

# Judaism and Justice

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

Judaism is a big subject. Having had the privilege of teaching converts to Judaism, I have experienced the challenge of understanding Judaism through the eyes of the uninitiated. It can be overwhelming. There are our sacred texts. There is history, philosophy, and literature. There are all the customs that revolve around life cycle, holidays and ritual observance. There are cultures unique to Jewish communities in countries all around the world. What is it that unites the Jewish people?

At a time when more Jews ask the question, "Why be Jewish?" well before they are even interested in pursuing the question, "How shall I be Jewish?", it is incumbent on us to frame some good answers. Our "market" has been schooled on instant messaging, media sound bites and MTV images. While the educator in me wants to respond to the skeptical inquisitor who asks, "Why be Jewish?" by offering a dozen basic books, the pragmatist in me knows that this is a non-starter. There are too many alternatives making claims on the time and attention of my potential Jew. There is a need for us to state succinctly just what it is that Judaism offers the contemporary

Jew if we are to have any chance of staking a claim to his/her loyalty.

## Core Principles

It is easy to despair. Judaism is a rich tradition and it can take a lifetime even to scratch its surface, not to mention understand its finer nuances. I take comfort in the fact that Jewish sages of the past must have faced similar challenges, yet tried to capture the essence of Judaism in easily understood and remembered formulas.

Maimonides (12th century) framed the core of Judaism in thirteen key principles. Joseph Albo (15th century) formulated three core principles and six dogmas that derived from those principles. In the second century, Shimon the Just offered one of the most memorable three-part formulas of the "pillars" of Judaism — *Torah* (study), *avodah* (service or worship) and *gemilut hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness) (*Mishna Avot* 1:2). One generation later, the sage Hillel, when confronted with a challenge from a Roman soldier, boiled Judaism down to one principle: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. The rest is commentary; now go and study."

## The Purpose of Judaism

While there are disadvantages in any attempt to reduce Judaism to bite-size formulas, to a generation with a short attention span the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. I have taken to asking my students a big question: "What is the purpose of Judaism?" It is amazing how often I am met by mystified faces.

Sometimes, the more Judaically knowledgeable the person, the more confused s/he becomes. Indeed, for Jews who have been raised in Judaically rich Jewish homes, who have benefited from a solid Jewish education and who come to adopt Jewish lives filled with prayer, ritual practice, learning and good deeds, the value of a Jewish lifestyle is self-evident. Yet even for such a Jew, there is the danger of losing the forest for the trees. "What is the purpose of it all?" is a question that helps one to focus and to center.

And then there is everyone else: American Jews who are affluent, well-educated, living lives filled with all kinds of opportunities . . . and yet Judaically illiterate. If they had any exposure to Judaism, it might have been in an afternoon Hebrew school, or with some obligatory lessons that were required to qualify for celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah. As they come into adulthood, the little they remember of their Jewish education is uninspiring. Just as they reach an age when they can begin to appreciate some of the depth, beauty and wisdom of Judaism, they go AWOL. They are educationally unavailable, and their ties to the organized

Jewish community will be, at best, tentative.

Imagine if this constituency of Jews had emerged from their brief exposure to Jewish education with a clear and memorable message of the purpose of Judaism. Perhaps, then, they, like Hillel's Roman soldier, might have considered taking up the challenge to "go and study" at some later time when they became mature adults.

## Justice and Holiness

Based on my reading of Judaism, there are two compelling answers to the question: "What is the purpose of Judaism?" The first purpose is based on Genesis 18:17-19, when Abraham first "hears" or apprehends God's call: to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world. The second purpose is based on God's revelation to Moses, which is recounted in Leviticus 19:2: The Jewish people are told to be a holy nation, and to bring holiness into the world.

Now, this is not a bad start. "Why be Jewish?" Because Judaism is a heritage that extends the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world and brings holiness into that same world. I think that I might now have the attention of more than an occasional Roman soldier.

Judaism believes that one way holiness is brought into the world is when people act with justice and compassion. The core text connecting the ideas of justice and holiness is Isaiah, chapter 58, a section that is read, not coincidentally, as the *haftarah* on Yom Kippur. The holiest

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observance on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur is the very day on which our personal behavior is the yardstick by which we fulfill the obligations of the day.

Is not the fast that I desire the unlocking of the chains of wickedness,

the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of the oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude?

Is it not the sharing of your bread with those who starve, the bringing of the wretched poor into your house,

or clothing someone you see who is naked

and not hiding from your fellow human being in their time of need?

(Behave this way and) Then shall your light burst forth as the dawn, your waters of healing will flourish again,

your righteousness will go before you and God's glory will be behind you.

Then, when you call out to God, God will respond, "Here I am."

(Isaiah 58:6-12)

## Ritual and Ethical Laws

Much has been made of the distinction in Judaism between those laws that are between a person and God and those that are between people and people. The former tend to get categorized as "ritual laws," such as keeping the Sabbath or keeping the laws of *kashrut* (dietary laws). The latter tend to get called "ethical laws," such as giv-

ing charity or visiting the sick. Early Reform Judaism made much out of emphasizing the importance of the latter and the irrelevance of the former. In creating a faith that would allow Jews to integrate easily into general society, the particularities of ritual law seemed to be an unnecessary impediment. Conversely, Judaism's legacy of bringing prophetic principles of justice into the world was a source of pride.

The dichotomy between "ritual" and "ethical" laws is not always helpful. Even as Reform Judaism has spent the past several decades trying to reclaim parts of the Jewish tradition that the early architects of their movement dismissed, to most liberal Jews, the ethical principles of Judaism have a self-evident value that the more particular parts of Judaism do not. It is against this backdrop that contemporary Jews need to reassess the relationship between justice and holiness.

The Torah calls the Jewish people an *am segulah* and an *am kadosh* (Deut. 7: 6, 14:2), a special nation, a holy nation. Building on ideas rooted in the pagan Near East, Abraham and his offspring created a monotheistic faith that gave birth not only to Judaism, but to Christianity and Islam as well. If the core principles of Judaism were to survive, the Jewish people needed to shape a culture and a lifestyle apart from the surrounding nations. The biblical admonition against "whoring after other Gods" (Judges 2:17, 8:33), later edicts prohibiting intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and the growth of a body of customs that distinguished Jews from others, were all driven by the

need to keep Jews a people apart, a holy nation. Indeed, the Hebrew word for holiness, *kedusha*, derives from the root meaning, "to set apart."

## Holy Apartness, Reconsidered

In the modern Western world, many Jews came to believe that this "holy apartness" was an unfortunate holdover from an earlier era when Jews were consigned to ghettos, persecuted and even killed. Modern Jews believed that in a world that welcomed Jews, indeed a world that made "our" Ten Commandments a basis for Western notions of morality and ethics, there was no longer a need for Jews to be a people apart.

The liberal/universal bias of so many modern Jews either led to a polite "benign neglect" of the notion of Judaism's "holy apartness" or an outright rejection of the idea as incompatible with modernity and pluralistic societies. That was certainly the perspective brought to the issue by Mordecai Kaplan.

At the dawn of the 21st century, this liberal/universalistic ethic is being challenged by many thoughtful people. Much of the world is seized by a radical Islamic fundamentalism that sees Western, liberal democracy as an evil, surpassed only by the evil of Zionism, Israel and the Jewish people itself. Each is regarded as an infidel force that needs to be eliminated by any possible means.

## Challenges of American Culture

Nor is this the only threat to the values and ideals that Judaism brought

into the world. Increasingly it is obvious that secular American culture is not the "neutral setting" that it was thought to be a century ago, a setting that would allow for a multiplicity of faiths and ethnic groups to co-exist, leading to a rich cultural mosaic in a tolerant and pluralistic America. This country's affluence and its love affair with consumerism has created a culture that is at odds with Judaism's emphasis on justice and holiness.

The pursuit of corporate profit that enriches the few creates a marketplace without a conscience. American corporations market violent toys, video games and movies without regard for the fact that in doing so, they contribute to America having more homicides than any other country. The selling of sex — in music, movies, magazines, and on television — makes it virtually impossible to raise children who understand and value the sanctity of loving relationships, the family and the virtue of modesty.

The widespread phenomenon of dishonesty, stock manipulations, and corporate financial scandals in politics and business among educated and professional people sends a message that "it is OK as long as you can get away with it." These examples of moral decay exist against the backdrop of a society that has allowed the gap between rich and poor to grow wider with each passing year.

## Distinctive Jewish Values

For several generations, many American Jews were convinced that American values were more or less the

same as Jewish values. The logical extension of that assumption was that it was not worth the time to learn the language of Judaism, since America provided much the same set of values. It was a license for Jewish illiteracy. It went without saying that Jewish "holiness" was chauvinistic, exclusivist and un-American. Why should Jews hold themselves apart from an America that gave them unparalleled freedom and economic opportunity? We should drink deeply and fully from the cup of American society.

It was these assumptions that lay behind Mordecai Kaplan's rejection of the idea of chosenness. Hoping for a world in which all religions might undergo the same kind of reconstruction that he was proposing for Judaism, Kaplan envisioned a world parliament of religions at which the people who brought the idea of chosenness into the world — the Jews — would voluntarily relinquish that claim. In return, all the other religions of the world, having created their own versions of tribal chauvinism, would similarly relinquish voluntarily their claims on exclusive truth.

World events of recent years have been hard on Kaplan's brand of liberal universalism. Though we might continue to admire the sentiments he so eloquently set forth, most of the Western world has been rudely awakened to a world struggle in which democracy, freedom and pluralism are identified by adherents of radical Islam as a scourge that must be eradicated from the world. Judaism, of course, does not escape indictment by these same extremist elements.

## Truths and Insights

Now it seems clearer that increasing numbers of Jews, and a not insignificant number of non-Jews, are coming to see that within Jewish texts there are truths and insights that are in short supply in the world. It is also clear that throughout history, Jews have had some measure of success in making these values operative in their communities.

Ironically, at the dawn of the 21st century, it seems that we have not traveled so far down the road from our ancestors who understood that Judaism was "counter-culture," offering a way of thinking and living that was embraced by few others in the world. Whereas once the cultural norm from which Judaism dissented was paganism, today it might be religious fanaticism, hedonism or secularism. From this perspective, the idea of *am segulah*, "holiness," has newfound appeal. There may well be no other way for the values and ideals envisioned by Judaism to be expressed and carried forward in the world, even if those ideals are not yet embraced by the society at large. For much of Jewish history, the biblical expression *am levado yishkon* (Numbers 23:9), "Israel is a nation that dwells alone," was descriptive. Today it has become prescriptive. Unless the Jewish people succeeds in holding onto some parts of the values and ideals of justice and holiness, over and against societies and cultures that have either rejected or ignored those ideals, there is no way for those principles to endure. It can only be done by reclaiming the importance and value of the Jewish people being "holiness-apart."

## Abraham and "the Call"

As we grapple with the core commitments of Judaism, we would do well to turn back to the Abraham narrative in the book of Genesis. With Abraham, God begins to build a covenantal relationship with one family, a family that becomes the Jewish nation. If one family can respond to God's call "to do what is right and just," (Gen. 18:19) perhaps the peoples of the world can come to live that way as well. Perhaps the Jewish people can become, in the prophet Isaiah's famous words, a "light of the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). Mordecai Kaplan himself, in *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, identifies the same verse as the source of the Bible's humanistic (as opposed to its mythological) message. It is the way that the Torah "provides inspiration and guidance in consonance with 'God's way of justice through law.'"<sup>1</sup>

It doesn't take long for Abraham to internalize the lesson. For only a few verses later, Abraham challenges God to act in a just manner as he threatens to destroy the inhabitants of Sodom and Gemorrah. Abraham asks of God: "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen. 18:23-33).

The Jewish people today are challenged by Abraham's legacy. Our community is a mixed bag with regard to living the legacy of Judaism and justice. On the one hand, we can take pride in the numerous organizations that have been created within the Jewish community in recent years that address the issue of justice. From the most prominent national organiza-

tions, like the Jewish Fund for Justice, Mazon, the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy and the American Jewish World Service, to smaller organizations that work in particular areas, like the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Poverty or the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, every week thousands of Jews roll up their sleeves to try to act in the spirit of the prophets to care for the most vulnerable in our society and our world. These are Jews who understand that Judaism is nothing if it is not about justice.

But the majority of Jews are unaware of such efforts. The reality is that most of our community is quite far from the experience of the "stranger, widow and orphan." The gap between rich and poor in America has widened. Today, the bottom 20 percent of Americans earn 4 percent of the national income; the top 5 percent earn 21 percent of the national income. In 1973, the top 5 percent of Americans earned 11 times more than the bottom 20 percent. Today, that multiple is 20! It is no secret on which side of that divide American Jews stand.

Tevye told us that it is no sin to be rich, but it sure makes it harder to understand the plight of America's most underprivileged populations. I find many members of the Jewish community increasingly insensitive to the challenges faced by poor people in George Bush's America. Even as our community sponsors some commendable efforts to fulfill Abraham's legacy, many Jews have worked hard to widen the distance between their life station and

the life station of those in need. We have a lot of work to do to bridge the gap between our talk and our walk.

### **Jewish Survival**

In the end, Jewish insiders who worry no end about Jewish survival may be barking up the wrong tree. Whereas our parents' generation sought out the institutions of the organized Jewish community — synagogues, federations, Israel — as their primary locus of identification, our children are loathe to view themselves quite so parochially. The last two demographic studies of the American Jewish community (1990, 2000) give evidence of a weakening of ethnic ties with each successive generation. This trend will not be stemmed by finger wagging over intermarriage or rabbinic sermons on the evils of assimilation.

Among the few magnets of identification for younger Jews are Jewish organizations that define their mission in the keys of justice and holiness. Find the organizations that engage Jews in renovating the homes of poor people, tutoring inner-city children, working the line at a soup kitchen, and the like — and you will find young Jews. Find the organizations that talk about Judaism as a path to holy living, as a way to encounter one's inner life, as a way to experience the transcendent in a world gone mad — and you will find young Jews. Ironically, these paths — justice and holiness — are Judaism's most ancient messages, messages that we would do well to rediscover in our own day.

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1. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 10.