

Is There a Relationship between Judaism and Social Justice?

Temple Isaiah, April 14, 1954

Rabbi Beerman here joined a list of distinguished speakers (James Parkes, Samuel Dinin, and Max Nussbaum) in a speakers' series at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, whose rabbi, Albert Lewis, moved to LA from Hebrew Union College in the same year as Beerman. This speech was an early articulation of Beerman's belief that Judaism, as he understood it, was inextricably linked to social justice. He laid out three key points, beginning with the theological principle that God could never be fully seen or even comprehended by humans (following the great medieval philosopher Maimonides). Rather, humans seek to approach God by approximating divine attributes—chiefly, for Beerman, “justice, love, mercy.” Second, he rearticulated the commonplace view that the essence of Judaism is not abstract principles (or creedal beliefs), but rather concrete experience rooted in the daily lives and moral choices of men and women. Finally, Rabbi Beerman offered up a juxtaposition between two worldviews, both of which were rooted in midcentury American culture. He expressed reverence for the “Judeo-Christian” ethic, a term that gained prominence in the 1930s and was elaborated in Will Herberg's 1955 Protestant-Catholic-Jew. This ethic bespoke, in his words, “love and compassion, tenderness and tolerance, sympathy and empathy.” Beerman contrasted that ethic to the spirit of the mass best-seller of 1936, Dale Carnegie's How To Win Friends and Influence People. He believed that this book advanced a view of human behavior that was based on manipulation and exploitation, and thus the antithesis of religion, whose roots lay in an unrelenting commitment to social justice.

I am honored by the opportunity your rabbi has given me to participate in this lecture series. My only fear is that in doing so he may have rendered you an injustice.

I do not share the wisdom, the experience, or the years which the other lecturers—Dr. Parkes, Dr. Dinin, Rabbi Nussbaum, and your own Rabbi Lewis, enjoy with such abundance.

What I will present to you tonight will be immature thinking on a challenging problem, and by good fortune I may be privileged to add to your insights. During the question and discussion period I feel certain that you will add to mine.

My ideas on this evening's subject are held tentatively, not finally. As I have altered and changed them thus far throughout my life, I have reason to expect and to hope that this process will continue. My words then are to be understood as part of this process of a groping and unclear perception.

The point of view I express is Jewish because my religious experience is Jewish. But it is a Jewish point of view, not THE Jewish point of view. Judaism, I need not remind you, offers a wide latitude of belief. No one can speak once and for all for the Jewish point of view. The God of the prophets, for example, the God of the philosopher Maimonides, the God of the mystic Israel Baal Shem Tov, and even the naturalistic God concept of Mordecai Kaplan are all Jewish concepts of God. And yet they share something in common—and it is in their commonality that can be found what I consider to be the chief source and basis for the relationship between Judaism and Social Justice.

You will recall that in the second book of the Torah, the book of Exodus, Moses begs God to let him see God's face, and God replies that no men can see His face and live—but that (to quote) "I will make all my goodness pass before thee." Then the narrative tells us, Moses stood in the cleft of the rock and a Voice cried out—"The Lord, Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering, abundant in loving-kindness, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin."

In other words, no man can know the reality of God's nature. That is to say, no man can see God's face. What the prophets, theologians, and philosophers have seen is only a shadow, an aspect of divinity, either by their personal religious experiences or by their powers of thought and reason. But God does manifest himself to man by His ethical attributes. Man can encounter God through justice, love, mercy; through the ethical attributes of God's nature, man partakes of Divinity. Without understanding this, without appreciating this, man is removed from God and from religion. To the extent that man does approach the ethical life in any and all of the institutions that man has created to serve himself—the family, the nation, society in general—to that extent, man approaches God.

The real test of religion is life itself. One of the clearest expressions of this idea I have found in a sermon of Theodore Parker: "To know whom you worship, let me see you in your shop, let me overhear you in your trade, let me know how you rent your houses, how you get your money, how you kept it and how it is spent . . . It is easy to repeat the words of David or of Jesus and to call it prayer. But the sacramental test of your religion is not your Sunday idly spent, not the words of

David or of Jesus that you repeat; it is your weekday life, your marks and not your words. Tried by this natural test, the Americans are a heathen people, not religious, far from that . . . the national test of religion is the nation's justice—justice to other states abroad, the strong, the weak, and justice to all sorts of men at home. The law-book is the nation's creed, and newspapers chant the actual liturgy and service of the day. What avails it that the priest calls us Christian while the newspapers and the Congress prove us infidel?"

Judaism then has its roots, as well as its chief mode of expression, in the concrete experiences of people. Our ideas are not phrased in pious generalities but in clear and incisive phrases that laid bare the social ills of the community: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field," thundered the prophet. Here religious experience is human experience. Religious problems are social problems. Religious values are the values of the common human life.

But I suppose most of this is self-evident. What we are seeking to determine in this series of lectures, as I understand it, is that satisfying blend of our Jewish heritage with American life today. Are the ideals of Judaism sensible and practical? Do they have any relevance for us? Or should they be regarded as something which belongs in religious school, the synagogue—something to be pulled out once a week or once a year on state occasions, like brotherhood week.

The reason we can ask such questions at all lies in the fact that as Americans, from the very beginning of our childhood, we are really taught TWO KINDS OF IDEALS. The one we may call for the purpose of our discussion, the Judeo-Christian ethic. It is the one verbalized in our schools and synagogues and churches. It is enshrined in the great documents of American history, in the writing of the prophets and the poets. It speaks essentially of cooperation among men. It speaks of love and compassion, tenderness and tolerance, sympathy and empathy. It is all based on the assumption that men are really brothers, capable of being friends, and that society is capable of improvement—and it says that these attributes of love and cooperation are truly human attributes.

But over and against this set of ideals are the ideals not so frequently spoken, but taught in more subtle ways, and seen operating in the world all about us, every day of our lives. And these ideals are ingrained in us as deeply as the others. They suggest the following—competition is the ferment of progress. Rugged individualism made us what we are. Nature decreed that life and business is a struggle and the fittest survive. Don't be a do-gooder; be a go-getter. What counts is not knowledge, but know-how. You can't change human nature.

Occasionally the ideals of this dog-eat-dog philosophy are honey-coated and dipped in chlorophyll or anti-enzymes. They go down the more sensitive pallets easier that way and are less offensive. A classic example of this type is the widely acclaimed book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The clue is in the title itself—not how to make friends or have friends—but how to *win* them. Friendship is not good in and of itself, the desired end is not a warm relationship between

human beings—but the purpose is to influence people, and beyond this, to manipulate others into liking you. Stripped of the chlorophyll wording the real title might be *How to Make Contacts Which May Be Useful in Climbing the Ladder of Success*.

Now what is expected of us? Is it essential to do good, or to Make good? Which is it when the chips are down? Which is primary and which is secondary? Which will get shelved for which in time of crisis in everyday decisions? At a very early age the Biblical command about telling the truth comes into conflict with the laws of Emily Post. Do we not become civilized, gracious, and charming by our little lies; do we not win approval by learning the techniques of approval?

There is a lot of ranting and raving from the pulpits in the nation in particular that we are falling short of our ideals. People are individually falling short of their ideals. People are just following contradictory ideals, and a sign of our maturity will be our readiness to admit this fact.

The solutions to the problems which confront our society cannot be laced up in easy formulas. Our basic religious principles are not going to provide absolute rules of conduct that will automatically tell us what to do under all circumstances. Our basic ideas are the funded wisdom of human experience. They may not give us the answers but they can supply a method and an approach from which each of us after analyzing the particular problem can make a decision.

The question we have to answer for ourselves is, do we want our religious philosophy of life to serve as an active agent in our society? Do we want Judaism to cause us to act and to make decisions, to become personally involved and to make commitments? There are some of us who are content to have our religion be a way of speaking rather than a way of doing (a living).

COMMENTARY BY RABBI ZOË KLEIN

“The real test of religion is life itself,” spoke Rabbi Leonard Beerman at Temple Isaiah in 1954. “Judaism then has its roots, as well as its chief mode of expression, in the concrete experiences of people.”

I hear echoes in Rabbi Beerman’s words of the nineteenth-century Rabbi Israel Salanter, who wrote: “The material needs of my neighbor become my spiritual needs.”

These words were one of the favorite quotes of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the face of the other was as beautiful, terrifying, and unknowable as the face of God. To be in anyone’s presence is to be on holy ground. The face is a revelation. Levinas wrote: “When in the presence of the Other I say ‘Here I am!’ This ‘Here I am’ is the place through which the Infinite enters into language.”

When Rabbi Beerman taught “No man can see God’s face. . . . But God does manifest himself to man by His ethical attributes,” his words vibrated with twentieth-century theologian Martin Buber’s philosophy: “When a person encounters another person in total immediacy, he or she may also experience a glimpse of God.”

In other words, God is found between people. And social justice is the art of interactivity. If Judaism “has its roots in the experiences of people,” as Rabbi Beerman shared, then Judaism is no less than the foundation and framing of Relationship.

Rabbi Beerman channels the voices of some of our most visionary sages, along with his own unique voice and fathomless wisdom, to issue a timeless challenge for us to bridge our religious ideals with our everyday actions. To be believing realists. One might imagine that religion has its roots in heaven, but for Rabbi Beerman, the roots of Judaism are in the concrete, and therefore are the tediously poured foundation of a just and Godly world.