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# Ritual Versus Justice: Must We Choose?

*Suzanne Singer*

As a rabbi, I have been engaged in a debate for many years with my colleagues about whether one's involvement in both ritual observance and social justice is a zero sum game. In other words, is it the case that the more time one spends on observance, the less time is available for social justice, and vice versa? In a recent exchange with me in *Sh'ma*,<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Richard Levy, one of my most significant mentors, explained that, as president of the CCAR, one of his reasons for spearheading the new Reform Principles of 1999 was, "to correct the perception—if not the reality—that increased ritual observance, prayer, and study were crowding out the movement's historic commitment to social justice."<sup>2</sup> My response was that, all too often, this is in fact the reality. A case in point: When I was a student at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles just a few years ago, *t'filah* was increased from twice to four times a week. Where students once made lunch for the hungry some mornings before school, now they prayed, a change pointed out by my esteemed colleague, Rabbi Linda Bertenthal, in her excellent senior sermon.

Not that we should have to make choices between the two. As Rabbi Levy points out, "Both—sanctifying time and place, and working for peace and justice among the peoples God created—were part of our mandate to 'bring Torah into the world.'"<sup>3</sup> And indeed, ritual and justice are intricately interconnected. To quote Rabbi Levy again, "Social justice needs to include study and worship (in the streets before a protest, for example), and worship to be effective needs to involve liturgical study... we must ask how

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our prayers can spill out of Shabbat use to affect the ways we relate to God at home, in nature, and in the public square."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it is actually quite difficult to make a distinction between the ritual and the ethical mitzvot. When I first taught about mitzvot during an Introduction to Judaism class, I tried to separate them but quickly discovered that it was almost impossible to do so. For example, if we take the commandment to observe Shabbat, it soon becomes clear that this mitzvah encompasses myriad ethical concerns. To begin with, we are told in the Torah that we are to give our servants, as well as our animals, a day of rest, certainly one of the very first expressions of concerns for worker and animal rights in history. Then, our willingness and ability to slow down, to connect to our deepest values, to spend time with those dearest to us, underline what matters most in life. This realization should lead us to treat our fellow human being with respect; it should prevent us from exploiting others, particularly in pursuit of money and power. Finally, the mindfulness we develop through Shabbat observance should instill in us a sense of gratitude for the blessings we have, sharpening our awareness of what so many in the world are not so fortunate to have.

The real issue is: Does observance, in fact, lead to this kind of mindset? And if it does, are we prepared to "pray with our feet," as Abraham Joshua Heschel described his marching for civil rights? Edward Feinstein, senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, asks what the most important word in the prayer book is. His response: "*al-ken*—therefore."

"Therefore" connects all our fine sentiments and deep wisdom with the reality of the world. "Therefore" binds us to bring our values out of the vague realm of our subjectivity and into the hard objective world of work, family, politics and power. "Therefore" tests all our spiritual aspirations and visions against the limits of our courage, imagination and resolve. "Therefore" makes religion real. Every day, someone confesses, "Rabbi, I'm a deeply spiritual person."

Good, I reply. Where's the "therefore"? What difference does it make? How does your spirituality shape the way you spend your money, speak to your housekeeper, raise your children? Do you vote spiritually? Drive spiritually? Watch TV spiritually? I am little impressed by those who profess to believe in God. I am moved by those whose faith is behaved. That's my "therefore" test.<sup>5</sup>

Kashrut is another example of how ethical concerns are intertwined with ritual observance. The Torah's rationale for observing kashrut is so that we can be holy. In addition, kosher slaughter has been considered the most humane way of killing an animal. Certainly, holiness and concern for the animal should also encompass our concern for the slaughterhouse worker. Thus we should expect that the kashrut *hechsher* stand for decent wages and working conditions, not only proper *shechitah*.

Unfortunately, observance does not guarantee morality, and all too often observance for observance's sake becomes the norm. I am not sure how many observant Jews combine dietary practice with awareness of kosher slaughterhouse conditions. Just look at the recent scandal surrounding Agriprocessors, the largest glatt kosher meat packing plant in the country. Not only were the animals treated appallingly, but the workers, many of whom were undocumented so with little recourse, were also paid very low wages under dangerous and unhealthy working conditions. According to a 1996 article in *The Forward*, for example, workers claimed that they received "virtually no safety training. This is an anomaly in an industry in which the tools are designed to cut and grind through flesh and bones. In just one month...two young men required amputations."<sup>6</sup> It is gratifying to know that the Conservative and Reform movements are developing an additional kind of *hechsher* called Magen Tzedek, though I wish this would be an unnecessary move: the traditional *hechsher* itself should be a guarantee of righteous conduct.

I fear that with greater observance has come greater insularity, however. I remember a conversation with some of my fellow students in seminary who stated that they liked to go to kosher markets and restaurants in order to run into others who keep kosher. My response was that I liked going to non-kosher markets and restaurants to run into everyone else. For several decades now, because the Jewish community has been so concerned about the problem of continuity, Jews seem to have retrenched from their concern with the larger society and reached inward to fortify their Jewish identity. This has been particularly true for some of my colleagues. They believe that this focus on social justice is the old Reform Judaism that jettisoned all the traditional rituals. They want synagogues to move us back to tradition; they want our congregations to spend more time in prayer and study, and to increase

observance of mitzvot. Indeed, in the past decade, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) has launched initiatives to increase Jewish literacy through an emphasis on Torah study, and in the past year, at the URJ's Biennial, Rabbi Eric Yoffie challenged synagogues to reinvigorate Shabbat morning services. Certainly these are worthy goals. But the question is: To what end? What is the answer to Rabbi Feinstein's "therefore"? Are we becoming more observant for the sake of being more observant, to fortify ourselves as Jews for the sake of our Jewish identity? Or is there an additional reason for the preservation of our rituals?

Social activist Leonard Fein, founder of *Moment* magazine and MAZON, expresses this beautifully:

...the central American Jewish problem of our time is not anti-Semitism, nor is it intermarriage specifically or assimilation more generally. It is the problem of boredom, the fact that for very many American Jews, the experience of being Jewish does not seem to be about anything—not, at any rate, about anything that matters very much. Many Jews are simply unable to fill in the blank in the sentence that begins with the words "It is important that the Jews survive in order to . . ." In order to what? In order to survive?

I can think of no single statement to which more Jews through the centuries and even today would subscribe, no sentence that more accurately and comprehensively captures the most fundamental Jewish insight, than that this, our world, God's world, is not working the way it was meant to—and that to be a Jew is to know that, somehow, you are implicated in its repair.

Accordingly, the completed sentence reads, "It is important that the Jews survive in order to help repair this oh-so-fractured world."

...in the end, it is not the services we attend that will sustain us; it is the services we perform. For us, Shabbat was never meant as a stopping place; it was meant as a resting place, a place to regather our energies to take up again, and forever, God's work in this world.

And what is that work? Do we not know? Have we not been told? It is the work of clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, of embracing the stranger and freeing the captive and smashing

the idols; it is, in short, the work of justice. That is the Torah that we are instructed to do. That is the Torah that drives us.<sup>7</sup>

In our recent *Sh'ma* exchange, Rabbi Levy asks: "What does the greeting 'Shabbat Shalom,' imply? Are we as a movement ready to join the conversation on how and when to disengage from Iraq? Are we ready to encourage young people to carry the URJ resolution on the war to sources of influence in this country? Are we ready to raise our voices to counter those in the Jewish community who are content with the status quo in the Middle East?"<sup>8</sup> I too hope that our prayers for shalom are not idle chatter. Indeed, how can we pronounce such words in synagogue if we are not willing to actively promote peace? Here, we are not talking about making a choice between prayer and social justice. Rather, we are asking that the ethical implications of our ritual mitzvot be uppermost in our minds—and on the doorposts of our house. I have frequently been "accused" of being a classical Reform Jew. Though I am not one, I do miss the universal outlook of classical Reform, the focus on the prophets' demand for justice. I am not looking to return to its stripped-down version of Judaism, but I would like to see more of us embrace the causes championed by our impressive Religious Action Center. I would like a concern for others and for *tikkun olam* to infuse our observance, our prayer, and our study. And I would like to see us leave the pews and take to the streets or the legislature or the op-ed pages of our newspapers.

In today's high-stress society, the truth is that, all too often, people don't have time for both observance and action. Choices must be made: spending Saturday morning at services or at a homeless shelter? Engaging in *t'filah* or making peanut butter sandwiches for the hungry? And while we shouldn't be considered inauthentic Reform Jews if we are equally concerned about separating milk and meat as we are about the working conditions in factories, what about the reverse? If our focus is on the latter, does that make us any less authentic? Were our classical forefathers less Jewish because they eschewed kashrut and *kippot*? And do we admonish Jews who never go to shul but are engaged in fighting for living wages? If some of us don't have the time to be at the forefront of social change, shouldn't we honor those who do? When the Israelites marched through the desert, the tribe of Dan brought up the rear, gathering those who had fallen behind. The Torah commentary *Etz*

*Hayim* explains that Dan was chosen because the Danites loved their fellow Israelites even though their religious faith was weak. "There is a need in today's community for people who express their religious faith by caring for the left-behind."<sup>9</sup>

According to recent studies, though young Jews want to be involved in social service, they are not so attached to Judaism. They fail to see the connection. They often view Judaism as irrelevant, boring, and obsolete. If the Reform Movement is to have relevance for our youth, we must make it crystal clear how Jewish tradition can respond to the urgent concerns of the day. An example: Recently, fast food giant Burger King joined major restaurant chains in establishing animal welfare standards in its choice of suppliers. I wish our Movement had been at the forefront of pushing for this reform. We could have made the connection between the humane treatment of animals and kashrut. Let us offer our youth a revitalized tradition that moves us beyond the borders of our own community and into the public square. Let us infuse our ritual, prayer, and study with the urgent call to right the wrongs of society. And let the Reform Movement again make a priority of speaking truth to power.

### Notes

1. Richard N. Levy and Suzanne Singer, "(Re)Defining Reform(ing)," *Sh'ma* 38, no. 645 (November 2007/Kislev 5768): 8–10, [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).
2. *Ibid.*, 8.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Edward Feinstein, "Are You Listening?" *JewishJournal.com* (August 3, 2006), [http://www.jewishjournal.com/torah\\_portion/article/are\\_you\\_listening\\_20060804](http://www.jewishjournal.com/torah_portion/article/are_you_listening_20060804).
6. Nathaniel Popper, "In Iowa Meat Plant, Kosher 'Jungle' Breeds Fear, Injury, Short Pay," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, May 26, 2006, <http://www.forward.com/articles/1006/>.
7. Leonard Fein, "And Pursuing Justice" (keynote address delivered at the 64th UAHC Biennial Convention, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, October 31, 1997).
8. Levy and Singer, "(Re)Defining Reform(ing)," 9.
9. David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 825.