility by encouraging kindness, care, and resilience. A people with limited political, physical, and economic might could not meet violence with violence. Nor could they revolt against their inherent state of powerlessness. Their response was to create communal structures focused on education, mutual care, and economic empowerment, grounded in principles of compassion, equality, and dignity. But they did not aim to create perfect communities, either; they accepted that there would always be unequal outcomes. The goal of aiding the vulnerable would not be advanced by flattening out human difference.

In the modern period, as “the ghetto walls burst open,” a new, universalist dimension of social justice became possible: caring for those beyond Jewish communities. Wolpe notes that this created a demanding balancing act between particularism and universalism. He argues for striving to find a balance: anchoring calls for universal justice within Jewish practice and learning. Jews must reject simplistic binaries, refuse to allow Judaism to be “captured or limited” by particular political traditions, and embrace the complexity of the Jewish condition: simultaneously strong and weak, privileged and threatened, focused within and without.

Kylie Unell emphasizes that the work of social repair (whether labeled *tikkun olam* or something else) is supposed to be done in service to, and partnership with, God. Young people, she argues, are craving conversations about God. Avoiding the subject does not

erase the universal longing for purpose and mission: It simply transposes it to causes and ideologies that become religions in and of themselves. This is precisely the opposite of what Jewish organizations should try to achieve, either in social justice work or elsewhere.

All of these essays demonstrate that the very diversity of Jewish ideas is a core feature of their timelessness. They endure because they beautifully reflect the spectrum of human experience and are honest about human strengths and weaknesses. They do not prescribe perfection or utopia. They call on us to accept and develop policies that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, which can create incremental change—unpopular in a world that likes quick fixes, but ultimately more sustainable, humane, and just.

ISRAEL AND ITS CRITICS

Arguments about social justice are typical of conversations about the Jewish state. Matti Friedman, Einat Wilf, and Ethan Felson share an understanding that discussions about Israel are frequently characterized by myth, misinformation, and a depressing dearth of critical thinking. Israel, as Friedman often puts it, is rarely treated like “a real place on the planet Earth.” Instead, stories about Israel often fall into the realm of what he calls the “ancient category of Western stories, typically moralistic in nature, in which Jews are used to illustrate the perceived ills of a given place and time.”

Friedman offers eight ideas about how to become a more discriminating consumer of information about Israel, and he reminds us of the wildly disproportionate attention that Israel receives in the media and in contemporary social justice discourse. This profound lack of context—historical, statistical, cultural, geopolitical—leads to double standards and distortion, and, ultimately, to destructive consequences for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Wilf discusses a particularly strange area of cognitive distortion: The projection of other people’s grand struggles and narra-

tives (apartheid, race, imperialism) onto Israeli society is “an act of blatant neocolonialism” that ignores or discards the uniqueness of Israel’s past and present in favor of simplistic slogans. The response, she suggests, should be to refuse to treat these as honest arguments, to acknowledge and address what they are *really* about, and to reject the framework of narratives that do not apply.

Felson shows us the ways that these challenges play out in Jewish communal life. How can the facile preconceptions of many progressive activists about Israelis and Palestinians best be addressed? Through unscripted, in-person encounters that make no attempt to propagandize and that offer the unique “aha” moments that come at points of ordinary human connection, often across lines of religion, politics, and ideology. They can also be addressed by showing that Israel’s struggles and achievements when it comes to human rights or environmental stewardship are not a form of “pinkwashing” or “greenwashing.” They are a result of the hard work of countless activists of all persuasions, which need to be seen and understood firsthand, without any preaching or proselytizing.



It’s no surprise that the essays in this volume are deeply in conversation with one another. No matter the topic, time period, or author’s predisposition, particular themes recur from essay to essay. They are the same principles of dignity, equality, and compassion that weave like radiant threads through the cacophonous Jewish tradition and the long, complicated Jewish past and present. To build a strong and creative future, we need to check our beliefs, behaviors and policies against these ideals. We need, in Kirchick’s word, to remain “unimpressed” by simplistic theories that fail to account for the complexity, diversity, frailty, strength, and beauty of the human condition. The Jewish way, these essays argue, is to remain in the middle, neither wholly one thing or another, in an unending effort to perfect the world. *