Introduction

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"Rabbi, we want to hear Torah, not politics, from the bimah." Every rabbi has heard this refrain, and many echo it. The plea, though, has always been discordant to my ears. No, I don't preach "politics," which I define narrowly in this context as taking to the pulpit to endorse or oppose a candidate for elective office. I understand Torah to be the Jewish people's primary teaching about how to live our lives, individually and collectively. Torah shaped our covenantal people in formation in ancient Israel and Judea, establishing fundamental norms—regarding ritual matters, yes, but even more, in legislating society's obligations toward individuals and vice versa.

The Holiness Code in Leviticus 19 offers a microcosm of the Torah's dual emphasis. Famously beginning "You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), the Holiness Code proceeds in the very next verse to tell us how to achieve this lofty, overarching goal of being holy. It first articulates an obligation toward other human beings, namely our parents, and then proceeds without pause to what may be viewed as a ritual commandment, the obligation to observe Shabbat. As the passage continues, injunctions to avoid idolatry and specific regulations about consumption of sacrifices are interspersed among directives about fair labor practices, care for the aged, and providing for the poor and needy. The message is clear: Israel serves God no less by pursuing social justice than through proper worship.

Even commandments that appear to regulate exclusively ritual matters often have ethical ends. For example, Professor Ruhama Weiss and Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz will persuasively argue in these pages that the laws of kashrut (dietary regulations) cannot be fulfilled absent fair labor practices and the ethical treatment of animals.

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Thanks to Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, we will see that requiring purification for a person who has given birth, a practice out of use since Temple times and abhorrent on its surface, must inspire us to demand that our society ensure proper reproductive health care for all people. And Rabbi Craig Lewis will excavate the detailed regulations for creating the priests' bejeweled *choshen* (breastplate), marshaling *parshanut* (commentary) alongside gemology to formulate a persuasive argument for equity in education.

Three Torah passages beloved among contemporary Jews are more apparently ethical in nature: the creation of humanity *b'tzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27); the oft repeated injunction "You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20);[1] and *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* (צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף), "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). Still, while Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert begins his commentary with "Justice, justice . . . ," he builds his argument about the ongoing need to uproot the sin of racist lynching by turning to the next verses, a seemingly ritual commandment forbidding the Israelites from erecting "a sacred post," a form of idolatry.

Rabbis and others who articulate social justice arguments are sometimes accused—not always unfairly—of basing a complex and controversial assertion about society merely on a pithy phrase from Torah, such as one of the three aforementioned beloved passages, with little depth. This volume is both an antidote to that accusation and a refutation of it. Here, a diverse array of members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and the American Conference of Cantors (ACC) and our colleagues in other movements, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion faculty, Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) staff, and lay leaders[2] build their social justice arguments on robust and creative employment of *parshanut haTorah* (Torah commentary), including academic biblical exegesis, classical midrash and commentary, modern midrash, and more. Rabbi Seth M. Limmer begins his chapter with the familiar verse "There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger" (Numbers 15:15), but he does not reach his conclusion about the

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rights of immigrants until he has drawn on sources as diverse as the Talmud, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dennis Prager, Ibram X. Kendi, and the *Brown-Driver-Briggs* biblical lexicon.

Much of the Torah is narrative rather than law, which is why "Law" has always been an incorrect translation of the word *Torah*, better understood as "Teaching," as it is rendered in the New JPS translation. The Sages who established Judaism as fundamentally being the study and observance of Torah also found deep meaning in the Torah's aggadah, its stories. Similarly, *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*'s authors have plumbed biblical narratives for inspiration to build a better society. Rabbi Esther L. Lederman draws fascinating parallels between Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery and America's "original sin of slavery," noting that the aftereffects of both are long-lasting. Rabbi A. Brian Stoller reinterprets the supposed "curse of Ham," turning it on its head as he personally comes to grips with his own deeply ingrained implicit racism and urges all white Jews to join him. Ilana Kaufman shares her painful experiences of not finding herself counted, demonstrating the need for our North American Jewish community to be more inclusive in its own census-taking by emphasizing the care that Moses takes in numbering the Israelites. Chris Harrison preaches against the text, insisting that the zealous Pinchas does not deserve God's *b'rit shalom* (בְּרִית שָׁלוֹם), "pact of friendship" (Numbers 25:12), for having murdered the kind of people we need to do a better job of including in our Jewish communities.

While I have cited a number of specific chapters, for each that I have mentioned, several others employ equally thoughtful and creative approaches to make important arguments, whether based on legal or narrative Torah passages.

The contemporary issues addressed in this volume are not meant to be all-inclusive of the social justice challenges facing the world today. *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* was never conceived as a book "about" social justice or an encyclopedia of the world's injustices. Instead, each author or pair of authors was asked to plumb a specific *parashah* (weekly Torah portion) and to derive a social justice argument from that process. Each *parashah* is tied to a single social justice

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issue—with the exception of *B'haalot'cha*, for which I received two submissions so insightful that both had to be included. Attempting to avoid duplication, I asked each author to delineate a very specific problem to be addressed. Some topics—most notably, racial justice—are explored from a variety of angles in several chapters. Other pressing problems of our day—for example, a long list of injustices outside the United States and Israel—are untouched here. While many of our authors identify as LGBTQ, only one pair of authors—Rabbis Sharon Kleinbaum and Mike Moskowitz—chose to address a topic specifically related to that community, and even that piece is as much about immigrant rights as LGBTQ rights, with Kleinbaum and Moskowitz persuasively arguing that the two are inextricably bound together.

In this context, one would be fair to ask, "What is social justice?" While each contributor to this book may have their own conception, the Center for Economic and Social Justice offers a useful definition:

> Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to collaborate with others, at whatever level of the "Common Good" in which we participate, to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development.[3]

Jewish religious leaders have been advocating for social justice longer than the term "Jewish" has existed. As our contributors demonstrate throughout this volume, the Torah itself provides the guide. The Torah repeatedly argues that living as God commands includes the requirement to establish, nurture, and protect social institutions—including governments—that grant the greatest good to individuals and communities, particularly those who lack privileges and whose voices are often silenced.

Biblical prophets might not have employed the term "social justice," but they repeatedly called for it all the same. Amos, an early prophet in the Northern Kingdom,[4] excoriates the Israelites "who

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trample the heads of the poor into the earth's dust, and make crooked the road of the meek" (Amos 2:7). Jeremiah admonishes the king himself to "do justice and righteousness," with particular concern for foreigners residing in Judea as well as widows and orphans, the Bible's prime examples of poor people who are unable to provide for themselves (Jeremiah 22:1–3). In a passage we read on Yom Kippur morning, Deutero-Isaiah[5] castigates elite Israelites for imagining that scrupulous ritual observance will protect them from God's wrath when they oppress their workers and lash out in violence. Instead, the prophet proclaims, God will favor those who free the enslaved, feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, and clothe the naked (Isaiah 58:3–8).

Gershom Gorenberg acknowledges that "Jewish religious texts celebrate diversity of opinion and multiple interpretations. And amid those many voices, neither the Bible nor the Talmud endorses a specific monetary policy, tax schedule or health plan for the twenty-first century."[6] However, Gorenberg goes on to argue for social justice as opposed to reliance on charity alone:

> To understand what's wrong with the voluntary model, I suggest reading the recent book *Justice in the City* by the scholar and activist Aryeh Cohen. Reading the Talmud and later rabbinic writing, Cohen shows that they obligate society to feed and clothe the hungry, and to provide homes for the homeless. The obligation must be carried out through political institutions, which both represent the people who live in a particular place and require, even coerce, them to pay what is needed. That is, a just society collects taxes to meet its duties to every person in its realm—which are also its duties to God.[7]

The advent of Reform Judaism brought a renewed emphasis on social justice. Rabbi Leonard J. Mervis wrote, "David Einhorn, a pioneer of Reform Judaism in Germany and later in the United States, summarized [the matter, writing,] 'We stand upon the ground of prophetic Judaism which aims at the universal worship of God by righteousness.'"[8] Mervis argues that early US Reform rabbis, even those who spoke out about slavery, did not actively advocate social justice

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during the period following the Civil War.[9] However, in 1885, under the influence of Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch,[10] the new Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) would adopt its "Declaration of Principles"—more commonly, the Pittsburgh Platform—including as its eighth and final article: "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."[11]

As the twentieth century began, the CCAR began to raise the collective rabbinic voice, primarily in support of fair labor practices, including child labor laws, "a more equitable distribution of the profits of industry," minimum wage, eight-hour workdays, and workers' compensation.[12] The CCAR expanded its advocacy to include women's suffrage in 1917.[13] Five years later, a half century before Sally Priesand's historic ordination at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, the CCAR sought to establish women's equality in its own ranks by calling for the ordination of women.[14]

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), founded in 1961 by the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (CSA)—a joint instrument of the CCAR and the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)—was conceived at the height of the civil rights movement. According to the RAC, "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted in the conference room of the Leadership Conference, which for decades was located in the RAC's building. The Jewish community has continued its support of civil rights laws addressing persistent discrimination in voting, housing and employment against not only women and people of color but also in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and the disabled community."[15]

Like the URJ and CSA, the CCAR has, for many decades, adopted resolutions on a wide range of social justice topics. Some are focused on what all would agree are "Jewish issues," such as those related to Israel and antisemitism. Some particularly noteworthy resolutions

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have enshrined social justice advances in ritual practice, such as "Resolution on Same Gender Officiation,"[16] which, when adopted in 2000, officially sanctioned Reform rabbinic officiation at same-sex marriages, years after some Reform rabbis had begun officiating at them but before those unions were recognized in any US state.

I have been privileged to participate in the CCAR's process of raising the collective Jewish voice for some two decades, first as a member and later in two separate terms as chair of the CCAR Resolutions Committee. During this time, Reform rabbis have collectively taken positions on issues ranging from reproductive justice to racial justice, from Israel advocacy to demanding equality for Reform Jews in Israel and speaking out for the rights of Palestinians, from economic justice to climate justice. In 2015, which seems late, the CCAR was the first mainstream Jewish organization and very early among all religious bodies to call for equal rights for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals.[17]

A substantial majority of the social justice arguments in this volume are consistent with positions that have been taken by the Reform Movement through the CCAR, URJ, and/or CSA. However, emblematic of an effort to achieve diversity of every kind in this book, authors were explicitly welcome to depart from such positions if they wished. When I invited Rabbi Jeremy Barras to write on the social justice imperative to support Israel, I assumed that his piece would take a different viewpoint from Rabbi Jill Jacobs's on the Occupation. What I could not have imagined was that both would base their largely opposing arguments on interpretations of the same biblical notion, that the Land of Israel would "spew out" those who commit unpardonable sins upon it.[18]

Compiling this book in 2020–21 offered unique opportunities and challenges. Authors wrote during a global pandemic, at a time of surging awareness of racial injustice in the United States in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, and in the midst of a rancorous American presidential election, with wildfires and hurricanes ravaging the West and Gulf Coasts, respectively. Inequities were brought into sharp relief by all three, offering ripe material to our authors. At

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the same time, wishing this book to be resonant well beyond the year of its authorship—indeed, still to be relevant at the moment of its publication—an effort was made to ensure that even as current events informed authors' arguments, they would not be quite so time-bound as a sermon for Rosh HaShanah or Yom Kippur 5781.

This book is the second I have edited for CCAR Press, following *The Mussar Torah Commentary* (2020). The two volumes appear to go in divergent directions. However, I see them as a sequence. Mussar, Jewish ethical discipline, urges us to engage in *tikkun middot*, repairing the measures of our souls. *The Mussar Torah Commentary*'s authors examined the fifty-four *parashiyot* to find lessons that would help readers train themselves to become better people. Much of that work is internal, though its success manifests in the ways we interact with the world. Too often, we who are inspired to engage in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world around us, skip a step, failing to do the internal work necessary in order to bring our best selves to *tikkun olam*.

To be sure, neither the work of *tikkun middot* nor that of *tikkun olam* is ever complete and will not be until we achieve a messianic future with God's help. Divine guidance is available to us through Torah, re-amplified in every generation. As we return to our portion in the Torah each week, let us ever find new words that inspire us to heal ourselves and this broken world.

Notes

1. Tradition holds that this commandment is stated thirty-six times. It is stated differently in different places. Typically, though, it includes the phrase "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."
2. Many of the authors fall in more than one of these categories.
3. "Defining Economic Justice and Social Justice," Center for Economic and Social Justice, https://www.cesj.org/learn/definitions/defining-economic-justice-and-social-justice/.
4. W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005), 263.
5. "Deutero-Isaiah" is the name given to the exilic prophet whom academic Bible scholars consider to be the author of Isaiah 40–55 (or, some say, 40–66).
6. Gershom Gorenberg, "Avoiding Sodom: It's About Policy, Not Charity,"

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Daily Beast, September 10, 2012, updated July 14, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/avoiding-sodom-its-about-policy-not-charity.

7. Gorenberg, "Avoiding Sodom."
8. Leonard J. Mervis, "The Social Justice Movement and the American Reform Rabbi," *American Jewish Archives*, June 1955, 172, americanjewisharchives.org/publications/journal/PDF/1955_07_02_00_mervis.pdf.
9. Mervis, "Social Justice Movement," 172.
10. Mervis, "Social Justice Movement," 172.
11. Central Conference of American Rabbis, "Declaration of Principles ('The Pittsburgh Platform'—1885): 1885 Pittsburgh Conference," CCAR, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/.
12. Mervis, "Social Justice Movement," 173–79.
13. Resolution adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1917, "Women's Suffrage," CCAR, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/women-s-suffrage-1889-1972/.
14. "Ordination of Women: Resolutions and Statements: 1963," Women of Reform Judaism, https://wrj.org/ordination-women-rabbis.
15. "Jews and the Civil Rights Movement," Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, accessed December 22, 2020, https://rac.org/jews-and-civil-rights-movement.
16. Central Conference of American Rabbis, "Resolution on Same Gender Officiation: Resolution Adopted at the 111th Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, March, 2000," CCAR, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/same-gender-officiation/.
17. All CCAR resolutions may be accessed at https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/resolution/.
18. Interestingly, the passages to which I'm referring are not in either of the *parashiyot* on which Rabbi Barras's and Rabbi Jacobs's respective commentaries are primarily based, but are found in Leviticus 18:24–28 and Numbers 35:33–34. Both Rabbi Barras and Rabbi Jacobs do, in addition, base their commentaries primarily on the designated *parashiyot*.

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