

Social Action as My Gateway to Judaism-Louis Friedler
Yom Kippur Avodah Service
September 21, 2007

"It has been told thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee. Only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

This quote is not so well known- in fact it was not even known to the random rabbinical student I asked recently. The quote is from Micah 6, verse 8, and was well known to those of us who grew up in Congregation Mishkan Israel in New Haven Connecticut, whose rabbi was Bob Goldberg. Let me read this again.

"It has been told thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee. Only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

So- Social justice is not only a central tenant of Judaism, it is a requirement. And the "only" in the phrase "only to do justly, etc" makes it clear that the remainder of Jewish practice is secondary. The only here has always reminded me of part of the famous quote of Hillel about the essence of Judaism: "Love thy neighbor as thyself. The rest is commentary."

Social justice/ social action was THE central focus of Mishkan Israel. Now, there were some disadvantages to this strong focus: I had a Bar Mitzvah that was a total of 45 minutes long; I learned very little Hebrew; the Jewish music in the synagogue sounded almost Christian. I did grow up hearing Yiddish spoken and singing Yiddish songs - but that was in my home. At times I regret that I do not know more ritual, or cannot participate in more depth in textual analysis- but the truth is, even now those holes in my Jewish education seem much less important to me than the activist version of Judaism I grew up with.

And there were some practical advantages to this vision:

The first was in community building. With a shared focus, we could function as a group in the larger community. Is this button recognizable? It was from the March for Jobs and Freedom, August 28th, 1963. This was the march during which Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech. We went as a group from Mishkan Israel. Soon thereafter MLK spoke at our synagogue. Yes- in my mind, a March on Washington was a Jewish event. I was in Connecticut a few weeks ago and drove by Mishkan Israel. In the rear of the synagogue is a very large vegetable plot; the congregation grows vegetables to donate to food pantries. I was pleased to see that social action at Mishkan Israel (now under Rabbi Herb Brockman) is still important.

A second major advantage was that when I went off to college, I did not have to rebel against my religion. I went to Colby- where at the time there was a minimal Jewish presence. After awhile, I found myself an officer both of Hillel and the Northern Student Movement (a local civil rights group.) These were already two parts of my Jewish community. And there was no break between my values before and during college. Fortunately, my parents shared those values- in the late 60's both they and I found ourselves at the same anti-war rallies in Washington, even though I lived 500 miles away from them. **Here is the point: relevant Judaism can draw in young adults and keep them active.**

Over the years since then I've gone in and out of my commitment to Judaism. I eventually found another gateway- Jewish music. I lived in Ghana for five months, where I taught mathematics and studied African music. I eventually became reasonably proficient playing an African flute. When I played in ensembles with the undergraduate music majors from the University of Ghana, I was as good as they were- as long as there was music in front of

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me. When the director asked us to play something that he would sing, I was completely lost in the complex rhythms. When I returned home, I realized that African music was not my music- and I threw myself into learning more about Jewish music- especially klezmer. This became another portal for me- I became involved at Beth Israel in founding and then leading the Klezmateens, which was a klezmer group for Beth Israel middle school children, and in playing with Knish- a klezmer band..

A few years ago I decided to invest more of my energy into social action at Beth Israel and less into the Klezmateens. I feel fortunate to be part of Beth Israel- a community in which 45% of congregational families regularly participate in the Upper Darby Food Service by preparing and delivering food. This is truly extraordinary; in another local synagogue, the members also have a plan to feed the homeless: they buy the food. Beth Israel is an unusually strong and caring community.

I'd like to end by reading an excerpt from a sermon delivered by Rabbi Robert Goldberg at Rosh Hashanah 1962:

Until the dawn of that day when the words "love thy neighbor as thyself" are no longer merely words, but inscribed on the tablets of our minds and hearts and made manifest by all our deeds, I cannot believe that there can ever be too much justice, personal or social, too much compassion, too much affection or concern for the needs of men.