Judaism and a Social Justice Ethic

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No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main;
…any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind;
and therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

John Donne (1572-1631)

Judaism and a Social Justice Ethic

Yamin Levy

Torah proclaims that every person is created in God's image and therefore human life is not only of supreme value but human existence in endowed with divine responsibility. As partners with God and stewards of the world's resources it is mankind's duty to see that God's bounty and God's compassion is enjoyed by all who walk the face of the earth. The Midrash[1] understands *Imatio Dei* as a call for justice, mercy and compassion. Maimonides[2] reiterates this mandate as the ultimate goal in human perfection per the prophets Yirmiyau's words:

Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise person take pride in his wisdom; neither let the mighty person take pride in his might; let not the rich person take pride in his riches; but let him that takes pride, take pride in this: That he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises mercy, justice, and righteousness on the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord; (Jeremiah 9:22-23)

I present these values in universal terms because that is the way Hazal understood our responsibility in relationship to the world.

The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni 1:13 states:

"God formed Adam out of dust from all over the world – yellow clay, white sand, black loam, and red soil. Therefore no one can declare to any people that they do not belong since this soil is not their home".

It is our obligation as citizens of the world and as Jews to eradicate hunger, pursue peace, and seek out justice. Everything about Judaism screams out involvement, non-conformity and resistance against oppression and injustice.

So when I was recently accosted by a well meaning member, of a community I was invited to, who waving a newspaper clipping about some young men at YCT who went to Ghana to build water and sewage systems for impoverished communities I was quite surprised. "Don't we have enough of our own problems that we need to worry about their problems?" he barked. "Let them (the non-Jewish world) deal with their own problems our boys should worry about Torah, anti-Semitism and Israel". "Everything else belongs to the world of the non-Jew"! I responded impatiently with: "Zeh Toldot HaAdam", the Biblical clause 'this is the generations of humanity', which was referred to By Ben Azzai (a student of Rabbi Akiva) as a fundamental principle of Judaism. According to Be Azzai all of humanity must be considered as brothers and sisters. "It seems like my world" I responded "and the world of these young men is much larger than your world".

I often marvel at how little religion and Judaism in particular asks of us living in the modern world. Judaism offers consolation, guidance, community but where is the courage to challenge and break the idols of today's culture and shatter the callousness of our daily comforts. Living a religious existence has achieved a degree of social respectability that involves neither risk nor strain.

When Emunah is replaced by creed, Avodah by discipline, Ahavah by habit, when the collective memory of our people's glorious past trumps today's crisis, when Judaism becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain or when we permit the only Jewish voice heard is the one of authority rather than the voice of compassion, its message, God forbid, becomes meaningless.

Judaism is much more than a mood or a feeling. The Torah answers the timeless question: What does God ask of me? Unfortunately the question that is more often heard goes as follows: what can I expect from God? What will I get out of a religious life? As opposed to what will life get out of me?

Hazal consistently emphasize human obligations over human rights. The purpose of our religious tradition is to keep alive the voice that calls out and says: "I understand the demand and here I am". The Judaism our prophets expected of us was not a religion that sought the satisfaction of personal needs. To define religious life in such terms is to make of it a refined sort of magic. The thunderous theophany at Sinai did not proclaim the Ten Commandments in order to satisfy ones personal needs! The task is to convert the divine commandment into human concern. The prophets of Israel, the great teachers of old, the individuals who have achieved the highest levels of spiritual consciousness devoted their orations and writing to the plight of the widow, orphan and stranger. Instead of affording us treaties on metaphysics or discourses on the sublime they dealt with the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place employing the most excessive language to make their point. For the prophet of Israel what appears to be a minor, commonplace sort of injustice assumes cosmic proportions:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,

Be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord.
For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters
And hewed out cisterns for themselves,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.

Jeremiah 2:12-13

Prophecy is the voice of God when the silent agony of the plundered poor cannot be heard. God rages through the prophet's words.

The prophet had little tolerance for those to whom God was simply spiritual bliss, comfort or a security blanket. The God of the prophets was the voice of incessant demand for compassion and justice. Tranquility was unknown to the soul of the prophet. The pain of the weak was his /her own – the suffering of the world gave him/ her no rest. In the Maimonidean economy of ideas the ladder in Jacob's dream was a metaphor for the Prophet's life work. In his dream, Jacob noted that angels ascended and then descended the ladder that reached the heavens. The Prophet of Israel firsts ascends the ladder of intellectual and character achievements for the sole purpose of descending the ladder in order to use his / her teachings to create a just and peaceful society.

Today complacency and conformity have replaced the passionate protest for justice, peace and righteousness that was the seal of the prophet.

Hazal internalized the message of the prophets and mandated active involvement in all matters facing the community.

Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his community and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world (BT Shabbath 54b)

This is quite an indictment against conformity and parochial concerns. For Hazal Torah is about the struggle to create a better society. Injustice cannot be passively accepted. In fact the Torah in at least four places admonishes "And you shall eradicate the evil from your midst" (Devarim 13:6, 17:7, 21:21, 24:7).Even God is challenged to apply the above standard when judging the pious:

"R. Acha ben Chanina said: Never did a favorable decree go forth from the mouth of the Lord which He withdrew and changed into an unfavorable judgment, except the following:

'And the Lord said to His angel: Go through the city of Jerusalem and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed' (Ezekiel 9:4)

At that moment, the prosecutor came forward in the heavenly court and said to the Lord: How are these (marked men) different from the others? Whereas God responded: these are wholly righteous men, while those are wholly wicked men. But Lord, argued the prosecutor they had the power to protest and did not? God responded and said: Had they protested they would not have succeeded. The Prosecutor countered: but Lord, if it was revealed to You, was it revealed to them? Accordingly they should have protested and incurred scorn for the holy Name, and have been ready to suffer blows … as the prophets

of Israel suffered. God revoked his original order, and the righteous were found guilty because of the failure to protest" (BT Shabbath 55a)

Righteousness is defined by non-conformity. Torah mandates we protest against injustice and effect change even when successful implementation appears very difficult[3].

From its inception Judaism has been a voice of protest against the evils of greed, injustice and the misuse of power. The Midrash described Avraham as a child challenging the belief system of his times by smashing the idols of his father and thus establishing the precedent that a Jew should not conform to a societies values when they are evil. Later in his life he challenged non-other than God by exclaiming: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly? (Genesis 18:25) Noach in contrast was later rebuked by Hazal for failing to criticize the immorality of the society around him.

The book of Exodus begins with three stories of protest against injustice. Shifra and Puah take on the Egyptian empire by refusing to kill innocent babies, Moshe Rabbeinu while living in Pharaoh's court goes out to his people and rushes to defend a slave against an Egyptian aggressor. The third story also takes place before Moshe is chosen by God to the lead the people. Being forced to flee from Egypt Moshe comes to the aid of a shepherd's daughters who were being harassed. All the books of Tanakh are filled with stories, metaphors and injunctions against passivity in the face of injustice.

Hermann Cohen the 20th century German Jewish philosopher found significant meaning in the fact that the Torah states no less than 36 times not to mistreat the stranger:

The alien was protected, although he was not a member of one's family, clan, religious community or perhaps people; simply because he was a human being. In the alien, therefore, man discovered the idea of humanity.[4]

Our world today faces countless critical issues such as vast poverty, the threat to our eco-system, widespread hunger, dwindling resources, war, violence, human slave trafficking, and rapid population growth. There has not been enough of an effort in the modern orthodox community to apply the Jewish values of compassion and justice to the many critical problems that threaten the world today. It is our community that is positioned to be the champions of social justice, the eternal voice of protest against corruption.

[1] Sifre Deuteronomy 11:22; also BT Sota 14a

[2] Maimonides, Guide 2:54

[3] I distinguish here between rebuke and protest. To rebuke another for religious transgressions is not the subject of this essay.

[4] Quote taken from David Novak's article called Universal Moral Law in the Theology of Hermann Cohen, Modern Judaism 1981:1: 101-117