

JUSTICE, JUSTICE SHALL YOU PURSUE

WHAT IS JEWISH ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK?

TORAH BLESSING

EXAMINING THE SOURCES OF OUR OBLIGATIONS:

Our textual tradition is replete with texts that urge us to seek justice, and to care for those in our communities who are vulnerable. As you read the following excerpts, *consider which texts most closely reflect your own sense of why you are obligated to engage in social justice work:*

- (a) Justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that Adonai your God is giving you.
— Deuteronomy 16:20
- (b) You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless. You shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that Adonai your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.
— Deuteronomy 24:17-18
- (c) Is such the fast I desire – a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast – a day when Adonai is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of lawlessness; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, clothe him, and not ignore your own kin.
— Isaiah 58:5-7
- (d) If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? — Mishna, Pirkei Avot 1:13
- (e) [A]nyone who sees a person oppressing an orphan or widow and does not come to their aid, they will also be considered oppressors. — ibn Ezra
- (f) “Give to the poor person readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return Adonai your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.” (Deuteronomy 15:10) It is a wheel that turns in the world. Maybe you think in your heart that you won't come to this fate [poverty]. You might not, but your child or your

grandchild might. Therefore, a person should do good things for others whenever he can, in order that others will do good things for him if he or his children need.
—Midrash Aggadah on Deuteronomy 15:10

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you personally feel that you are “obligated” to engage in community service or social justice work? If so, where does that sense of obligation come from? From God? From your sense of fairness? From your membership in a particular community?
- (b) Do any of the texts above touch upon your own sense of why we should engage in this kind of work? If so, which one(s)?

EXAMINING OUR MOTIVES:

Few, if any, of us engage in social justice work for the sole reason that God commanded us to do so. Many factors can influence our decision to engage in particular social justice work including, to name just a few: pride, desire for recognition or gratitude, guilt, personal gratitude or indebtedness, and even superstition.

Consider the following statements:

“[One who gives tzedakah so that his child may live] is a fully righteous person – one is a righteous person in this matter, and we do not say that he did the mitzvah not for its own sake, for he fulfilled the Creator’s commandment to give tzedakah even though he intended it for his own benefit or for his children’s welfare.”

— Rashi on Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim 8b*.

Is *tzedaka* primarily a restorative act that reestablishes justice? Personal acts of *tzedaka* hardly have the power to rearrange society. While acts of *tzedaka* are described as benefiting both donor and recipient, we might make a good case that the impact of these acts is greater on the one who gives than on the one who receives. If we want to see a significant social transformation, diminishing the sense of entitlement and the imperative of acquisition may be more significant in the pursuit of justice than the direct impact of *tzedaka*. Personal rather than social transformation may be one goal of *tzedaka* – to help us question just how much we “need.”

— Rabbi Richard Hirsh

How do we learn empathy? By being encouraged to notice that it actually feels better to be openhearted, connected and loving than it feels to be isolated and cut off. We cultivate good habits by repetition and encouragement, but also by recognizing that they actually make us happier. And we all want to be happy.

— Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you agree with Rashi that our motivation when doing social justice work does not matter, so long as we do it?
- (b) Is the motivation to engage in social justice work to gain recognition different from the kind of motivation Rashi is discussing?
- (c) What do you think about Rabbi Hirsh's assertion that *tzedaka* is of greater benefit to the giver than to the recipient? What have you personally gained from engaging in social action work?
- (d) Rabbi Peltz Weinberg discusses the effect that happiness has on our willingness to engage in social justice work. But what if the type of work that needs to be done makes us miserable? Should we prioritize finding an opportunity that we enjoy? Or focus on which needs are most urgent?