Temple Israel 2009 – Rabbi David J. Fine

Tikkun Olam (Magen Tzedek, Health Care and Agahozo)
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The Talmud tells the story a certain heathen who approaches Shammai, the great Jewish sage, and offers to convert to Judaism but only if he can teach him the whole Torah while he stands on one foot. Shammai picked up rod and chased him away for his insolence. The heathen then appeared before the great sage, Hillel. "I will convert to Judaism if you teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot," he said. Hillel calmly responded, "The Torah can be summarized in one sentence: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary."

Hillel's teaching, besides being welcoming to converts, is a profound insight on the essence of our religion. Rabbi Akiva, perhaps the greatest rabbi of the Mishnah, confirmed this point, stating that the verse "Love your neighbor as yourself" is *the* fundamental principle of the Torah [Sifra Kedoshim 4:12]. In explaining this statement, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, in his book *The Way Into Tikkun Olam*, writes: "The Rabbis of the Midrash and the Talmud, in interpreting this verse [to love your neighbor as yourself], determine that it requires us not really to love everyone, which they knew was impossible, but to have concern for others and, more importantly, to act out of that sense of commitment and loyalty to others" [p. 26].

Rabbi Dorff's argument here is that when the Torah commands us to love our neighbor, and when Hillel and Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud tell us that this is the essence, the fundamental principle of the Torah, the meaning is not to feel love but to act out of love, that is, out of commitment and caring. How do we do that? The Torah tells us, in

any number of passages like this one from Deuteronomy: "God upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" [Deut. 10]. And as explained in the Midrash: "The stranger who dwells with you shall be with you, and you shall love him as yourself. Just as the Torah says with regard to fellow Jews, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' so the Torah says with regard to aliens, 'And you shall love them as yourselves, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt'" [Sifra Kedoshim 8:4]. Not only must we care for our Jewish neighbors, but for all human beings in our midst. "According to the Talmud's count, thirty-six times the Torah requires Jews to treat the alien within their midst fairly and even to love the stranger" [Dorff, p. 42].

What else do we think the prophet Isaiah could have meant when he said that Israel is to be "a light unto the nations"? Judaism teaches us to care for those around us, to be aware of the needs of others and to help provide. Even the poor who receive charity, according to halakhah, are themselves obligated to give charity to others. Just as there is no limit to the amount of studying Torah one can do, so too, states the Mishnah, there is no limit to the amount of charity, of tzedakah, that may be given [M. Peah 1:1].

Tikkun Olam is a phrase that literally means "repairing the world." The phrase derives from the mystical notion that we must all do our part in fixing elements of the world so that we each become God's partner in creation, helping to increase God's presence through the world. How do we do tikkun olam? In Judaism, God is the model from which we learn what is right and good. The Talmud teaches: "Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina said, 'What is the meaning of the verse, "You shall walk behind the

Lord your God"? It means that a person should imitate the righteous ways of the Holy One. Just as God clothed the naked (that is, Adam and Eve), so too you must supply clothes for the naked, (that is, the poor). Just as God visited the sick (that is, Abraham after his adult *bris*), so too you should visit the sick. Just as God comforted mourners (that is, Isaac after Abraham died), so too you should comfort mourners. Just as God buried the dead (that is, Moses on Mount Nebo), so too you must bury the dead.'" [Sotah 114a].

When we speak of tikkun olam we speak of social responsibility, of the mitzvah of helping those in need. We must remember that the Hebrew word for charity is *tzedakah*¸which means so much more than alms for the poor. *Tzedek* means justice, in the sense of the standard set by God for how we should treat, or love, our neighbor. *Social justice* might be an apt translation of the concept.

The word *tzedek* has found a new usage in the Conservative movement with the establishment of the Magen Tzedek, the "Righteousness Seal," a new food certification that will evaluate producers in the kosher food industry to determine whether they reach the standard of Jewish social justice. We will in the near future be offering this social justice certification as a supplement to kashrut certifications and we will soon be able to look for these products in our supermarkets.

The story is told of a rabbi walking home from synagogue one Friday night who sees someone who he thought was one of his most pious devoted congregants enter a non-Kosher Chinese restaurant. Curiously, he stands by the window, thinking that maybe he wasn't there to eat, but then he observes how his friend talks to the waiter, gesturing at the menu. The rabbi keeps watching, thinking maybe he was just ordering a drink, or

some vegetables, even though it was Shabbat, but a short time later the waiter reappears carrying a platter full of spare ribs, shrimp in lobster sauce, crab Rangoon and other treif delicacies the rabbi had never heard of. The rabbi stayed where he was, eyes glued to the window, thinking that maybe it was a mistake. Then, as his friend picks up the chopsticks and begins to eat, the rabbi bursts through the doors of the restaurant and says, "Morris, what are you doing? I thought you kept kosher!"

To which Morris replies, "Rabbi, you saw me enter this restaurant?"

"Yes," the rabbi replies.

"And you saw me order this meal?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the waiter bring me this food?"

"Yes."

"And you saw me begin to eat it?"

"Yes."

"Then Rabbi, I don't see the problem here. The entire meal was under rabbinic supervision!"

We laugh, but know that every good joke rests upon certain truths. There is rabbinical supervision and there is rabbinical supervision. And while there is no end to disputes in the kosher-keeping world over which type of ritual slaughter, and which ingredients, are kosher and which are suspect, the new level of supervision which the Conservative movement is adding to the table is not a ritual supervision but a social justice supervision.

The very word "kosher" means something that is fit for use. Kosher food is food that is prepared under the ritual requirements of the Jewish dietary laws. But for food to be truly kosher, for it to be truly fit for consumption, it should also be prepared without abuse of animals, without worker abuse, child endangerment, and without underpayment of laborers. While there have been abuses in at least one sector of the kosher food production industry, what is driving the Magen Tzedek program is not the low standards of industry, but the high standards of Jewish social ethics. These are not new concerns. No one in the Jewish world disputes that the Torah commands employers to pay timely and adequate wages. And Judaism does hold businesses to a higher standard than most regulatory jurisdictions. It is not enough to pay a worker minimum wage when he or she is supporting a family and depends on this employment to provide a roof, food and healthcare, and when we all know that a minimum wage cannot provide these things. The Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative movement's supreme panel on questions of Jewish law, already decided some years ago that Jewish law requires employers to provide healthcare. And a year ago the Law Committee passed a responsum that reaffirms the Conservative movement's commitment to a living wage, the right to unionize, and various other aspects of labor relations. With the Magen Tzedek program, the Conservative movement is not suggesting that we examine every item that we buy to determine if it was produced according to the high standards of Jewish social justice. Given the global sphere of production, that would be a tall order, although socially conscious consumerism is a worthy aspiration for us all. But at least with items that are sold to the Jewish community as "kosher," as fitting for consumption according to Jewish law, we ought to know if they have satisfied the standards of *tzedek* as much as

whether or not all the blood has been drained and the sciatic nerve removed. I am reminded of a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, that a Jew who would not touch an egg with a bloodspot (and hence not kosher) is admirable, but the truly good Jew is the one who is horrified to touch a ruble that has a bloodspot on it.

While the laws of social justice have always been central in Jewish teachings, never before has a systematic effort been employed to certify adherence on a national scale. This ambitious endeavor of the Conservative movement has generated widespread praise throughout the Jewish world, along with the expected condemnation from the far right. While the Reform have usually taken center stage on tikkun olam issues, in matters of the kosher food industry they have taken second seat to us, and I see this as an enormous opportunity for the Conservative movement to set an agenda of moral leadership in the Jewish world of the twenty-first century.

Some have criticized the project as putting religion where religion does not belong. It is one thing to observe kashrut and want kosher food, but business practices are a matter of governmental jurisdiction, and do not fall under the religious sphere. But as I have said, Jewish standards are higher than most governmental standards. Business ethics do not fall outside the reach of religious principles. Nor should they. In the final analysis, one must remember that what we are talking about is not just a bottle of ketchup on the supermarket shelf, but of the hundreds or thousands of laborers who are employed in the factory that produces that ketchup that I put in my shopping cart. How easy it is to forget that there are human beings on the other side of that supermarket shelf, people who struggle to make ends meet, and do not enjoy the plenty on their tables that we will tomorrow night.

One does not need to be a Communist and agree with his conclusions in order to appreciate the great insight of Karl Marx, that the challenge of industrial society is the alienation of the consumer from the sources of production. In our industrial society we don't just walk down the block and watch things being made. Rather, we walk down the block, or ride down Route 17, to a supermarket or department store where we buy products that are produced in factories sometimes thousands of miles away and only brought to us for consumption. We have no connection with how things are made. The only thing we think about are the numbers on the price tag.

A couple of years ago Alla and I went to Vermont for a week in the summer with the boys, and one of the things we did was visit a milk farm, a cheese farm, and a corn farm. Yes, I was looking for things to do with little kids, and yes they loved it. I didn't realize at the time the moral education that I was giving them in learning that milk cartons don't grow on supermarket shelves. They have a picture in their heads of dozens of cows lining up by the milking machine, with the milk collected in a large vat, and then pumped into the truck as it came for pick-up which we were lucky to witness. The Magen Tzedek is asking us to paint a similar picture in our minds. When we buy kosher products we should think not only about how the meat or whatever else it is will look like on the stove, on the grill, and on the table, but also of the people involved in its production.

Indeed, the reach of the demands of tzedek, or Tikkun Olam, are vast. Did anyone notice a few minutes ago that I mentioned that the Law Committeee of the Conservative Movement requires employers to provide health care? I was wondering if I could just slip that in without notice. As we know, health care is an extremely

contentious issue today, and I have sat up at night wondering, why are Americans getting so agitated over whether or not their neighbors get to go to the doctor when they are sick? Of course I understand that it is more complex than that, but I what I also understand is that the real issue is not whether or not people should have health care, since every good person can agree on that. No one argues that any American ought to live without health care! The issues of debate have to do, rather, with the role of government, the extent of the national responsibility to provide health care, the pragmatic concerns of whether the government can be trusted to carry through any such program, and further pragmatic concerns of how a government program would effect existing programs. It is certainly not for us to weigh these various pragmatic concerns here. And as I have said before, I accept and believe that there are good and moral people on both sides of this debate. I do want to make two points:

1. The provision of health care is a moral issue, and
2. Jewish tradition demands the provision of health care.

I first fully understood the moral dimensions of this debate when the President held his conference call with the thousand rabbis that I mentioned on Rosh HaShanah, and explained that what is driving him to effect change here is the belief that health care reform will save people's lives. I was also very moved by these last words that the late Senator Kennedy wrote to the President before he died: "[health care reform] concerns more than material things; that what we face is above all a moral issue; that at stake are not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country." So far, indeed, for Senator Kennedy. Please understand me here. I am not making a political argument. I am saying that the provision of health care is a moral

cause. Now, whether it is possible to achieve that is a pragmatic detail that the politicians need to work out. That is their duty, and I cannot comment on that here. The point is that the issue is one of social justice, what we call tikkun olam.

Secondly, that Jewish law requires the provision of health care. Now, the Law Committee did explain that individuals also have responsibilities to provide health care for themselves. Health care can be expensive, and Judaism does not consider it to be something that we are simply entitled to without making our own contributions. But what Judaism does teach is that the responsibility for the provision of health care is not only individual, but also communal. The community must provide for its members when they cannot provide for itself. In Judaism this is not a matter of voluntary charity, in the Christian sense. We do a disservice to our tradition when we translate tzedakah as charity. What we are talking about, rather, is a matter of mitzvah, which means a duty, an obligation; the mitzvah of Tzedek, of social justice.

Judaism demands that we love our neighbors, that we care for others. I want to share with you my excitement over a Tikkun Olam project that our congregation has taken upon itself for the current year. We have pledged to support the costs of feeding one child at the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village in Rwanda. This is a project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, one which many of us may have heard about from our member Will Recant, who, through his work at the Joint, is intimately involved with this project. What Agahozo is is a youth village for orphans of the Rwandan genocide, and it is based upon the model of the youth aliyah villages in Israel that were originally founded to absorb orphans of the Shoah. The word Agahozo means the "drying of tears," a place where tears are dried, a poignant African translation of our

word “shalom.” What a model we can establish in the world, for the Jewish people, victims of the worst tragedy human beings could ever inflict on others, to work to help victims of other genocides. This is what it means when the Torah teaches us to live the stranger, for we were strangers in Egpyt.

Our plan this year is that if each of us could give $18 towards this village, we will be able to support one child for a year. There is information in the current issue of Temple Talk, and there will be more to come during the year. Please join us in this important work.

For me, the concern for justice as applied to the workers who produce the food I eat, for the provision of health care for those who cannot afford it, the feeding of an orphaned child in Rwanda, respresent the very essence of Judaism. Ours is not a religion solely devoted to praying and learning. Yes, we do that, and davening and studying are critically important, but we do that to help us understand the fundamental principles of Judaism, to we walk in God’s ways, to seek to restore justice to the world, what we sometimes call tikkun olam. The full expression of Judaism is found not inside the synagogue, but outside, in the way we live our lives, in the way we spend our money and our time, in the things we care about, the values we choose to uphold.

In tomorrow morning’s haftarah Isaiah speaks out: “Behold on the day of your fast you pursue business as usual, and oppress your workers…..Is this the fast I have chosen? Is this what you call fasting, a fast that the Lord would accept?” What good is your ritual fast, Isaiah is preaching, if one goes home to oppress ones workers, if one resumes “business as usual” with all its abuses and injustices. Isaiah continues in the haftarah: “*This* is my chosen fast: to loosen all the bonds that bind men unfairly, to let

the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do no turn away from people in need….Then you shall call and the Lord will answer: you shall cry out and God will say, 'Here I am.'"

If we, my friends, restrict our religious concerns to the number of pages we've davened and whether or not we like the sermons, without concerning ourselves with the types of issues I've raised tonight, then what is the purpose of our fast, of our religion? This is the challenge that Rabbi Akiva meant when he said that "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the fundamental principle of the Torah, what Hillel meant when he said it encompasses all of the Torah. Would we be comfortable with our own children working in the factories in which our food is produced? Assuming that they are of age, and putting aside our aspirations for what we think they should be doing with their lives and how much we would like them to earn, would we be comfortable with their safety and their ability to support themselves in such environments? Or would we allow our children to live on their own without health insurance? And finally, could we live in a community that was not prepared to give them food and shelter if some tragedy should take us away? That is the standard of Jewish social justice. Because if the answer is no, then what is "Love your neighbor as yourself" possibly supposed to mean?