

## Plain as Day: Our Bible's Call for Social Justice

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A few weeks ago, I spoke about the prophet Jeremiah, whose very first prophecy we would read as our Haftarah that next morning. His was the first of three haftarot of admonition—of admonishment—in which the prophets chastise the Jewish people of their times. They chastise them *in the name of God*, because, as we said, a true prophet can only speak the words God puts in their mouths. The prophet may take some *poetic* license, but the sentiments come from what Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests is an empathic relationship with God—a sort of emotional closeness. The prophet and God are on the same wavelength. And in these three haftarot especially, that wavelength is an angry one.

In the third haftarah of admonition, from the prophet Isaiah, God is so angry at the Jewish people that the prophet rails against us, saying God doesn't even want our sacrifices any more: "I've had enough of your burnt offerings of rams, the fat of your calves, the blood of your bulls!" God doesn't want us coming to the Temple: "Assemblies of iniquity, I cannot abide!" God doesn't want our prayer: "When you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you... I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime."

What was our crime? *Twice* the prophet says it has to do with our treatment of the *yatom* and the *almanah*—the orphan and the widow. We have failed to uphold justice for them—which is to say, for the most vulnerable members of society. "Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one...greedy for gifts. They do not judge the case of the orphan, and the widow's cause never even reaches them." And how might we come clean of our societal sins? The prophet advises, "Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow." If we do this, "Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white. Be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece." It's a pretty simple equation.

It's an equation reiterated on the holiest day of the year in another prophecy by Isaiah that we read on Yom Kippur: Shirk justice and compassion, and God will want none of your rituals and religious offerings. Protect the rights of the vulnerable, and God will once again be on your side. "Is this the fast I desire?" When we *act* piously but continue to oppress others? "No, *this* is the fast I desire: To untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free...it is to share your bread with the hungry, and take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him." And if we do these things, then "the Presence of Adonai will be your guard. When you call, God will answer. When you cry, God will say, 'Here I am...' Then shall your light shine in darkness."

There are critics of our movement who propose that social justice, while nice, and admirable, has no basis in Jewish text. Who believe that *tikkun olam*—repair of the world—is something we Progressive Jews may *attribute* to Scripture, but which isn't really *native* to our tradition. I, and Isaiah, beg to differ. Not only are calls for justice rampant and *emphatic* in our prophetic literature, but also in the Torah itself: in its *36 calls* for treating the stranger, the widow, and the orphan with dignity and not oppressing them; in the Torah's commandment to feed the needy from the corners of our fields; in the Torah's call to be stewards of the earth and to give our animals a day of rest. To claim that these ideas are not authentic to Judaism, stated clearly, boldly, and inscribed in our sacred texts, is simply myopic.

Interestingly, many who share this perspective don't seem to acknowledge that a great deal of the halachic practice Jews live by today isn't spelled out in the Torah any more than the specific words *tikkun olam* are, if that's what's at issue. The Torah says *shamor v'zachor*—keep and remember the Sabbath—but it is only through much later interpretation of those words—*centuries* later—that we adopted the practice of lighting two candles on Shabbat, one for each word. Nor, by the way, does the Torah say we should light the candles X number of minutes before sunset; this, too, came later, and was only *ascribed* to words found in the Torah, which were taken to be a “prooftext.” If these acts can be ascribed to words in Torah that have so little apparent connection to the actual *content* of the text, then why is it such a *problem* for some people to see the blatant, clear-as-day references to acts of social justice in that same text? They're right there! “Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Do not reap to the edges of your fields...leave them for the poor and the stranger.” “If there be someone needy among you, do not shut your hand against him; you had better open your hand and lend him sufficient for what he needs.” And that's just in our foundational text, the Torah. What about later texts, like Mishnah and Talmud, or even our Haggadah's “Let all who are hungry come and eat”? What about Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, which says that a man is obligated to feed strangers, orphans, widows, and other poor people in his sukkah, or else he hasn't properly performed the mitzvah of rejoicing”?

You can only miss this stuff if you really try. So *why* do some people try? Is it that the responsibility to pursue social justice is difficult and inconvenient, and if we say it's not *Jewish* then we don't have to bother? Aren't there other things we call Jewish that are difficult and inconvenient? Why the double standard, where social justice is concerned?

Is it the misperception that repairing the world only helps *other* peoples, not Jews too? Is there no sense that we all might benefit, by stoking the embers of compassion and social responsibility?

Or is it that people misunderstand our movement and think that social justice is *all* that Progressive Judaism supports, at the *expense* of worship, ritual, peoplehood, or education? This is where they get us wrong. If it is myopic to look at Jewish texts and conclude they say nothing about social justice, it is equally myopic to look at our Progressive Jewish communities and conclude that we don't value a *diversity* of Jewish expressions and responses to God's call, from worship to learning, from *yahrzeit* observance to Shabbat dinner, from Israeli dancing to volunteering, and so much more. Progressive shuls do not value one to the exclusion of the other—*all* are considered valid ways of expressing one's Jewish commitment. We are not the ones saying "either/or." We are saying "both/and."

This was Isaiah's message too. It's not that God doesn't want our sacrifices, prayers or fasts *at all*. It's that these are *incomplete* offerings when presented *in the absence of* righteous, just, and merciful behaviour towards God's creations: other people, the earth, the animals... It's a problem for God, Isaiah says, when ritual is offered *at the expense* of social justice. God wants *both/and*.

Isaiah concludes our three haftarot of admonition with words of guidance: *Tzion b'mishpat tipadeh, v'shaveha bitz'daka*—"Zion shall be redeemed by the law (*mishpat*), her inhabitants through justice (*tzedakah*)."  
Both are commanded. May the light of the prophet's words help us all to "shine in darkness."