Torah and Social Justice: The Work of Uri L'Tzedek

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The authors are leaders of Uri L'Tzedek, an organization dedicated to addressing social justice issues. This article appears in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

For nearly two thousand years, the Jewish people experienced powerlessness wandering in exile, often without privileges, land or rights. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, we became the prototypical ger (stranger), perpetually in a state of alienation from our surroundings. During the modern period, Jews won increasing rights in the Western world and began to participate more actively in the societies in which they lived.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Jewish communities in Israel and in North America experienced unprecedented freedom and prosperity. One indicator of this has been the emergence of Jewish organizations that address social justice concerns in America and around the world. Jews have come to see themselves as "global citizens". Organizations like American Jewish World Service, PANIM, Jewish Funds for Justice, and the Religious Action Center reflect the Jewish community's desire to go beyond its own gates. In this hotbed of Jewish social justice development, the Orthodox community has notably been underrepresented. Perhaps for fear of assimilation or dilution of halakhic standards, the Orthodox community allowed the Torah's charge of tzedek tzedek tirdof (justice, justice, you shall pursue) to become the mantra of other movements as it focused inward.

In recent years, young Orthodox Jews have decided to move their efforts beyond their own communities. These young Jewish activists, born and bred on hesed projects, are not satisfied with momentary amelioration of life's difficulties. This younger generation, which grew up with the comforts and trappings of power and

prosperity, craves more lasting change and more meaningful ways to better society. Out of this desire for systemic social justice led by the Orthodox community, Uri L'Tzedek was born. This essay will outline Uri L'Tzedek's mission and goals, strategies and tactics, as well as two specific case studies that demonstrate the social justice change that Uri L'Tzedek creates and promotes.

Uri L'Tzedek aims to serve and inspire the American Orthodox Jewish community toward social justice in and beyond our communities. It seeks to develop the growing discourse of social justice among traditional Jewish communities using Jewish texts and the paradigms of halakha to connect God, Torah and social-political issues, ultimately translating that discourse into action. Through its work, Uri L'Tzedek aspires to create a Jewish community of learners and leaders who will seek to improve the world, while simultaneously fulfilling and enriching their religious and ethical lives.

Uri L'Tzedek employs three principal strategies to promote and achieve its mission: (1) to create learning opportunities to allow for the reintegration of social justice issues and traditional Jewish sources; (2) to foster and train new Jewish social justice leadership; and (3) to engage in action and activism toward substantive systemic change.

At the heart of Uri L'Tzedek's success has been its beit midrash (learning) program. Through batei midrash, Uri L'Tzedek began creating an Orthodox community that wrestled with the role of social justice in the Torah, the Talmud and the halakhic literature. Topics have included immigration, healthcare, Tibet and domestic violence. Uri L'Tzedek educators and visiting scholars combined Jewish learning, compelling personal narratives, and the most recent and urgent facts and research on the pressing issues of today. These educational programs are taught in synagogues, schools, and colleges.

To bring the powerful Torah of justice outside the four walls of the beit midrash, Uri L'Tzedek began developing social justice leaders in the Orthodox community. The charge of creating a just society is greater than any single individual or small group can shoulder. With a broad, diverse and committed leadership, Uri L'Tzedek reaches more people, addresses more issues and creates more opportunities for change. Uri L'Tzedek fosters a diverse cohort of leadership through one-on-one meetings, community-driven initiatives, high school and college student mentoring, and individually mentored programs.

Uri L'Tzedek as an organization identifies pressing social justice issues that impact, or are impacted by, our community. By partnering with other

organizations, neighborhood councils and community initiatives, Uri L'Tzedek identifies and addresses social justice needs ranging from inter-community race relations to domestic workers' rights.

The gemara in Kiddushin states: "Study is great, for it leads to action." Uri L'Tzedek is committed to translating the learning into real life. Learning about the halakhic mandate to care for the stranger and the oppressed is complemented by work with Jewish-owned businesses to help them treat immigrant workers according to the Torah's standards. Studying the Jewish view of forbidding racism leads to opportunities for people from diverse communities to join together for community service and dialogue. Over the course of the past year, Uri L'Tzedek addressed the challenge of workers' rights in two specific arenas.

The first such example of combining learning with activism was an initiative at Stern College for Women. In February 2008, Shmuly Yanklowitz, Uri L'Tzedek co-founder and director, taught at a social justice shabbaton at Stern College about workers' rights. After the lecture, several inspired students wanted to learn more about the issue and how they could effect change. Yanklowitz directed them to resources in both the halakhic and social justice literature and encouraged them to examine the institutions around them. The students discovered that workers at Stern College did not have a place to eat their lunches due to the restrictions against non-kosher food in the cafeteria. The students learned that there was no separate cafeteria for workers. They were forced to eat outside or in bathrooms. Concerned about this treatment of workers, students organized a petition. They approached the administration of the school asking for a change. The administration answered this request. Within a week, a temporary lunchroom for Stern College workers was made available.

A second example of combining learning with activism was Uri L'Tzedek's joining Domestic Workers United (DWU) in lobbying for a domestic workers bill of rights. While American labor law provides benefits and protection for most industries, domestic workers in homes, as well as farm workers, have been excluded. In the fall of 2007, Uri L'Tzedek identified this topic as a growing social justice concern and held an evening study program, examining this topic from both halakhic and personal perspectives. That following spring, Uri L'Tzedek joined a campaign to pass legislation in the New York State Assembly and State Senate that would guarantee domestic and farm workers the basic labor rights that all other laborers already enjoy. Joining together with a coalition comprised of clergy, advocacy groups, volunteers, academics and domestic workers, Uri L'Tzedek activists journeyed to Albany, NY to lobby for this social justice cause. This effort

succeeded on two levels: it created strong new communal bonds where none had previously existed, and it significantly pushed this legislation forward, garnering additional eight multi-sponsoring congressmen and the eventual passing of the first ever domestic workers bill of rights.

For Orthodoxy to remain a relevant and a transformative force, it must speak to the souls of American Jews. Jews, today more than ever, are seeking to make meaning of their contemporary identities and to be engaged in modern society in more complex and nuanced ways. The Torah must be an enabler, not an inhibitor, in guiding a sophisticated and moral discourse and call to action. Uri L'Tzedek seeks to lead a movement wherein Jews will integrate Talmud Torah, community organizing, leadership development, and a passion for tzedek. Uri L'Tzedek maintains that a pursuit for righteousness and justice in all domains of our lives is the most powerful religious force to create social change, build community, and represent the truth of our mesorah (tradition). Rabbi Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man inspired us to answer this call: "When God created the world, He provided an opportunity for the work of His hands - humanity - to participate in His creation. The Creator, as it were, impaired reality in order that mortal humans could repair its flaws and perfect it." Uri L'Tzedek supports and challenges our community to respond to Rav Soloveitchik's charge to repair the world and perfect it.

The directors of Uri L'Tzedek are Ari Hart, Aaron Finkelstein, Tsufit Daniel, and Shmuly Yanklowitz. To learn more about Uri L'Tzedek visit uriltzedek.webnode.com or write to uri.ltzedek@gmail.com.