Beyond Particularism: The Jewish Case for Human Solidarity

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"It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."
—Eleanor Roosevelt [1]

Many people wish to break social bonds and instill fear between groups. I've seen this attitude firsthand. Recently, I posted a picture of a Jewish-Muslim dialogue session I led for the local community. The purpose of the session was to encourage interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding between communities. The reaction to the dinner on social media, which I thought—hoped—would be uniformly positive and respectful, included comments that were anything but. Of the hateful comments my photo received, the one that stood out in my mind was: "Not the first time terrorists and bankers have worked together."

I was sad—disappointed—to see how many ignorant Jews started Muslim-bashing and how many ignorant Muslims started Jew-bashing. Aren't we, as a modern society, better than this? Haven't we moved beyond the baseless hatreds that defined earlier generations? I came to realize that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are tied together, and that all vulnerable minorities need to stick together.

One of the central commitments of the Jewish faith is to work to improve the world. More than 3,000 years ago, God told Abraham: "And you shall be a blessing" to others (Genesis 12:2). Rabbi Akiva taught that the principle to love one's neighbor "is the major principle of the Torah."[2] It was Hillel who taught: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." This is Judaism's central teaching. He added: "This is the whole Torah! All the rest is commentary" (BT *Shabbat* 31a). Rambam explains that the two goals of halakha are to perfect our inner world and to eradicate injustice and suffering from the outer world.[3] "The commandments were given only to refine God's creatures."[4]

If we believe in Jewish virtues, we have to study them and make them manifest in our lives. What is one way we can begin to understand the universality of Jewish social justice action? At the most basic level, the imperative to save life is a crucial concept of the Torah's understanding of interpersonal responsibility; it is undeniable that the ethos of Judaism is about affirming the inherent holiness of life. Rabbi Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, one of Modern Orthodoxy's most influential theologians, writes:

Judaism's ultimate dream… is to vanquish death totally. In fact, since God is all good an all life, ideally there should be no death in God's creation in the first place. Classic Judaism therefore taught that when the ultimate redemption is achieved, when the Messiah comes, all those who have died will come to life again. Resurrection of the dead will nullify death retroactively.[5]

Rav Yitz's comment is a powerful reminder that we are to affirm life in this world. And, as Rav Yitz teaches, we don't have to consider about the *quantity* of life (as has been traditionally emphasized), but also about the *quality* of life, an idea he suggests has increased weight in the post-Holocaust era of humanity. But how do we approach this view? In an earlier generation, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote:

There is nothing so physically and spiritually destructive as diverting one's attention from this world. And, by contrast, how courageous is halakhic man who does not flee from this world, who does not seek to escape to some pure, supernal realm.[6]

Thus, through the appreciation of life, we not only affirm an ethical commitment to others but also a belief in God. It is for this reason that embracing *Tzelem Elokim*—that all humans are created in the image of God—is so foundational to Jewish values. The essence of the creation in relationship to the Creator is an undeviating bond. And because of this link, we learn repeatedly of its importance to the idea of humanity's shared and singular heritage:

Adam was created alone in order to teach us that causing a single to perish is like destroying the entire world, and saving a single soul is like saving the entire world. Another teaching: Adam was created alone for the sake of peace, so that we cannot say to each other: "My ancestor was greater than yours." We are all created from the dust of the earth… and none of us can claim that our ancestors were greater than anyone else's (BT *Sanhedrin* 38a).

Moreover, because *mitzvot ben adam l'haveiro* (ethics) may actually have more religious weight than *mitzvot ben adam laMakom* (religious engagement with the divine), social justice work naturally follows a path of treating every human being with the respect they inherently deserve. On this point, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, one of the most prominent pre-war Lithuanian rabbis, writes:

For "among two hundred is to be found a hundred," [a common rabbinic idiom], meaning that in all mitzvot between man and his fellow there is also a component between man and God. Why then should they be lessened by being between man and his fellow? And it is for this reason that the Rosh saw mitzvot between man and his fellow as being more weighty, for they contain both elements.[7]

As we discern from the above passage, to be religious is to emulate the compassionate ways of God. Thus, this principle underlies all Torah study and related Jewish social justice activities:

Rabbi Elazar quoted this verse, "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice (literally, "to do *mishpat")*, to love goodness (*hessed*), and to walk modestly with your God" (Micah 6:8). What does this verse imply? "To do justice" means to act in accordance with the principles of justice. "To love goodness" means to let your actions be guided by principles of loving-kindness. "To walk modestly with your God" means to assist needy families at their funerals and weddings [by giving humbly, in private]. (BT *Sukkah* 59b)

Engaging in Jewish social justice work as a religious enterprise means that activists don't merely seek the win at the end. To paraphrase Levinas, human "uniqueness lies in the responsibility for the other man."[8] The means to social betterment must be just and holy to ensure just and holy ends. Rav Ya'akov Yitzchak of Pzhysha (the "Holy Yehudi," an eighteenth-century Hassidic *rebbe*) was asked: "Why in the verse, 'Justice, justice you shall pursue' [Deuteronomy 16:20] is the word 'justice'

repeated?" The *rebbe* answered that the repetition is meant to convey that not only must the ends we pursue be just, but so too must the means we employ to achieve those ends.[9]

Who are the ones who must bear the burden of repairing the world and bending it toward justice? The work of repair cannot be solely upon the Gentiles (who make up the majority of the world's population) while Jews, a small minority in the world, benefit but do not contribute. Rabbi Soloveitchik was adamant about this point:

Since we live among Gentiles, we share in the universal historical experience. The universal problems faced by humanity are also faced by the Jews. Famine, disease, war, oppression, materialism, atheism, permissiveness, pollution of the environment—all these are great problems which history has imposed not only on the general community but also on the covenantal community. We have no rights to tell mankind that these problems are exclusively theirs… the Jew is a member of humanity.[10]

Working to bring more peace and justice into the world is a big task. It is not enough to look into legal codes solely to inform our decision-making process and moral considerations. Consider the words of Ramban:

Now this is a great principle, for its impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of a person's conduct with one's neighbors and friends, and all of one's various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries. But since God mentioned many of them—such as "you shall not go about as a talebearer" (Leviticus 19:16), "you shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge" (Leviticus 19:18), "neither shall you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16), "you shall not curse the deaf" (Leviticus 19:14), "you shall rise before the elder" (Leviticus 19:32), and the like—God reverted to state in a general way that, in all matters, one should do what is right and good, including even compromise and going beyond the requirements of the law.[11]

Indeed, peace and redemption depend on work happening all over the globe. Religious conscience has the potential to ensure peace while also having an effect of furthering justice, compassion, and dignity in regions of the world where these notions are not yet entrenched. There is a need to harmonize gratitude in the quiet prayerful presence of God, while also knowing there is real suffering and brokenness in the world. Therefore, one of the most powerful tools in this field of work is the strength to refuse to look away and be silent.

But how do we proceed knowing that the path ahead is difficult? At the most basic level, working together supports spirits during hard times. Doris Haddock, a social activist also known as "Granny D" (1910–2010) was 98 years old when she gave a speech about how she was transformed during her experiences of living in the time of the Great Depression. She remarked: "Maybe we were hungry sometimes, but did we starve? No, because we had our friends and family and the earth to sustain us…."[12] For the human mind, the darkest times are among the most frightening. When we cannot clearly see what is happening around us, we shrink inward, unable to navigate the world physically and emotionally. Certainly, our presence has the possibility to remove the darkness in others. There are rare and unique moments when we can show up for other groups in a way that builds trust.

Too often, societal norms teach us that independence is the primary virtue. But in fact, the notions of living in states of inter-dependence and co-existence are just as powerful. To be sure, we must learn to hold one another close in challenging times. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin relates a parable:

A little boy was struggling to lift a heavy stone but could not budge it. The boy's father, who happened to be watching, said to his son, "Are you using all your strength?"

"Yes, I am," the boy said with irritation.

"No, you're not," the father answered. "You have not asked me to help you."[13]

It is undeniable, however, that there is much hate within the hearts of a vast number of people around the world. How best to engage with these individuals who, seemingly, have already closed off their internal avenues of reasoned dialogue? Is it even worth engaging with them? On this topic, Rav Kook teaches:

When interacting with a morally corrupt person, it would be appropriate to hate them as a result of their moral faults. But from the perspective of their *Tzelem Elokim* (inner sparks of Godliness), it's appropriate to treat this person with love…."[14]

To seek another's deepest inner value is fundamental to Jewish consciousness and social justice actions. Why, then, does finding the inner value in others not seem to be a central concern for Jewish discourse today? There are five primary challenges to the Jewish community engaging fully in Jewish social justice leadership right now:

1. **Elitism.** Among some, there is a sense that Jews are more special and holier than Gentiles.
2. **Narrow-Minded Traditionalism.** There is increasingly a slide to the right in traditional communities that are moving toward deeper societal isolation.
3. **Watered-Down *Tikkun Olam.*** Jewish activists often join secular social justice movement without bringing real Jewish wisdom or spirituality to the engagement.
4. **Moral Priorities.** There is a sense that Jews are alone or are hated in the world, and thus we should only take care of ourselves since no one else will.
5. **False Sense of Relevance.** There is a perception (based upon civil rights stories) that Jews are still at the epicenter of change-making.

How do we remedy these challenges? There is no doubt that Jews are feeling more isolated today than in the past 70 years. But the opposite story can also be told. American Jews have never experienced such security, acceptance, and integration. It is true that we have unique obligations to our fellow Jews but that does not preclude us from also actualizing another existential component of the Jew: our humanity. Jewish solidarity can be coupled with human solidarity.

One of the vital decisions activists can make is to decide whether we wish to be on the side of listening and healing or on the side of waiting. Activists do not engage in this crucial work because we are promised a reward. As it says: "Whoever has compassion for [God's] creatures is shown compassion from Heaven" (BT *Shabbat* 151b). Rather than waiting to witness the spiritual recompense for our deeds, we engage in this work because we love others and feel empathy for others' suffering. We seek to emulate God's ways:

> The Talmud teaches: "The Torah begins with an act of kindness, and ends with an act of kindness. It begins with an act of kindness, for it says, 'God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them' (Genesis 3:21). And it ends with an act of kindness, for it says, 'He [God] buried him [Moses] in the valley."[15]

One of the costs of opening our hearts to vulnerable populations of the world is the nightmares and anxiety it produces. It is haunting to deal with echoes of orphans crying from broken cribs, hospital rooms filled with casualties from senseless civil wars, refugee camps filled with generations of families, factory farms slicing jugular veins without pause, jail cells stuffed with people who need to be rehabilitated rather than punished, and janitor closets where invisible workers toil out of sight and out of mind from the greater populace. But we must do our best to accept the challenges of assisting these people, even at great sacrifice to our emotional cores.

Each of us has something to share. Anne Frank's message of not needing "to wait a moment before make the world better" is an inspirational aphorism that can push us to use the talents we have to actualize our unique potential. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains that Judaism cannot be reduced to some strict Kantian calculation of a "universal imperative." Rather, Judaism is a deeply subjective and relative religion where everyone has a unique calling in this world:

> There is no life without a task; no person without a talent; no place without a fragment of God's light waiting to be discovered and redeemed; no situation without its possibility of sanctification; no moment without its call. It may take a lifetime to learn how to find these things, but once we learn, we realize in retrospect that all it ever took was the ability to listen…. He whispers our name—and the greatest reply, the reply of Abraham, is simply *hineni*: "Here I am," ready to heed your call, to mend a fragment of Your all-too-broken world.[16]

I think the basis of values-driven and mission-driven efforts is the notion that we just don't look at the small annoyances that hold us back. Instead, there is an obligation to look beyond the

inconveniences of the work and look towards the ultimate goal of healing the world. To be a passionate advocate means worrying less about folks throwing water on our embers of compassion, and focusing more on feeding our fires. In other words, more than battling the darkness that surrounds us, let's infuse ourselves and those around us with light. We are to be focused on the big picture.

While Jews have a unique holy mission in the world, we dare not look down upon Gentiles or other faith groups in our pursuit of universal justice. Indeed, we must emerge in a faith-rooted manner that is transformative for us, as well as for populations who experience oppression and injustice. To be sure, there are texts from Jewish tradition that imply we have a higher obligation to Jews than to Gentiles (BT *Bava Metzia* 71a). Yet, there are also texts that instruct that we are equally obligated to all (BT *Gittin* 61a). Nachmanides teaches that: “We are commanded to save the life of a non-Jew and to save him from harm, that if he was drowning in a river or a stone fell on him, that we must use all of our strength and be burdened with saving him and if he was sick, we engage to heal him” (*Sefer haMitzvot,* Mitzvah 16).

Human solidarity is something to work toward and cultivate. When immigrant children recently found themselves under attack in America, I found myself praying, under the stars, in a circle of strangers. A young woman to the left took my hand. A young woman to the right took my hand. They were no longer Mexican, Christian, brown, women, DREAMers. I was no longer Jewish, American, white, a man, a citizen. They were all those things and I was all of those things. But, for a brief moment, difference fell away. We were one: Not strangers, just humanity. All of us humbly sinking together into the harmonious unity of the cosmos, in solidarity with each other and with creation.

[1] *Voice of America* broadcast (11 November 1951).
[2] See Abraham Joshua Heschel (Gordon Tucker, trans.), *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, Continuum, New York, 2006, p. 73; JT *Nedarim* 9:4.
[3] *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:27.
[4] *Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Shemini* 15b. Similarly, *Genesis Rabbah, Lekh Lekha* 44:1; *Leviticus Rabbah, Shemini* 13:3; See also Ira Bedzow, *Maimonides for Moderns: A Statement of Contemporary Jewish Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, United Kingdom, 2017, p. 45.
[5] Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, Touchstone, New York, 1988, p. 183.
[6] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, p. 41.
[7] Elchanan Wasserman, *Kovetz Maamarim* (ed. R. Eliezer Simchah Wasserman), Jerusalem 1963, pp. 42–43.
[8] Emmanuel Levinas (trans. Gary D. Mole), *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, The Athlone Press, London, p. 142.
[9] See Martin Buber (trans. Olga Marx), *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, Routledge, New York, 2002, p. 7.
[10]Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, & Reuven Ziegler, eds.), Abraham’s *Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc. New York, 2008, p. 203.
[11] Ramban commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18; see also David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic: The Search for a New Jewish Self*, Jewish Lights, Woodstock, VT, 2012, p. 43.
[12] See Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy*, New World Library, Novato, CA, 2012, p. 129.
[13] See Joseph Telushkin, *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume 2: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself*, Random House, New York, 2009, pp. 39–40.
[14] *Midot HaRaayah, Ahavah* 9.
[15] Deuteronomy 34:6; BT *Sotah* 14a.
[16] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*, Schocken, New York, 2005, p. 262.