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## What's God Got to Do with It?



WHEN I FIRST encountered Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, I was a sophomore in college. Like Meg Ryan getting to know Tom Hanks through his charming emails in *You've Got Mail*, I met the 19th-century German rabbi through his fittingly titled book *Nineteen Letters* (1836).

Hirsch's initial readers were young German-speaking Jews raised in what we would today call Orthodox homes, living in a Europe that was slowly embracing emancipation. Attracted to the world around them and able to participate in it for the first time, these young Jews doubted the value that Judaism added to their modern lives.

Hirsch spent his life trying to demonstrate that Judaism could enhance one's experience in modernity by investing a life of freedom with purpose. He provided a recipe for mixing secular interests with Jewish tradition, a Jewish particularism that enabled an engagement with the broader world. His vision can guide us today, particularly as we wrestle with the ways that Jews engage with issues of social justice.

As I was trying to figure out how to express my Judaism, Hirsch helped me to situate myself in the Jewish story. He showed me that the very fact that I am aware of my Judaism indicates that I have a necessary role to fill in Jewish history. Particularly in light of today's obsession with race in American and American Jewish life, the book had added value because Hirsch spoke to me, a biracial woman who did not grow up in an Orthodox home, as a whole Jewish human, and not as a Jew of a particular denomination or a fragmented agglomeration of multiple "identities." I simply read him in the way he had intended: as a young Jewish person trying to find my way. Hirsch provided a clear, straightforward elucidation of Judaism and its role in the world, along with establishing that every individual is both a product of and reflection of God. Hirsch's vision gave me a sense of direction and of unique purpose as a Jewish person, full stop.

I was not alone in experiencing this. Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters* was an instant hit with young Jews in the 1830s and remained so for generations. Hirsch was a bona fide celebrity in German lands and in the nearby Habsburg empire. While older, traditional Jews were skeptical of him and his modern ways, young people embraced him with a unique, unrivaled fervor. A young Heinrich Graetz, who would go on to become one of the first modern Jewish historians, was so taken with *Nineteen Letters* that he asked Hirsch if he could become his student. Hirsch agreed, and Graetz spent three years living in Hirsch's home. He dedicated his first book to his venerable teacher.

Although Hirsch remained Orthodox, his ideas, including those related to justice, were embraced by the early leaders of the Reform movement in America. Kaufmann Kohler, one of the movement's most prominent theologians, spoke glowingly of Hirsch, citing him as one of his greatest influences. As Kohler described, Hirsch also had a strong influence on many others—including the great American Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff:

Beyond doubt...Samson Raphael Hirsch, the preacher of a higher Jewish manhood...molded the soul of Jacob H. Schiff

to render him a leader of the American Jew in the best sense of the word, an exemplar of Jewish piety and loyalty, one who does great and noble things for the sake of God and the glorification of His name and [at] the same time prompts many to follow his example in reflecting luster on Judaism by works of large-hearted love for humanity.

The challenges and opportunities that Hirsch explored are still very much with us. The German-Jewish community of the early 19th century was splitting along ideological lines as emancipation inspired many Jews to break from traditional Jewish observances that held them back from participation in the broader world. Rather than discard Judaism altogether, new efforts emerged to “reform” Judaism to accord with modern sensibilities. Hirsch remained Orthodox but nevertheless agreed with the reformers that traditional Judaism was “an inherited mummy” practiced by “a generation which shows veneration for Judaism, but a veneration without spirit.”

Young people were pioneering a new way to be Jewish, he wrote at the ripe age of 26: “I see a younger generation aglow with noble enthusiasm for Jews. These young men [and women] do not know authentic Judaism, and what they believe they know of it they consider as empty forms without meaning.” And yet many of these young Jews were going too far. While they had a passion for Jews as human beings, they lacked Jewish spirit. Attempts to provide young Jews with vehicles to channel their energy and passion into caring for Jewish *people* had failed to capture their hearts and minds for *Judaism*.

I’m now deep in the midst of working toward a doctoral dissertation about Hirsch, but I still read his work with wonder. With regard to the Jewish spirit, it is as if he were describing our condition today. In particular, I see the challenges posed by the current Jewish approach to justice as profoundly similar to those that vexed Hirsch. Over the past few decades, Jewish communities have built an ideal of *tikkun olam* that encourages young Jews to care for people (Jewish

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or otherwise) without inspiring them to care about *Judaism*. Rather than feeling proud of their heritage and living boldly as Jews, many Jews today identify as “Jews of no religion.” They erase—and are encouraged to erase—their Jewish distinctiveness in favor of a bland universalism.

To Jewish funders and organizations looking for innovative ways to help young Jews engage with the world around them, I offer, inspired deeply by Judaism, the gems I have found in Hirsch’s *Nineteen Letters*. Hirsch gives us a robust framework for rethinking *tikkun olam* as a movement that embraces God and encourages all Jews to identify their individual calling to heal the world and strengthen the Jewish people.

What Hirsch does in his writing that few others can is situate the individual Jew in a larger whole. In the letter explaining his philosophy of man’s purpose in the world, he writes:

Is it conceivable that everything is to be of service in the world, of service to God, and only man is to be self-serving throughout? Your own inner awareness tells you, and the Torah states, that man’s purpose is to be *tzelem Elokim*—a likeness of God. You are to be more than everything else; you are to exist for everything else. You can know God only through His acts of love and justice; and, in turn, you too are called upon to act with justice and love, not merely to indulge or endure.

Action on behalf of justice and love, Hirsch argues, is how humans fulfill their fundamental purpose of being created in God’s

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image. What is crucial about this, and the way it differs from most *tikkun olam* efforts today, is the centrality of God. Throughout the *Nineteen Letters*, Hirsch fills the heart and soul with a vision of God in the world. As Kohler describes, Jacob Schiff is not associated with greatness for his action alone, but rather because these actions are “for the sake of God and the glorification of His name.” God is at the center. The problem with *tikkun olam* today is that it has been secularized, putting humans at the center; God has largely been removed. Human beings are told to act for their own sake, not for God’s.

There is, however, a limitation that comes with speaking about God, for it is difficult to put into words something that is so abstract. Hirsch creates a mission-based approach to life that helps a person see God in the problem he feels called to fix in the world. Accordingly, everything that a person has, from his thoughts to his money, is to be used in the service of that repair:

Our life’s mission is concerned with what we become, what we make of ourselves, and what we give, not what we get.... Man’s entire life, all of himself, his thoughts, feelings, speech and action—even his business transactions and personal enjoyments—represented service of God. Such a life transcends all vicissitudes. Whether in luxury or privation, abundance or want, whether with tears of joy or of sorrow, such a human personality,

unchanging almost like God, sees in every new blessing, as in every loss, merely another challenge to tackle anew the same unchanging task.

For Hirsch, a person’s mission is not to fix all of the problems in the world. Unlike contemporary *tikkun olam* efforts, which assert that it is a Jewish imperative to help fix any problem that arises, no matter how distant to Jewish individual or collective experiences, Hirsch suggests that we help young Jews identify the problem God has placed in their heart to address during their life. Through identifying this, people can develop a personal vocabulary for speaking about and understanding God, creating the basis for a strong relationship with God based on human action. The notion that we have a moral imperative to remedy every area of injustice wastes an individual’s personal and material resources. Instead of feeling called to fix all of the wrongs in the world, Hirsch tells us: Find your purpose.

Especially in America, where the denigration of religion is a creed in and of itself among most elites, people trying earnestly to help young Jews feel connected to Jewish heritage tend to believe that God is the ultimate turnoff. Mention God and young people will run for the hills. But as a young person, and as someone who is committed to helping other young people feel that Judaism is a treasure given to them, I know that this misses the mark for many. Young Jews, like many young Americans, are starving for a conversation about God. They want to connect to a power that is more personal than “the Universe” or “a Higher Power,” and feel a sense that their existence matters. They want to feel part of a much larger whole, in which their actions have impact. They want a relationship with a Being who cares about their actions. Whenever I write or speak, my most popular content is that in which I speak openly about God, when I engage with the tricky questions of faith in a world that posits secularism and even atheism as intrinsic to intelligence and modernity.

Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters*, which speaks openly about man's relationship with God, was popular because Hirsch was unafraid of bringing God into the picture to discuss faith in a level-headed way. The personal God of Hirsch is, in large part, the God that endows us with mission. This idea, and his writing more generally, is so grounded, so reasonable, that both Orthodox and Reform Jews have felt comfortable citing Hirsch as a great Jewish figure and inspiration.

What is unique about Hirsch's thinking, which we would be well-served to bring into Jewish life today, is his emphasis on individual action in strengthening the Jewish community. Hirsch helps every person understand that he has a unique value to contribute to the world.

Contrast this with our community today. We are so focused on segmenting people according to racial, gender, and class lines that we lose the ability to see the uniqueness of every person, the person he is beneath his so-called identity markers. We are being trained to look at people through the lens of injustices they may have experienced, and not through the gifts they can bring to help repair the world. People have more to offer the world than their pain.

It seems to me that *tikkun olam* work today is only the work that falls into a particular category of justice work, namely issues related to equality in a particularly American context, through an American frame of reference. God did not create every person in order to ask him to care about the same issue. *Tikkun olam* must be seen as a movement of individuals, each on a unique mission. Sometimes those missions will overlap with those of others. But it is for each person to discover what God intends for him, as long as we are alive to help shape the world for the better.

*Tikkun Olam* has become a Jewish denomination in its own right. The deeds one does in the name of justice now are supposed to connect one to Judaism and satisfy a longing for a personal relationship with the Divine. But we've known for a long time that taking God out of the picture misses the mark. Booker T. Wash-

ington, a close friend of Jacob Schiff's, warned Tuskegee Institute students of this in 1906:

Educated men and women, especially those who are in college, very often get the idea that religion is fit only for the common people. No young man or woman can make a greater error than this.... As you value your spiritual life, see to it that you do not lose the spirit of reverence for the Most High as revealed in your own life and experience, reverence for the Most High as revealed in the men and women about you, in the opening flower, the setting sun. Do not mistake denominationalism for reverence and religion. Religion is life, denominationalism is an aid to life.

Religion is Godly, while denominations are creations of man. Religion is intended to give space for the inner richness of every individual to come forth and express itself uniquely—and to connect to something transcendent, beyond himself. The modern understanding of *tikkun olam* is obsessed with identity categories that reduce people rather than expand their humanity; it offers particular takes on the political issues of the day rather than a focus on transcendent human questions. By denying the possibility of connecting to the Divine (however defined), it fails to offer a model that will meaningfully—even profoundly—inspire people to do good in the world. \*