

JEWISH VIEW OF JUSTICE – STUDY NOTES FOR JUNE 2, 2020

FROM RABBI SUSAN NANUS

Judaism has an all-enveloping and passionate dedication to the ideal of justice. The moral imperatives of justice, ethics and morality were taught by the Torah and the Jewish prophets, so that they are religious ideals and obligations, rather than just good behavior.

We are obligated to care for the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), the widow, orphan and stranger (Exodus 22:20-21), the Levites (Deuteronomy 12:17-19) and the landless. We are also warned against corruption, bribery, misuse of power, and mistreatment of workers. The Torah specifies rights for women and other groups. The Torah teaches the ideal of justice for the benefit of society and the moral guidance of the individual

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now, when?

EXODUS VS SINAI CONSCIOUSNESS

Exodus consciousness caused Jews to identify with each other regardless of the fact that they might be living thousands of miles apart, under different political regimes, speaking different languages, and developing variations on Judaism that often synthesized elements of traditional Jewish practice with the specific gentile culture in which they lived.

This consciousness also meant that Jews took care of one another, not only when they lived in close proximity, but even when they became aware of Jews in distress in other locales. During the time that Jews lacked political sovereignty, they became a community of shared historical memory and shared destiny. They believed that the fate of the Jewish people, regardless of temporal domicile, was linked.

The Jewish people would not be merely a people apart, a separate ethnic and political unit. Instead, they would be a people bound to a higher calling. According to God's covenant with Abraham, every Jew is called upon not simply to believe in the values of righteousness and justice, but to act on them: motivated by moral responsibility, to advocate—as Abraham did—on behalf of the vulnerable of all nations.

Abraham lived in Canaan as “a stranger and a sojourner” (Gen. 23:4), but his sense of separateness and apartness did not prevent him from heeding a universalistic moral call—behaving with altruistic compassion toward the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This sense of a higher calling—an altruistic urge to bring righteousness and justice into the world—is the Jewish legacy from Abraham. It is what I call the “**Sinai Impulse**.”

Reconciling Exodus and Sinai

There is a 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 its 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, a prominent Orthodox opinion leader, 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 (*mahaneh*) 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.”

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof / צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוֹף

Justice, justice thou shalt pursue.

Deuteronomy 16:20

This is one of the central declarations of the Torah, echoed in many other instructions. For example:

You shall not be partial in judgment; hear out low and high alike. Decide justly between the Israelite and the stranger alike. Take no bribe, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice, shall you pursue. (Exodus 23:8)

[Genesis 18:19](#)

For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

[Exodus 23:6](#)

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit.

Exodus 22:21

“Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner; remember that you were foreigners in Egypt.

[Leviticus 19:15](#)

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.

[Leviticus 19:33-37](#)

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

[Deuteronomy 10:18](#)

He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

[Deuteronomy 24:17](#)

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge,

[Proverbs 21:15](#)

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.

[Isaiah 1:17](#)

Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

[Micah 6:8](#)

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

[Psalm 106:3](#)

Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!

[Zechariah 7:9](#)

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another.

[Proverbs 21:3](#)

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

[Jeremiah 9:23-24](#)

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

[Proverbs 31:8-9](#)

Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

[Jeremiah 22:3](#)

Thus, says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

[Ecclesiastes 5:8](#)

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

[Psalm 89:14](#)

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

[Zechariah 7:9-10](#)

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor,