RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

A JEWISH CALL FOR JUSTICE

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For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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Can Social Justice Save the American Jewish Soul?

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For most of my professional life as a rabbi, a teacher, an author, and a community activist, I have tried to advance the idea that social justice needs to be more central to the program of the American Jewish community. The idea is so simple and, seemingly, so obvious that it is hard to understand why it cannot gain traction.

Isn't it obvious that social justice is the primary mandate of Judaism? Isn't it obvious that there is no attitude or behavior as universally shared by American Jews as their commitment to the ideals of tolerance, peace, and justice for all people? Isn't it obvious that if the Jewish community made social justice a core commitment in the way it spoke and acted in the world that it would attract tens of thousands of Jews who are otherwise turned off to Jewish affiliations and who spend their time and money on a host of causes and organizations that advance the common good in our society and in our world?

The answer to these questions lies in the origins of Judaism. As I outline in my book, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair*

the World (Jewish Lights), we have a tribal obligation to each other as Jews and a convenantal obligation to the world as ethical human beings.

A Nation with a Mission

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, when God expands on an initial charge to Abraham to go forth from his land to the land that God will show him. In 18:19, God adds a critical prerequisite that will enable Abraham to fulfill his destiny and become the father of a great nation. He is to obey God's commandments and "extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world," *la'asot tzedakah umishpat.*

The second purpose of Judaism is based on God's revelation to Moses, which is recounted in Exodus 19:6. The Jewish people are told to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," a *mamlechet kohanim* and *goy kadosh*. The Hebrew word for holiness—*kedusha*—comes from a root that means separate and apart.

Judaism is a religion based on a paradox: Jews are expected to maintain a holy apartness as God's chosen people and, *at the same time*, are expected to be totally engaged with the world around them. The observance of ritual laws must be combined with acting toward others with justice and compassion to be loyal to God's covenant with the Jewish people.

Each of these core mandates of Judaism—tribe and covenant—are rooted in the Torah, which has made them part and parcel of Jewish consciousness and identity. The Exodus from Egypt is a political act that liberates a people from slavery and gives them a sense of common history and destiny. The political consciousness it generates among a newly created Children of Israel (*b'nai Yisrael*) is supported by the teachings that Israel is an *am segulah*, a treasured and exceptional people (Deut. 14:2); a *goy kadosh*, a nation that is holy and apart (Exod. 19:6); and "a nation that will dwell alone," *am levado yishkon* (Num. 23:9). I call this Exodus consciousness.

If the Exodus created an ethnic/tribal consciousness among Jews, it was Sinai that invested in them an understanding of their mission in the world. Jewish existence was to be based on bringing *tzedek* and *mishpat*, righteousness and justice, to all God's children. The covenant forged at Sinai committed the Jewish people to a life of ethics and values. It was the spiritual/moral genesis of the Jewish people, and it was powerfully connected to the Jewish people's understanding of what God wants of them. The Torah's teachings about acting with compassion (*chesed*), protecting the stranger in one's midst (*ahavat ger*), and pursuing peace (*shalom*) and truth (*emet*) shaped the Jewish notion of how one should live in the world. Sinai consciousness is at the root of the Jewish understanding that to live true to the covenant that God established with the Jewish people at Sinai is to live a life of social responsibility.

Tribal Jewish Identity

Modernity and the experience of the American Jewish community have brought into bold relief the growing gap between covenantal and tribal Jewish identity.

Tribal Jewish identity in the twenty-first century is relatively easy to define. The State of Israel is the single largest tribal Jewish polity. You are either a citizen of the state or not. A Jew living in the Diaspora has the opportunity to express loyalty for the State of Israel by joining an organization that works to raise money or generate political support for the Jewish state. This, too, makes that Jew a member of the tribe.

Jews also can declare their tribal identity by making a financial contribution to their local Jewish federation, which supports a wide range of local and international Jewish needs. The same is true for memberships in synagogues and in Jewish cultural, philanthropic, public affairs, and/or educational organizations. Payment of these voluntary "taxes" also essentially makes one a member of the tribe.

This means of creating tribal identity has the useful side effect of allowing us to measure, quantitatively, the size of the Jewish world. What we discover is that, while the population of the State of Israel continues to grow, the affiliation numbers in the rest of the Jewish world show a steady decline, a phenomenon that leads those very organizations to have a heightened sense that the future of the Jewish people is at risk. Those committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish

community will continually be challenged to find ways to capture a larger market share of the Jews who do not choose to belong to the tribe in any tangible way.

Covenantal Jewish Identity

To understand the decline of Jewish tribal affiliation, it is critical to understand what covenantal identity means to contemporary Jews. Throughout the generations, the Rabbis recognized that the covenantal spirit of Abraham's legacy was as important as the specific behavioral commandments that later made up the substance of Jewish life and observance. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, perhaps the most respected Orthodox sage in the history of American Jewry, asserts that the *brit avot*, the covenant of Abraham and the patriarchs—a covenant with a universal thrust focused on the welfare of the entire world—was more important than the specific laws given in the Torah and in later rabbinic codes, laws intended to preserve Jewish particularity. The legacy of Abraham's response to God's call to righteousness and to justice shaped the values and consciousness of Jews for all time.[1]

In a similar vein, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who served as the first chief rabbi of Palestine from 1921 to 1935, believed that the early Zionists—who observed few, if any, of the ritual commandments of Judaism, and who wore their secularism proudly—were agents for a divine plan for the Jewish people in the world. Unlike Theodor Herzl, Kook did not see a Jewish homeland as primarily a place to provide safe refuge for persecuted Jews. Rather, he believed that the upbuilding of Israel was part of a divine plan to bring healing to the entire world.

This more universal (and potentially secularizing) understanding of Jewish faith and destiny is at the core of modern covenantal Jewish identity. Rabbi Kook challenged the normative rabbinic reading of the verse "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" as referring only to other Jews. He believed that Jews must read the verse to refer to all humanity.[2]

It is not easy for the organized Jewish community to assess how Jews might be living out covenantal Jewish identity when it is stripped of all elements of tribal association. It is easier to identify a Jew who takes on the particular details of Jewish observance and faith than it is to identify a Jew who has no such practice yet lives in accordance with

Jewish ethical and moral principles. There are data that can tell you how many Jews belong to synagogues, how many contribute money to federations, and how many travel to Israel. One can also discover how many Jews keep kosher and how many light Hanukkah candles. What cannot be as accurately determined, however, is how many Jews feel Jewish, or how many Jews view Judaism and Jewish ethics as an important part of their identity.

Expanding the Tent

Many Jews define large parts of what drives their actions in the world through the context of the Judaic heritage, even when they have no Jewish affiliations or do not engage in any Jewish religious practice. They adhere to what I call Sinai consciousness, or what the sociologist Herbert Gans calls "symbolic ethnicity."[3]

Given the way that the Jewish community currently functions, such Jews are effectively defined as being outside of the tribe. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jews who might otherwise be open to initiatives or programs of the Jewish community when such endeavors align with their values and ethics are driven away by an implicit attitude coming from communal institutions that they have "not paid their dues" to the tribe, not only financially but also by their lack of regular association with communal institutions.

The organized Jewish community is not very good at understanding and validating this kind of covenantal Jewish identity. The leadership of the American Jewish community often feels that the community is under siege and/or at risk. Any manifestation of anti-Semitism at home or abroad, and any threat to the security of the State of Israel, sends the community to its battle stations. When in this mode, the Jewish community has a tendency to circle the wagons and ostracize those Jews whose opinions stray too far from the party line, as evidenced by the experience of Breira in the 1970s and *Tikkun* magazine for much of its history.

During rare moments, like the mid-1990s, when Israel seemed to be on the road to peace and the Jewish community did not feel besieged by outside enemies, the demons became internal. Predicting "death by demography," communal leaders sounded alarm bells over

the results of Jewish population studies that showed soaring rates of intermarriage and assimilation and declining affiliation patterns.

In either mode—under siege or at risk—the Jewish community tends to draw hard and fast lines on who belongs and who does not. And the harder the lines, the less likely that covenantal/Sinai Jews, whose identity is soft and ambivalent, will see themselves as part of the Jewish community.

It is here that the organized Jewish community has created for itself a catch-22 situation. In a social milieu in which fewer and fewer Jews deem ethnic affiliation a necessity, the Jewish community is nevertheless desperate to get marginally affiliated Jews to make overt commitments to communal institutions by joining Jewish organizations and contributing money to Jewish causes.

The target audience is large. When one extrapolates from membership statistics and patterns of observance from recent Jewish population studies, it could be argued that more than half of American Jews are "potentially" affiliated Jews.[4] These Jews may be open to deeper involvement in the Jewish community, but only on their terms. They don't feel that they need it. But if inspired and convinced that it will add meaning and purpose to their lives, they are "available." The form that their availability will take is very tentative. They are more likely to dabble in a Jewish event here, make a modest gift to a Jewish cause there, than they are to become flag-waving, highly affiliated Jews overnight.

For a Jewish organization that invests money in some kind of outreach strategy, this is an unsatisfactory, short-term return. So, instead of meeting covenantal Jews halfway and appealing to their sense of universal justice, the Jewish communal establishment continues to focus on rallying the highly committed. Yet the language used by these Jewish organizations—constantly sounding the warning bell of imminent extinction—is the language least likely to attract marginal Jews to the fold. Why would anyone join a sinking ship if they did not have to?

The divide between Exodus/tribal Jews and Sinai/covenantal Jews is wide and getting wider. The Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel were formative events for Exodus/tribal Jews. It would be hard to invent a more compelling narrative for why Jews need to band together, whether in a nation-state or through diaspora Jewish organizations, to protect themselves and watch out for each other in a hostile

world. Yet those dual experiences are becoming more remote with every passing year. They are not the life experience of Jews born after World War II. And while Exodus Jews still see Israel as the biblical David doing battle against an array of Goliath enemies in the world and thus worthy of unqualified support, to the majority of Jews, the narrative is much more morally complex. Israel is no longer the engine to Jewish identity or to Jewish philanthropy that it once was.

Why Jewish Particularism Is Okay

What, then, might draw marginal Jews closer to the Jewish community? I believe that social justice is one of the most compelling answers to that question.[5] It will not be a straight shot. There is much that stands in the way. But I will try to make the case.

It is critical to recognize how central social justice is to Jewish consciousness. The concern for the stranger, the pursuit of justice and peace, the empathy for the poor, and the commitment to truth and fairness is buried deep in the soul of every Jew. It transcends denominational boundaries, geographical contexts, and historical eras. It is acted out by Jews who wear *kippot* (head coverings) and by those who would not step foot in a synagogue. It is rooted in the sacred texts of the Jewish people, so it is familiar to the knowledgeable Jew. But in ways that serendipity or faith can only explain, it has become a large part of the identity of Jews who have never opened a single Jewish book. Despite the hand-wringing by those most committed to the continuity of the Jewish people, many Jews live the values of the Torah even though they have no formal affiliation with the Jewish community. It is what I have called Sinai consciousness.

The historical experience of the Jewish people has helped to acculturate Jews into the communal ethic of righteousness and justice. The admonition to "care for the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:21) was not only about Egypt, just as the Passover seder was not just about Egypt. It was about the persecution of Jews in every era and in almost every place they lived. It developed in Jews a commitment to come to the aid of fellow Jews when circumstances made it possible. It developed in Jews an instinctual sympathy for others who similarly came to experience persecution and oppression.

Sinai consciousness explains the terrible guilt that American Jews felt about their failure to help their European coreligionists during the Holocaust. It explains why so many Jews rallied to the cause of civil rights for American blacks. It explains the Soviet Jewry movement and the development of an Israel lobby. It explains the prominence of Jews in organizations that work for the underprivileged and the protection of human rights around the world. This culture of empathic compassion is what explains Jewish voting patterns and attitudes that defy the typical pattern that links rising socioeconomic status with growing political conservatism. Sinai consciousness, it turns out, is more tenacious than economic interests.

When Jewish communal organizations provided a context to work for the broader welfare of American society and the world, Jews pursued those goals with vigor. When, on the other hand, the organized Jewish community pursued its organizational mandates and missions largely focused on defense and survival—quite adeptly and appropriately, I might add—the Sinai consciousness of many Jews emerged elsewhere.

One of the most welcome developments of recent years is the evidence of an unselfconscious Jewish identity among younger Jews, who are eager to combine their passion for justice with their identification with the texts and values of the Jewish tradition. Michael Schwerner and Andy Goodman—two Jews who traveled to the South to help in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan along with African-American James Chaney—clearly were motivated by a desire to advance social justice, but they had no connection to their respective Jewish identities. There are young Jews today who are not satisfied simply to ally with the most vulnerable members of our society. Increasing numbers of Jews are eager to root such behavior in the language of Jewish texts and to do the work under identifiable Jewish banners. This is cause for celebration, and it points to a healthy maturation of the American Jewish community.

What is unassailable is that social justice continues to be among the strongest factors that unite Jews. A 2000 study, conducted by Steven M. Cohen and Leonard Fein under the auspices of a short-lived organization called Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice, asked the question, "Which of the following qualities do you consider most important to your Jewish identity?" Forty-seven percent of respondents cited "a commitment to social equality," 24 percent cited "religious observance," and 13 percent cited "support for Israel."[6]

Many will say that social justice is not enough. It certainly would fail the tribal loyalty test as defined in the minds of the stewards of the organized Jewish community. But take the hypothetical American Jew who is an active member of a human rights organization, an environmental organization, or a civil liberties organization, or who is active in local politics. Assume that this individual is not a member of any Jewish organization and gives no money to any Jewish causes. Engage this person in a conversation about what drives his or her volunteer and philanthropic activity, and in many cases we will find that it traces back to that person's Jewish roots, be it a grandparent role model, identification with one or more aspects of the Jewish historical narrative, or the reading of a book of Jewish fiction. Expose that person to a Jewish institution that speaks to his or her values, to a Jewish teacher who frames those values in the words of classical Jewish texts, to a social justice initiative sponsored by a Jewish organization, and there is a very good chance that such a person can be drawn closer to the Jewish community.

I know. I have been part of such education and outreach for three decades, and I can count hundreds of such Jews who "discovered" that there are Jewish institutions through which they can fulfill their personal passions. These Jews represent a gold mine of talent that is largely unrecognized and untapped by the organized Jewish community.

Is Social Justice Enough?

There are obstacles. The Amos study revealed a deep ambivalence on the part of those surveyed about whether they felt they needed to do their social justice work under Jewish auspices. Reflecting the same phenomenon uncovered by the 1990 and 2000 National Jewish Population Surveys, Jews are less and less likely to join Jewish organizations because they have so successfully integrated themselves into America. They don't need the communal support that was welcomed by their parents and grandparents when they first came to America, seeking a familiar context as an ethnic minority in a new milieu.

I would go one step further. I find that the younger the Jews, the more likely they are to manifest "post-tribal syndrome." Younger Jews tend to push away any and all elements of the Jewish heritage that smack of parochialism. The very elements of tribal connection that have kept the Jewish people united across the world for centuries are regarded with increasing disdain by younger Jews. Add to this bias a general suspicion of religious organizations that is supported by media revelations of unethical behavior by clergy and religious institutions and you begin to understand the deep aversion many younger Jews have to associating themselves in any way with the Jewish community.

Ironically, beneath these biases lie many noble and commendable values and aspirations. One young Jewish social activist who now works for the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, building relationships between synagogues in the Boston area and local community-organizing efforts, recently reflected on his youth at a well-established Conservative synagogue in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. He was turned off by "empty ritual and an emphasis on couture over action." He contrasted his home congregation's $2 million capital campaign to make the synagogue more aesthetically pleasing to its upscale membership with a Lutheran church in Harvard Square, Cambridge, that launched a $1.5 million campaign to fix up its basement to better assist the homeless men and women served by the church's programs.[7] This is a harsh assessment, and not many religious institutions in America would pass this level of ethical scrutiny. Yet it is a good example of how Sinai consciousness can drive many Jews away from Jewish institutions.

The same people who dismiss religion, and Judaism along with it, believe in many of the core Jewish values that are behind Judaism's historic commitment to social justice. Many of them would like to contribute to efforts that help such values influence the conduct of society. Yet in a world that is increasingly polarized and partisan, religions and religious institutions stand suspect. There is evidence to support the indictment. The Jewish community must be able to articulate why particularism is okay, why religion can be a force for good, and why Judaism is a worthy and morally compelling life path.

The Jewish community desperately needs to attract these Sinai Jews. With each passing generation, they make up a larger and larger percentage of the American Jewish community. They will not resonate

to the tribal appeals that worked for their parents or grandparents. They are, mostly, highly educated, affluent, and interested in things that might give their lives added meaning and purpose. They will not affiliate with the Jewish community unless a piece of the message resonates with them. The Jewish community must make the case.

Why Judaism?

All of this brings us back to the millennial tension in Judaism between Exodus and Sinai impulses. Every faith community is committed to the survival and perpetuation of its own. Judaism is not immune to these tendencies. Judaism has often fallen prey to the tendency, affecting all groups, to see itself in parochial terms, to believe that the interests of the group supersede all else. This is especially true in times of crisis. In modern times, this defensiveness extends to times when Israel is at risk, either from war, terrorism, or worldwide campaigns to discredit Zionism and the right of Jews to collective existence in their ancestral homeland.

Still, the Jewish tradition's universal teachings about responsibility toward all human beings and to the entire world continue to bring us back to the needed equilibrium between self-interest—the Exodus impulse—and the interests of humanity—the Sinai impulse. Even when, or perhaps especially when, the Jewish world tends toward the parochial, there are voices in our midst that call us back to our prophetic legacy to be agents for the repair of the entire world.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the Orthodox leader cited earlier, spoke to the tension between Exodus and Sinai in the consciousness of the Jewish people in another way: In order to explain the difference between the people of fate and the nation of destiny, it is worth taking note of the antithesis between camp (*machaneh*) and congregation (*edah*). The camp is created as a result of the desire for self-defense and is nurtured by a sense of fear; the congregation is created as a result of the longing for the realization of an exalted ethical idea and is nurtured by the sentiment of love.[8]

The Jewish community cannot realize its fullest potential to become a people of the covenant, committed to the ethical principles of righteousness and justice, if it remains in its tribal camp, paralyzed

by fear and consumed by its perceived need to defend itself from every threat, real and imagined. It is true that without the proper communal mechanisms and political advocacy to properly defend the Jewish people at risk, no Jew would have the luxury to pursue the more lofty Sinai agenda. At the same time, unless the Jewish community begins to give higher priority to an agenda of righteousness and justice—the agenda that started with the first Jew, Abraham—it will have confused the means and the ends.

That prophetic legacy is why the Jewish people were put on this earth.

What Does *Tikkun Olam* Actually Mean?

RABBI JANE KANAREK, PHD

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Today, the term *tikkun olam*—usually translated as "mending the world"—is used throughout the Jewish world to summarize the efforts of Jewish social justice movements. We view *tikkun olam* as our Jewish inheritance, a mandate to Jews to make the world in which we live a better place. But the term *tikkun olam* itself has become a cliché, used so often that it offers little real guidance for social justice efforts.

What if, though, we were to look more deeply within Jewish tradition at the roots of the phrase *tikkun olam* to see what guidance that perspective might provide us? What might this deeper look at the meaning of the words *tikkun olam* teach us about how we, today, can better mend our own worlds? What kinds of possibilities for change might our eyes become open to that we had not previously considered?[1]

"Because of *Tikkun Ha'olam*"

One of the first uses of the phrase *tikkun olam* can be traced to the Mishnah, one of the earliest sections of the Oral Law, composed sometime around 200 CE. The words *tikkun ha'olam* (a more grammatically correct version of the phrase, as it uses the definite article before