



Judaism and Social Justice: Five Core Values from the Rabbinic Tradition¹

by Rabbi Sid Schwarz

It is easy to lose the forest for the trees. Most religions are complex phenomena. In the realm of interfaith dialogue, it is helpful to return to the core of each of our respective faith traditions to understand its essence. For Judaism there are two core mandates—justice and

holiness. Each of those two principles is rooted in a Biblical verse.

In Genesis 18:19 God tells Abraham that his mandate, as the first Jew, is to extend the boundaries of justice and righteousness in the world (*laasot tzedakah umishpat*). In Exodus 19:6,

God reveals to Moses a second mandate. The Jewish people are told to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (*mamlechet kohanim v’goy kadosh*). The paradox of these two mandates is that justice requires Jews to be fully engaged with the world. There is no other way to bring about justice. Yet holiness requires the Jewish people to establish some separation from the world. All of the practices, rituals and customs of the Jewish tradition are the ways that Jews distinguish themselves from all the other cultures, nations and faiths on the planet. This paradox is common to virtually all religions. At their best, religions offer a particular path to effect universal values in the world. At their worst religions allow the faithful to confuse ends and means. In the effort to insure fidelity to the group, its customs and its ways, one or more of the universal values at the core of the religion get violated.

What follows are five Jewish values that stand at the core of Jewish teachings about social justice. There are counterpart teachings in Islam and Christianity and they build on many of the principles articulated here. Each of these values is the product of a conversation that took place over many centuries by the sages of Judaism. Part of the beauty of the Jewish tradition is that a rabbi of the 15th century is in conversation with a rabbi of the 2nd century. And a rabbi of the 21st century can only be authentic to the Jewish tradition if he or she is in conversation with all of the rabbis who preceded them, even as they may bring new insight and new applications to values that date back to

the days of the Bible. This list of five values is simply the “tip of the iceberg” of Jewish teachings in the realm of social justice. But it does give a flavor for the ethical impulse of the Jewish tradition and the generations of Jews who sought to be faithful to the words of Torah.

Kavod Habriot: Dignity of all Creatures

TORAH / Teaching

The fundamental dignity of all creation is very precious to God. There is no value more precious than it. (Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon haMeiri, 13th century scholar, in his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, *B’rachot* 19b)

Kavod habriot is the Jewish principle that requires we accord every one of God’s creatures a level of dignity. Traditionally, this principle has been applied to all human beings although some have extended it to the animal kingdom as well. Long before western society embraced the concept of universal human rights, Judaism taught that every person – Jew and gentile, male and female, rich and poor – deserves to be treated with respect.

The centrality of the principle of *kavod habriot* is underscored in a Talmudic citation that teaches that any rabbinic ordinance may be set aside for the purpose of preserving *kavod habriot* (*Berachot* 19b). This is because *kavod habriot* is a principle that supercedes other, more specific legal obligations. The first chief rabbi of the *Yishuv*, the pre-state settlement of Jews in Pales-

tine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, said: "Protecting [the respect] one rightfully deserves is not a matter of arrogance. On the contrary, there is a *mitzvah* [commandment] to do so. The opinion of the *halakhic* decisors is that it is prohibited to ignore *kavod habriot* even in the case of a *mitzvah*" (*Mussar Avikha*, p. 73). Jews must carry themselves in a dignified way and society must never function in such a way as to deny a person's dignity, regardless of the circumstances.

In the Talmud, the rabbinic sage Ben Azzai argues that Judaism's most important principle is *b'tzelem Elohim*, treating all human beings with the dignity appropriate to a creature made in the image of God. The principle derives from the story of creation which culminates in the creation of Adam and Eve: "God created humankind in the Divine image" (Genesis 1:26). When we treat others with dignity, Judaism teaches, we are indirectly paying our respect to God. The converse is also true, as the Mishna says: "All people are beloved for they are created in the image of God" (*Avot* 3:18).

It is instructive that the Jewish tradition speaks of *kavod habriot* – literally "respect for all creation" – and not *kavod ha'adam*, "respect for humankind." Jewish tradition reminds us that human beings were the last of God's creations. "The Lord is good to all," sings the Psalmist, "and God's mercy extends to all creation" (Psalms 145:9). There is an important place within Judaism for both environmentalism and advocacy for humane treatment of animals. The Jewish concern for the dignity of the

non-human world owes something to the principle of *kavod habriot*.

The protection of the natural environment (*haganat hatevah*) also has deep roots in the Jewish tradition. The natural environment is owed the respect and dignity due to all of God's creation. A *midrash* tells of God charging the first man with a responsibility to preserve the environment: "When God created Adam, God led him around the Garden of Eden and said to him: Behold my works! See how beautiful they are! See to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world; for if you do, there will be no one after you to repair it" (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13).

Judaism also embraces the idea that animals must be treated respectfully. The prohibition against cruelty to any living creature (*tza'ar ba'alei chaim*), is implicit in the Ten Commandments, where we are told that even beasts of burden must rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). The Torah and the Talmud return repeatedly to the basic kindnesses that humans owe to animals under our charge. Jewish tradition even played a pioneering role in the development of the concept of animal rights. Centuries ago, Maimonides, the great medieval legal authority, explained that in some circumstances, "There is no difference between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings" (*The Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:48).

Kavod habriot is an attitude that must be translated into behaviors. It is intended to guide the behavior of Jews, not only with other human beings, though that to be sure, but also the way human beings interact with

animals and with the natural world. It also needs to inform the public policies of the societies in which we live. A society that implements a law or practice that results in diminishing in any way the dignity of one group of its citizens is violating the principle of *kavod habriot* and citizens of conscience are duty bound to do all in their power to oppose or reverse such a policy. "All commandments between man and his fellow man," taught the 20th-century Talmudic scholar Joseph Soloveitchik, "are based on *kavod habriot*."

Chesed: Lovingkindness

TORAH / Teaching

Shimon the Righteous used to say: "The world survives because of three things: Torah, service (to God) and acts of lovingkindness". (Mishnah Avot, 1:2)

In the Talmud Rabbi Akiva advances the primacy of the principle to "love your neighbor as yourself," *v'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 9:4). *Chesed*, a word that is sometimes rendered as "lovingkindness" and sometimes as "compassion", derives from Akiva's principle to extend the love of self to others.

The Jewish tradition recognizes the difficulty – perhaps the impossibility – of loving all people. Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, a 16th-century Jewish commentator on the Torah, sums up an important strain in the Jewish tradition when he comments on the practical implications of the Biblical imperative to "love your neighbor as yourself": "That is to

say, try to do for your neighbor what you would want for yourself, if you were in your neighbor's place". Even if we do not love everyone, it is possible to act towards every person with *chesed*, lovingkindness. *Chesed* means always asking ourselves how we would behave if we cared about every person at least as much as we care about ourselves. *Chesed* is perhaps the purest expression of the altruistic impulse in Judaism, that impulse which was exemplified by Abraham's advocacy for the people of Sodom and Gemorrah and which, at Sinai, became the central moral purpose of Judaism. A true act of *chesed* is a good deed done with no expectation of reward. *Chesed* is an act of compassion extended without a motive of self-interest. The prophet Zechariah put forth a guidepost for Jewish behavior this way: "Let your judgments be guided by truth (*emet*), and compassion (*chesed*) and mercy (*rachamim*) guide your dealings with all people" (Zechariah 7:9).

The behaviors that fall under the heading of *chesed* span the varieties of human interaction. The scholar and philosopher Maimonides, in his encyclopedic compendium of Jewish laws, the *Mishneh Torah*, lists just a few: "It is a positive commandment to visit the sick, and comfort mourners, and bury the dead, and celebrate a wedding... These commandments are implied in the commandment 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (*Yad*, "Laws of Mourning," 14:1-2). Maimonides teaches that acting with lovingkindness means more than giving of our resources and our time. It means giving of ourselves,

sharing the full range of human emotion, from joy in a time of celebration to sorrow in a time of mourning. Part of what drives *chesed* then, is empathy

Everyone has material needs. And so, every Jew is obligated to give charity. But everyone has spiritual and emotional needs, too. "Deeds of lovingkindness" taught the Talmud's Rabbi Eliezer, "are greater even than charity. Charity is only towards the poor; but lovingkindness can be directed towards anyone" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkot*, 49b). And while Judaism forbids Jews from giving so much charity that the givers themselves are reduced to poverty, Maimonides explains that "there is no prescribed measure" for the boundless obligation of *chesed*.

Forced to sum up all of Jewish tradition in a single phrase, the sage Hillel declares: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and study'" (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a). Hillel gives a general rule but the general rule does not substitute for the Jewish moral tradition. It merely characterizes it. To leave Judaism at Hillel's general rule would be like declaring that American law begins and ends with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

The rabbis did not want to leave the definition of *chesed* to human intuition. Having already suggested in our theme passage, Avot 1:2, that *chesed* is one of the pillars on which the world stands, the rabbis set about to define it. Using a verse from the Bible where God is described as *rav chesed*, "full of compassion" (Exodus 34:6), the Tal-

mud goes on to explore God's actions, as recorded in the Bible, to determine what it might mean for human beings to be "full of compassion". Thus we have the following: " 'You shall walk after Lord your God,' this means that you should imitate God's virtues. Just as God clothed the naked, so too should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One visited the sick, so too should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One comforted mourners, so too should you comfort mourners. Just as the Holy One buried the dead, so too should you bury the dead" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah*, 14a).

The behaviors cited in the passage from the Talmud typify the kinds of actions that fall under the definition of *chesed*. Implicit in the passage is the rabbinic view that just as God extends compassion to all humanity, so too must Jews practice *chesed* in every human interaction.

Lo Ta'amod: You Shall Not Stand Idly By

TORAH / Teaching

You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:16)

Three verses before the book of Leviticus offers up the famous maxim, "Love your neighbor as thyself", there is a verse that puts forth a commandment that might have even wider ramifications. As is so often the case with timeless wisdom literature, verse 16 seems to anticipate the human tendency to ignore injustice. The Jewish value

"lo ta'amod al dam reacha," the prohibition to stand idly by while the blood of your neighbor is being shed, makes it an obligation to try to stop a crime, an injustice or an atrocity. The choice to go about one's daily affairs as if there were no moral obligation to act is a violation of this Biblical commandment.

Lo ta'amod extends the right and obligation of self-defense – rooted as it is in our impulse towards self-preservation – to the altruistic effort to protect other people's lives. Motivated by this value, it is the responsibility of Jews to protect other people's right to live free of aggression and injustice.

Judaism understands that sometimes the failure to use force in defense of life will only lead to further violence and aggression, and ultimately more loss of life: "if someone comes to kill you", taught the rabbis of the Talmud, "you kill them first" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 72a). The individual who represents the threat is called in Hebrew a *rodef*, literally, "a pursuer". When one has evidence of a pursuer's intentions, Judaism sanctions killing that person before s/he kills you first. The Talmud connects this principle to *lo ta'amod*: "From where do we learn that if someone pursues his friend with the intent to kill, one is obligated to intervene, even if that means taking the murderer's life? The Torah says, 'You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor'" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 73a).

Perhaps aware of the difficulty in determining the right level of intervention, the rabbis of the Talmud added a qualification to the principle of intervention

— if one was pursuing his fellow to slay him and the pursued could have saved himself by maiming a limb of the pursuer but instead killed his pursuer, the pursued is subject to execution on that account" (*Sanhedrin* 74a).

The experience of the Jewish people during World War II heightened Jewish consciousness about the application of the principle *lo ta'amod*. Historians have brought to light how much information was available by the early 1940's about Hitler's plans to exterminate the Jews of Europe and his ability and willingness to do it. Arthur Morse's book, *While Six Million Died* and David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*, provide painful details of a world violating this very principle, sitting idly by while the blood of others were being shed. It was in light of this historical experience that after the war, Jews became leaders in campaigns for human rights and were in the leadership of many human rights organizations.

The entire field of human rights attempts to balance the right of countries to run their own affairs free from outside interference against the danger posed if a country begins to persecute and/or kill some subset of people within its borders. The often quoted phrase "Never Again", was supposed to mean that, given the horrors of the Holocaust, the world would never again let genocide take place. The failure of the world to heed that call is underscored by numerous genocides since the end of World War II, most recently the "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans in the early 1990's, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the genocide that took place

in Sudan in the first decade of the 21st century. In each case, the nations of the world reacted slowly and inadequately, making possible the massacre of millions of innocent people. The response of religious communities to such atrocities is not much better than that of the United Nations or the nations of the world. Unfortunately, the moral principle of *lo ta'amod* has hardly become standard practice in the post-Holocaust world.

According to many traditional and modern Jewish authorities, the value of *lo ta'amod* extends much further than intervention in defense of human life. Jews have a powerful responsibility to take action on behalf of vulnerable people in general, wherever help is possible. Jewish legal authorities take *lo ta'amod* as a commandment to protect not only the lives of others, but also their property (Ridbaz on *Choshen Mishpat*, 426). The rabbis of the Talmudic era further extended *lo ta'amod* to mandate speaking out when silence would lead to injustice: "From where do we know that if you are in a position to offer testimony on a person's behalf, you are not permitted to remain silent? from, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Sifra Leviticus on 19:16). Withholding testimony in a court of law or failing to come forward when your testimony might advance the cause of justice, is a violation of this Jewish principle.

It is rare that we are called upon to serve as witnesses in court but we may be in other situations where we can act on behalf of, or in defense of, others. Voting, we might argue, is a way of

offering testimony as is lobbying public officials on an issue that affects the health and welfare of a society. Coming to a demonstration that raises public awareness about a cause, be it gun violence, protesting hate crimes or to demand higher wages for underpaid workers are all examples of the application of the principle *lo ta'amod*. The principle at work here points in the direction of civic engagement and social responsibility for the society in which we live.

Here, *lo ta'amod* is complemented by another important Jewish value, "*lo tuchal l'hitalel*": "You cannot turn away" (Deuteronomy 22:3). The Torah introduces "*lo tuchal l'hitalel*" in the context of the moral imperative to return a lost object to its owner. But the value has much broader implications. *Lo tuchal* can be seen as expressing the obligation to assist whenever people are in need and cannot help themselves. Notice carefully the Torah's language. We are not told that we "shall not turn away" but rather that we "cannot". Helping someone in need, the Torah implies, ought to be instinctive. So deep-seated is our moral responsibility that it ought to seem physically impossible to "turn away".

Darchei Shalom: The Ways of Peace

TORAH / Teaching

We support the non-Jewish poor together with Jewish poor, and we visit the non-Jewish sick alongside Jewish sick, and we bury non-Jewish dead alongside Jewish dead, all for the sake

of the ways of peace. (Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin*, 61a)

One of the abiding tensions in Jewish ethics is how Jews are supposed to relate to non-Jews. There exists in the Jewish tradition some fairly shocking passages about non-Jews that would offend modern sensibilities such as Shimon bar Yochai's statement that even the best of the gentiles should be killed (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 66b)! Yet such statements are more than balanced by other texts that cast gentiles in a more sympathetic light as with the sage Samuel's observation that God will make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews on the Day of Judgment (Jerusalem Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* 57a). The contrasting examples provide evidence to the dangers of taking quotes out of context. A full and fair survey of classical Jewish texts will reveal that the historical circumstance conditions the attitude of a given sage. Thus Shimon bar Yochai uttered his indelicate comment after he witnessed his teacher, Rabbi Akiva tortured to death by the Romans. Conversely, Samuel lived in the Babylonian exile during which Jews enjoyed excellent relations with their hosts and were able to develop a communal life that was actually intellectually and materially superior to that experienced by their counterparts in Palestine. His kind comment about gentiles needs to be understood against that backdrop.²

It is in this context that we must understand the principle of *darchei shalom*, the ways of peace. In this formulation, *shalom* is not referring to the absence of war but rather to peaceful

social relations between Jews and non-Jews. In our teaching we see that the Talmud calls upon Jews to provide for the non-Jewish poor just as they would provide for the poor among the Jews. The Talmud goes on in the same passage to list other acts of compassion, like tending to the sick and burying unclaimed bodies. This suggests that such acts of compassion should have no national, ethnic or religious boundaries.

There is perhaps no area of ethical concern that reflects greater inconsistency in the thinking of rabbinic sages than that of relations with gentiles. Much of the anti-gentile sentiment and legislation in rabbinic Judaism was influenced by the Bible's aversion to idolatry. Judaism begins with Abraham's rejection of the idolatrous ways of his father and his culture. In the Talmud, idolatry joined incest and murder as one of the three cardinal sins that Jews must avoid, even at the risk of death. One rabbinic teaching suggests that the practice of idolatry is tantamount to denying the entire Torah (*Sifre* Deuteronomy 54). Motivating some of the harshest rulings like not needing to return the lost property of a gentile (*Baba Kama* 38a) had to do with categorizing gentiles as idolaters. Since the goal of monotheism is to root out idolatry from the world it should not be surprising to find many rabbinic sages who regard gentiles as unworthy of fair and equal treatment.

Yet by the middle ages, prominent rabbis issued decisive rulings to correct any impression given by earlier rulings that gentiles could be treated unfairly. This despite the fact that gentile treat-

ment of Jews during this period had not much improved. Maimonides, living in 12th century Egypt, still believed that Christians were idolaters yet wrote: "It is forbidden to defraud or deceive any person in business. Jew and non-Jew are to be treated alike. If the vendor knows that his merchandise is defective, he must so inform the purchaser. "It is wrong to deceive any person in words even without causing him a pecuniary loss" (Yad, Mekirah, xviii. 1). In his Mishnaic commentary Maimonides remarked: "What some people imagine, that it is permissible to cheat a Gentile, is an error, and based on ignorance". Within a generation, Rabbi Menachem Meiri (1249-1316) in his commentary (*Bet Bekhira*) on the Talmudic tractate *Avodah Zara*, (Idol Worship) would issue a definitive ruling declaring that neither Christians nor Muslims should be considered idolaters. As such, long standing restrictions on commerce and social relations between Jews and gentiles were eliminated. Subsequent rabbinic sages repeated and reaffirmed the position that Jews must comply with the highest standards of justice and fairness in their dealings with gentiles.

Sefer Hasidim, an ethical treatise dating from 12th century Germany, maintains that Jews must continue to have strict boundaries in their dealings with gentiles. At the same time it exhorted Jews to be ethically scrupulous in their dealings with gentiles provided that they lived according to the seven Noachide laws. This principle, established early in the rabbinic tradition, says that gentiles can attain the ultimate reward of a share in the world to

come provided they observed the universal moral laws set forth in the Biblical book of Noah concerning murder, stealing and the like. Jews, on the other hand, are required to observe all 613 commandments of the Torah to merit the same ultimate reward. Perhaps the most remarkable passage in *Sefer Hasidim* is that which holds up a noble act by a Christian as one worthy of emulation by Jews (No. 58).

By the 19th century, when there already existed the possibility for Jews to live among gentiles on more or less equal terms, rabbinic authorities gave even greater emphasis to the way Jews behaved among gentiles. Rabbi Samuel R. Hirsch, one of the leaders of neo-Orthodoxy in Germany, said that the conduct of Jews needed to be exemplary so that non-Jews would come to know that the Torah was about truth, justice and love. Conversely, he claimed that injustices committed against non-Jews were worse than those committed against Jews because it will bring the entire religion of Judaism into disrepute.³

Although the phrase *darchei shalom* does not appear in the Bible, the principle becomes an important Jewish guidepost for behavior. It points to a consciousness about how Jews are viewed by others and an acute sensitivity that the welfare of the Jewish community depended on the good graces of those in power. Here, too, one can find a range of attitudes from defensive to altruistic. Thus, in some places, Jews are urged to act in a respectful and fair manner with gentiles so as to "avoid enmity" (*Avoda Zara* 26a). The He-



brew expression used is *meshum aivah*. In other places the texts warn Jews against bad behavior toward gentiles because it will “profane God’s name” (*Baba Kama* 113b), what is known in Hebrew as a *chillul hashem*. This notion suggests that the reputation of the God of the Jewish people is tied up with the reputation of the Jews themselves and visa versa. The opposite idea is *kiddush hashem*, Jews acting in such a way as to bring honor to God’s name. Through history, acts of Jewish martyrdom, when Jews allowed themselves to be killed rather than abandon their faith and Jewish practice under duress, came to be closely associated with this concept.

Darchei shalom, acting properly for the “ways of peace,” is the most altru-

istic of these three rationales given for acting kindly towards the gentiles. On one level, the end result is no different than the rationales “to avoid enmity” or “so as not to profane God’s name”. In all three cases, Jews try to avoid trouble because others have power over them. On the other hand, one could also read *darchei shalom* as motivated by more than just wanting to avoid more persecution or another pogrom. It can be read as a sincere desire to create harmonious relations with other ethnic and religious groups. Given the fact that society still falls short of this level of intergroup respect and tolerance into the 21st century, the expression of this value in pre-modern Jewish texts is fairly significant.



Ahavat Ger: Loving the Stranger

Torah / Teaching

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)

No commandment is repeated as often in the Torah as that of protecting the stranger. The rabbis enumerate 36 separate injunctions that underscore the centrality of the principle in Jewish tradition. The core teaching from Deuteronomy 10:19 makes this commandment anything but theoretical. Its invocation of the Jewish people's historical experience with being strangers clearly ties the commandment to a sense of empathy. While many commandments of the Torah require faith—we act in a certain way because God commands us—the value of protecting the stranger is historically intuitive. Jews identify with the outsider because they themselves have been outsiders.

In the Bible, the word *ger* refers to gentiles who live among Jews. Such outsiders require special protection. They are alone, without ties of religion, nation or culture and therefore are vulnerable. In the prophetic literature the *ger* is associated with the widow and the orphan. Treatment of the stranger emerges as a category that is not so much a legal designation, as it is in the earlier stages of Israelite history. It is a euphemism for the weak outsider who needs protection. The *ger* has no natural allies. It is therefore the obligation of every Jew to protect him or her.

When the Israelites took possession of the land of Israel, the earliest ethical impulses of the Jewish people acquired legal status. It is therefore telling that among the first laws established in the land of Israel was to define the status of *gerim*, literally “foreigners” who attached themselves to the Israelites and resided among them. Since the land was apportioned among the Israelites, the *gerim* were essentially day laborers or artisans. In an agrarian society, this virtually assured their dependency on the kindness of the landowners. That is what makes the Biblical command so significant. The Israelites must treat the strangers in their midst as “equal before the law” (Deut. 1:16). Equally significant is the fact that the Bible mandates a form of welfare for the strangers in the land, instructing all landowners that the corners of their field and the fallen grain was to be left for the poor and the stranger (Leviticus 19:10). Both are mentioned in the same verse suggesting that destitution was commonplace among those who were outsiders.

What begins as the directive not to oppress the stranger evolves into treating the stranger fairly and providing her or him with sustenance and support. But the Bible does not stop there. In the same chapter that introduces the phrase, “You shall love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18), we read: “The stranger who shall reside with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). Whatever ambiguity might have ex-

isted with who was meant in verse 18 by “loving the neighbor,”—only Jews or those beyond the tribal circle—is now gone. Verse 34 says explicitly that the love you feel for yourself and your kinsmen, must also be extended to the stranger, the outsider.⁴

This is the implication of verses that tell us that God loves the stranger (Deut 10:19), God protects the stranger (Psalm 146:9) or that God considers those who oppress the stranger in the same category as adulterers and those who bear false witness, (Malachi 3:5). The Jewish tradition is making the case that God is on the side of the stranger, and by extension, Jews understand that it is to the stranger’s side that Jews must rally. If loving the stranger did not quite make it into the “top ten” commandments, the verse from Malachi seems to be trying to make an amendment. Adultery and false witness are both part of the Ten Commandments and the prophet is saying that one who does not protect the stranger is no better than one who violates the core covenant of Mt. Sinai.

This clearly seems to be the intent of the prophet Jeremiah when he says that the House of the Lord and the land of Israel is reserved for people who follow a certain ethical course of action in their lives: “If you execute justice between one person and another, if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow, if you do not shed the blood of the innocent, if you do not follow other Gods...then will I let you dwell in the land which I gave

to your fathers for all time” (Jeremiah 7:5-8).

Similarly, the prophet Zechariah uses this “vulnerability ethic” as a centerpiece for what is required for Jews to merit God’s reward of living in the Promised Land: “Execute true justice, deal loyally and compassionately with each other, do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor and do not plot evil against one another...” (Zechariah 7:9-10). Again, we find the invocation of the vulnerability ethic and it is not restricted to the *ger*. Rather the *ger* becomes symbolic of all outsiders, all who are victimized by the forces of oppression.

The Jewish historical experience of oppression makes it impossible for Jews to ignore the Torah’s commandment to protect the vulnerable. The modern nation-state has become accustomed to gaps between privileged and underprivileged classes. It is often justified by the economic, political and/or religious ideology of the ruling elite. Jews have been on both sides of that divide. It is easy to act with sympathy to the outsider when that is your status as well. It is much harder when you begin to have a taste of privilege.

In the end, the test of any faith tradition is the extent to which it helps its adherents understand that the ultimate act of religious fidelity is seeing to it that all of God’s children can enjoy the blessings of liberty, economic opportunity and the freedom to act on the dictates of their conscience.

Notes

1 This article was excerpted from Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*, © Sidney Schwarz. Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, USA, www.jewishlights.com.

2 For a full treatment of this subject see Elliot Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics* (Jewish Publication Society, 2002) ch. 3.

3 Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances* (Soncino Press, 1962) pps. 392-3.

4 See Ernst Simon, "The neighbor (rea) whom we should love" in M. Fox ed., *Modern Jewish Ethics* (Ohio State University Press, 1975).

