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Making Our Synagogues Vessels of *Tikkun Olam*

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"The Jewish protagonists of social idealism should realize that the Jewish religion came into being as a result of the first attempt to conceive of God as the defender of the weak against the strong and that it can therefore continue to serve as the inspiration in the present struggle." -Mordecai Kaplan¹

In the Exodus story, the quintessential liberation story and the Jewish foundational myth, when Moshe is at the burning bush and receives his mission to lead the people to freedom, he asks God, "Who shall I say sent me?" God's response: "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* - shall be what I shall be, Tell them that *Ehyeh* sent you" (Exodus 3:14).

Arthur Green, in his new book, *Ehyeh*,² teaches that for the kabbalists, *Ehyeh* is the deepest and most hidden name of God. God is the possibility of all that can be. Green writes:

In the moment when Moshe needed to give the slaves an answer that would offer them endless resources of hope and courage, God said tell them *Ehyeh* sent you. The time-

less God allowed the great name YHVH to be conjugated, as though to say *Ehyeh, I am tomorrow*.³

The Challenge of Justice

The centrality of working for social justice was part of Mordecai Kaplan's vision for Reconstructionism. Kaplan believed that reconstructed religion had among its goals the need to mobilize human beings, through their own power, to combat social evil.

For those committed to social justice, this is a time of crisis for the planet, for the United States, and for Israel. The large majority of scientists agree that global warming is approaching a crisis stage; the United States has the largest disparity between rich and poor in its history; Israel is struggling with poverty, with nearly 20 percent of the population facing insecurity about obtaining food, and the occupation results in everyone's freedom being restricted.

Failing to Mobilize

Having been the executive director

of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation for twelve years, I know as well as anyone that not only have we not succeeded at mobilizing our members to work for social justice, we have not made it one of our highest priorities. We are not alone - the level of social action in Jewish congregations in all denominations is low. I attended a meeting of the rabbinic advisory council of the Jewish Fund for justice a few years ago, and the leaders of all three liberal movements were bemoaning the lack of social action work at the congregational level.

Our synagogue communities are not fulfilling Kaplan's original vision. We need to strategize about how to lead our communities into a full embrace of the mitzvah "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" - "justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20).

To help us strategize, I want to describe some of the terrain in which we are operating.

Competing Claims on Attention

We cannot underestimate how two issues have affected the institutional Jewish community's attention to issues of poverty and justice. First, the 1990 national Jewish population study shocked people with its statistics on assimilation and intermarriage, and from that point on an enormous percentage of communal resources turned inward to combat these trends. As a community, we have become more myopic and increasingly focused only on our needs.

The second issue is, of course, the

situation in Israel. Israel not only takes up a lot of attention, again focusing time and resources on our own affairs, it divides the community. Many of the people most drawn to social justice issues are precisely those who oppose the policies of the Israeli government, and they feel less drawn to be in a Jewish setting, given how most public Jewish voices support the policies of the Israeli government. Though this may not be true of most Reconstructionist congregations, it does affect those considering the very idea of joining a congregation.

Constraints on Discussion

More importantly, in the current climate, Jewish institutional leaders do not want to challenge the United States administration on policy issues because they do not want to risk their influence in matters concerning Israel. This landscape means that synagogue social action committees do not have a larger Jewish context within which to operate. Not only do they have to overcome the inertia within the congregation, but they often also find the larger community to be an impediment to their work.

In addition, the increasing number of very wealthy Jews in positions of power has changed the position and focus of some groups. One example is the struggle over domestic policy issues in the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the umbrella organization of Jewish community relations councils and national Jewish "defense" agencies. The JCPA historically took classic "liberal" positions, but in the last few years it has been pressured to make

changes in the direction of more conservative positions, most notably regarding issues of low-income housing. Around the country, the number of independent JCRCs is dropping, as Federations absorb them, further weakening the profile of the Jewish community in social justice issues.⁴

Reviving Interest

The apathy in our community about issues of poverty and justice reflects the apathy nationally. Until recently, there has been a low level of political activism across the country.

Partially in response to the pervasive *low level* of synagogue social action, the non-denominational organization Amos was conceived to help train and motivate congregations; sadly, it lasted only a couple of years. However, it did produce at least one enduring piece of work. Amos commissioned Stephen M. Cohen, a leading expert on Jewish sociology, and Leonard Fein, author and activist, to do the largest and most extensive study ever undertaken of the attitudes of American Jews to social justice.⁵

The study was completed in 2002. Some of the key findings are useful and very heartening for us. According to the study, about 90 percent of American Jews agree with the following statements:

- "Jews have a responsibility to work on behalf of the poor, the oppressed and minority groups."
- "When Jewish organizations engage in social justice work, it makes me feel proud to be a Jew"

- "Jewish involvement in social justice causes is one good way to strengthen ties with other groups in society."

Three out of four said that "a commitment to social justice is at the heart of my understanding of Judaism."

Commitment Remains Central

Asked to rank "what quality you consider most important to your Jewish identity," 47 percent picked commitment to social equality, 24 percent religious observance and 13 percent support for Israel. By four to one, those surveyed agreed that synagogues should sponsor more social justice programs. Paradoxically, about half said that their synagogue had the correct number of programs. (Interestingly people do not like the phrase "social justice"; only 24 percent found it appealing.)

When I first read this study, I frankly found it quite astounding and puzzling. A commitment to social equality is far and away the most important aspect of Jewish identity for a representative sample of the Jewish community. The large majority of American Jews deeply understand that Judaism at its core is about justice. If this is true, why is the level of synagogue activity so low?

One reason offered is that only 15 percent prefer to promote social justice as part of a Jewish group, while more than 70 percent, while not opposed, are indifferent. This is a very important finding. For us to mobilize our congregations, we need to be able to address this ambivalence.

Cohen and Fein make an interesting point about the tension between

universalism and particularism that Jews have been living with for the last 150 or so years. The tension is often framed as "How can Jews become an integral part of the larger society, while still maintaining a particular tie to other Jews?"

Universalism and Particularism

How does this play out in synagogue social action?

The universalist might ask: If I want to be universalist, undertaking work for the betterment of society - why should I do it in a particularist, meaning Jewish, context? If I want to play out my particularism - my identification with Jews - why should I at that moment turn it toward universalist ends? When I am with Jews, I want to "do Jewish," and when I am acting to change the secular world, I am being universalist. Another way of looking at this: It is precisely those Jews who are most drawn to the universalist values of Judaism who may be most disturbed by what they perceive as parochial or "ethnic" issues.

The challenge is to make the universalism/particularism paradox a tension that leads to energy and action, not ambivalence and paralysis. As many traditions teach, paradox can be a source of wisdom if we live with it and embrace it.

Murray Bowen, the founder of family therapy systems theory, stated that the fundamental tension in all systems is between the force to differentiate and the force to merge. He based this on observations by scientists in the fields

of biology, physics, chemistry and astronomy. In psychological terms, this is the central human tension of how to be both an individual and part of a larger unit - be it a marriage, a family or a community. As Lawrence Leshan wrote:

On the one hand, we all have the drive to be more unique and individual, to heighten one's own experience and being. On the other hand is the drive to be part of something larger, a full-fledged member of the tribe. ⁶

Competing Cultures

Recently, some anthropologists and systems theorists have postulated that the flow of human history from its origins involves the alternation between cultures focused on "I" (individualism, embodied in elites) and those focused on "We" (communal, embodied in attention to the collective).

In a model developed by Ken Wilbur and Don Beck, 'the culture of modernity (the culture of the West for most of the 19th and 20th centuries and still the dominant culture), is an "I" culture; they dub it the "I improve" culture and it sets these goals:

- Strive for autonomy and constant change;
- Seek out the good life and strive for abundance;
- Progress through the best solution;
- Enhance living for many through technology; and
- Play to win and enjoy competition. There are positive sides to this "I"

culture. It is productive, goal-oriented, energized, and focused on results and outcomes, and it creates a strong middle class. The negative side is that it is materialistic, self-absorbed, short sighted, and focused on high⁷ need achievement, and it encourages people always to want more.

Seeds of Change

Every culture produces the seeds of change for its transition. In the 1960s, in the West, more people began to discover that material wealth does not bring happiness or peace. There were renewed needs for community, sharing, and a richer inner life; there was a sensitivity to the have/have-not gaps. This is the period in which the Reconstructionist movement began to grow, when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was established and our congregations began to increase. This communitarian "We" culture is relativistic and sociocentric; it is the culture of "we become," and its goals are:

- To liberate humans from greed and dogma;
- To explore the inner beings of self and others;
- To promote a sense of community and unity;
- To share society's resources among all;
- To reach decisions through consensus; and
- To refresh spirituality and bring harmony.

There are positive sides to this "We" culture. It is consensual and inclusive, empathetic, sensitive to broader human conditions, and concerned about others. But there are also negative sides to

this "We" culture. It can impose blinding group-think approaches. People are treated as members of groups, not as individuals. And it is characterized by identity politics, too much emphasis on feeling, a vulnerability to narcissicism, and a naïveté about power.

While this culture is clearly not dominant in governments or the economy, it is powerful in intellectual, artistic, and popular culture-postmodernism, relativism, multiculturalism, and the move to spirituality. This culture values consensus, seeks spirituality, is egalitarian and humanitarian and tolerant; its leadership style is the "sensitive facilitator." Its organizational style is social networks - and it sounds a lot like the culture of Reconstructionism.

A New Culture Emerging

The hope for the transformation of culture is activated when people feel overwhelmed by economic and emotional costs of caring, when they are confronted with chaos and disorder from lack of structure and clear hierarchies of value, when they feel a need for tangible results and functionality, and when *knowing* becomes more important than *feeling*.

This reminds me of congregations I consult with that were formed by groups of like-minded people, are somewhat structureless and, when they hit sixty or seventy families, realize that feel-good, informal structures with loose-knit rules simply do not work any more - that they now have to develop a structure, set clear values, and have some formal hierarchy.

Wilbur and Beck maintain that a new culture is beginning to form. Their key point is that this new culture realizes that all of the previous levels of civilization coexist at the same time, and that objective economic and social conditions will produce cultures at different stages and with different needs living alongside each other, without the need to force one culture to accept solutions for another.

Beck worked extensively in South Africa with the African National Congress (ANC) and the government during the transition from apartheid. He learned that the steps of evolutionary change could not be skipped. Imposing the values of the "We" contemporary culture of the West on a society that needs to develop economically and politically does not work; it requires a more goal production-oriented culture. This is yet another way of stating the lesson: We can't impose our culture on others.

Evolution and Progress

Here is Kaplan writing about evolution and progress in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*:

Although progress is not always in a straight line, the course of human history shows that the human race is moving in the direction of enhanced personality and enhanced sociality. Where people once identified society with a small family; tribe, or clan, we are beginning to think in terms of a world society. At one time every detailed act of the individual in the pursuit of work or leisure was

hedged about by the traditional taboos of the tribe, and had to conform to ancestral habits. People today are demanding and obtaining more and more of autonomous direction in the development and expression of their personalities. Personality and sociality are not static goals. They can never be reached and passed. But their pursuits give meaning and value to human life, and renders it inherently worthwhile.⁸

Kaplan is defining progress as the simultaneous development of a greater identification with an increasingly larger group - and the growth of greater individual freedom and creativity. This is very much in keeping with the paradigm that Wilbur and Beck are now developing about how civilizations have evolved. For Kaplan, as it is for Wilbur and Beck, progressive evolution is the ability to reconcile the "I-We" split on a larger and more sophisticated level. (Keep in mind that the "I" can also be my nation or nationalism juxtaposed to the "We" of the international community.)

For Kaplan, God is the spirit that makes for resolving the paradox of personal self-realization and social communion; God is the resolution of the universal-particular, merge-individuate tension.

Spiritual Development vs. War

Lawrence Leshan has written that one of the two ways to satisfy the two conflicting drives simultaneously and without contradiction is through spiritual development or mysticism. Unfor-

tunately, the other way is through war. (This is part of his fascinating thesis about why societies have not been able to prevent war.⁹) A spiritual understanding allows us to view ourselves as separate individuals and as part of the total cosmos, with nothing ultimately separate from anything else.

How does this relate to social action, *tikkun olam*, and the repair of the world? In part, I want to explore how our belief in and relationship to God fit in. Spirituality can be seen as feeling connected to or even merged with all of creation. It is the quintessence of universalism. Religion is the translating of that feeling into a system of beliefs, ethics, rituals and hierarchy, thereby making it particularistic.

The Place of God

The classic Reconstructionist formulation of God is "the power that makes for salvation" - for making the world better, which is our understanding of "salvation." In that formulation, the power that is God is multidimensional, universal. God is the urge within us to bring about a more just world, God is the energy we use to fulfill the urge; God is in the vision we have of a better future. We fulfill our godliness through the process we use to bring about a better world. God, then, is not only in the means and ends, but also in the very fabric of wanting to repair the world. The role of God in the classic Reconstructionist formulation is inspirational and sustaining, and I would guess that the large majority of Reconstructionist congregants (whether or not they are in-

involved in *tikkun olam*) would not, without reflection, describe this as their experience.

Many believe that God is that energy that helps bring about *tikkun olam*, but they do not know how to have faith in it upon which they can draw. We do not know if ultimately peace and justice will prevail; we do not know if the good guys are going to win or lose, we do not believe in an end-of-days messianic miracle - so what does it mean to have faith?

It is faith in the possibility that society will improve. Remember Kaplan's definition of progress - the individual experience of self-actualization will grow deeper and be increasingly available to larger numbers of people, while at the same time individuals will identify ever more deeply with an overgrowing number of people.

Evidence of Progress

By those criteria, we are making progress. just think how much more individual freedom is available to women around the world, or about how much disaster relief is provided to people around the globe, how much more the world is becoming a global village. On a personal note, I have a child with Down syndrome; the possibilities that he has today have, in all likelihood, never been available before to people with mental retardation.

Having faith can give us the strength and vision to act more powerfully, as the God that we have faith in acts through us. It is not the faith of waiting for something to happen; it is not the faith of passivity; it is the faith that

inspires us to act. Interestingly, the Jewish Fund for justice, a secular group, in its analysis of the low level of social action activity in synagogues, cites the crisis of faith of many American Jews. JFJ acknowledges that God is neither a motivating force in the lives of most Jews nor a factor in helping determine values and priorities; this is an area ready for change.¹⁰

Cultivating an understanding of God that results in this kind of faith would provide buoyancy for our synagogues as vessels of *tikkun olam*. I have no easy answers about how to bring this about. Opening the conversation is very important. Conversations about our understanding of God can be very intimate; many, if not most, people feel vulnerable and even timid about expressing their beliefs, and many are even unsure what their beliefs really are.

Hard Questions

Consider the importance of such questions as: What are your beliefs about God and *tikkun olam*? What do you have faith in? Does this faith support your *tikkun olam* work? If not, could you draw upon it? And consider how difficult it often is to have such conversations.

It is by acting on the Jewish teachings of working for justice through a Jewish identity that we express our universal and particular needs and values simultaneously, and we need to be explicit about this.

As a result of our unique diaspora history, Jews have a long legacy of seeking to balance the universal and the particular, of being a Jew and a citizen of a

large culture. Living in two civilizations in the era of the Global Village, we have a rich history upon which to draw.

Congregational Life

Going back to our organizing challenge, the survey with which I began shows that our congregants believe that social justice is a fundamental aspect of Judaism. How does this translate to congregational life?

Above; I outlined a formidable set of impediments to congregations becoming more activist. It is important to know the terrain in which we are operating. It is all too easy to blame ourselves, to think we are not doing a good enough job, and to feel disheartened -and then our energy drops. This is where faith comes in. There are, in fact, reasons for optimism. In the nation as a whole, there is an upsurge in political activity. We have the new phenomenon of Web-based organizing, with organizations such as MoveOn.org and Take Back America. Community organizing is increasing with groups like Jobs for Justice, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, ACORN and the LAY (Industrial Areas Foundation).

Most congregations relegate social action work to a committee, and its effectiveness frequently depends on the abilities of the chair. All of the responsibility for fulfilling one of the key tenets and identity pieces in Judaism often falls here. Sometimes the rabbi is supportive and sometimes not. A healthy system integrates the major responsibilities. It also allocates resources: How much staff time is devoted to sup-

porting this work; how much money is allocated for programming; how much time on the board agenda is there discuss these issues?

Integrating, Not Segregating

Integrating *tikkun olam* values into the internal decision-making life of the congregation is one valid choice either for the *tikkun olam* committee or a special task force. The Washington-area Jews for justice group has compiled a very detailed audit for its congregations to help them understand the choices they have made. Let me suggest the kinds of issues a synagogue can examine:

- Do you pay your support and maintenance staffs a living wage?
- What benefits do staff members get?
- Are there pension plans for support staff, and what kind of health insurance is offered?
- Where do you bank? Could your banking be transferred to a community development financial institution?
- With whom do you contract for landscaping or other services, and what are their employment policies?
- What is the environmental impact of your facility?
- What kind of paper goods do you buy? Do you buy fair-trade coffee?
- Do you make your facility available to other groups?

I am sure that the above list can be expanded. By raising these issues, congregants become educated and the issues then have an impact on their lives. The congregation models taking responsibility for its actions, the way an individual needs to take responsibility.

Practical Applications

In talking about where the synagogue chooses to bank and how it uses its assets, individuals will begin to examine their practice. In talking about a living wage, people will think about how much they pay people who do domestic work for them. Perhaps they will think about how much they tip service workers, realizing that many of them do not earn a living wage. While this does not address public policy issues in the larger picture, by raising them as policy issues within the congregation, it raises the larger questions. *Tikkun olam* begins at home.

Every synagogue committee can integrate *tikkun olam* concerns into education, ritual life, the building and grounds, personnel, and especially the fundraising committee. This whole systems approach then apportions responsibility and provides a supportive context in which the *tikkun olam* committee can do external work. Several years ago, when the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation began a series of workshops on growth and outreach, the message was that the whole congregation is part of outreach and each committee had to make it part of their work. The same is true of *tikkun olam*.

Taking responsibility for one's actions is the heart of any spiritual path, and taking responsibility for one's role in society is the heart of good citizenship. A congregation that does both serves as a model for its members. This is living successfully in two civilizations.

Facing the Problems

To begin taking responsibility, one needs to know that a problem exists. There are significant numbers of poor and working-class Jews. The most recent census shows that one in five Jews in New York City lives below the poverty line. Yet the majority of Jews are middle and upper-middle class. The median Jewish income is 50 percent above the median income of others in the United States. The American middle class as a whole is insulated from confronting poverty. As our incomes have gone up, we have grown more distant from the problems of poverty. We do not understand how poverty affects choices that we make in our lives about where to live, work, and send our children to school.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Jacob Riis shocked America with his photos about the invisible poor, and contributed greatly to progressive public policy. Half a century later, Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*,¹¹ which helped bring about Great Society legislation such as Medicare and food stamps.

The invisible poor are now more invisible than ever. African-Americans are still disproportionately poor - and housing patterns in urban areas are more segregated than they were thirty years ago. The United States today has the highest proportion of immigrants in the total population since the early 20th century. This time, immigrants are far more likely not to be Caucasian, which compounds the problem.

Short and Long Term Needs

Many synagogue social action committees make the poor visible by focusing on direct service projects such as food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters. These focus on short term needs; but many people drawn to activism want to work on advocacy for policy issues, addressing the long-term problems and causes. Even people involved in direct service can grow tired. This is not to say there is no place for direct service, only that advocacy and direct action need to be in balance.

In the Torah, the obligation to take care of the poor is unwavering; it is our responsibility. Taking care means both direct service and structural or policy change. The Torah tells us not only to give money, food and clothing - direct service - but to have a sabbatical year, when debts are forgiven; a jubilee year, when property is redistributed and everyone starts out again; and to pay a living wage. There are many policy changes far short of redistribution that would make significant differences.

One of the most effective motivational tools is hearing people's stories. I recently spoke at the national Hillel *Tzedek* conference. One college student talked about how she was not an activist until she spoke to the maid in her dorm and only then realized what it meant not to be paid a living wage.

Service Work and Advocacy

Congregations can make the poor visible; direct service is a part of it. Some congregations are part of the In-

terfaith Hospitality Network, neighborhood networks of churches and synagogues that house homeless people for week at a time. This is a national effort.

Participating in the organization Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger, is another means of making congregants aware of poverty in America. The basic principle is that whenever there is a simha, three percent of the cost of the food is donated to Mazon. Currently the largest agency in the United States combating hunger, Mazon directs its funds to both direct relief and advocacy.

There is a tension in many congregations between direct service work and advocacy. Advocacy can seem potentially divisive, and too large an issue if conceived of nationally. Focusing on local (city or state) policy can ameliorate much of this. On a political level, it frequently is less "hot button" than national issues. Good educational work can be done on issues without necessarily taking positions. Even raising the policy questions can be important.

I want to highlight a new effort of the Jewish Fund for Justice (I referred to its analysis earlier). It has developed an excellent program to revitalize synagogue social action based on working in coalitions with other faith groups. It is described in a pamphlet, "Faith Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life." (It is available free by contacting www.jfjustice.org.)

Respect for Differences

Congregations can encompass more

than one position on an issue. Multiple positions can be advocated within the a unity of the congregation. This is most easily done in the context of educating people about the issues. It can also be done in the realm of advocacy. Different committees or working groups of a congregation can take different positions. The congregation as a whole needs to be fair about resource allocation and time. The congregation as an institution does not have to take a position on an issue and it can allow committees to engage in advocacy work. This will require careful negotiation, trust and civil behavior. This can only work in an atmosphere of respect, with everyone accepting that reasonable, moral and ethical people may have different opinions.

The roots of Judaism are in the commitment to create the conditions where each living being has the opportunity to manifest godliness in daily life. The tradition teaches that justice is a necessary condition and that we are mandated to pursue it. The roots grow out of a faith in God that by definition guarantees that the possibility of attaining justice always exists. It is our task to cultivate that faith.

1. Mordecai Kaplan, "Marxism and the Jewish Religion," *Reconstructionist* (Vol. I, March, 1935), 15.
2. Arthur Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003).
3. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. Some of these ideas were developed in conversation with Arthur Waskow.
5. Steven M. Cohen and Leonard Fein,

American Jews and Their Social Justice involvement: Evidence from a National survey" sponsored by Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social justice, 2002, published.

Lawrence Leshan, "Why We Love War," *the Reader* (Vol. 15, Jan.-Feb. 2003), adapted from *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and Madness* (Hellos -ess, 2002).

Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber, "The guru and the Pundit," and Don Beck, "The Never Ending Upward Quest: An

Interview with Don Beck," *What Is Enlightenment* (Issue #22, Fall/Winter 2002).

8. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 122-123. 9. Leshan, op. cit.

10. "Faith Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life" (New York: Jewish Fund for justice, 2003).

11. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

- Fall 2003

The Reconstructionist