



IF I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE, WHAT AM I?

JEWISH SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THE NATHAN CUMMINGS FOUNDATION

THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE ROUNDTABLE

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO
THESE CAUSES, ALONGSIDE
THOSE OF THOUSANDS OF
OTHER AMERICAN JEWS,
WOULD OVER TIME MATURE
INTO WHAT IS NOW KNOWN
AS THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE
MOVEMENT.





1900 – 1979

JEWS AND JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS HELPED TO PRODUCE MANY OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE VICTORIES DURING THE FIRST DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY. AS THE JEWISH POPULATION SWELLED DUE TO MASS IMMIGRATION BEFORE THE 1920S, WORKING CLASS JEWS – MANY WITH RADICAL POLITICS – BECAME A FORCE IN AMERICAN LIFE. THE DECADES THAT FOLLOWED SAW A JEWISH COMMUNITY INCREASINGLY COMMITTED TO ENDING DISCRIMINATION AND COMBATTING EXPLOITATION, OFTEN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NON-JEWISH ALLIES. THIS LEGACY INSPIRED MANY JEWS IN LATER DECADES TO BUILD WHAT HAS COME TO BE KNOWN AS THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT.

LABOR & THE JEWISH LEFT

The pre-War years were a golden age of Jewish radicalism. Immigrants and first-generation Americans worked in city sweatshops and other low-wage industries. Many powerful unions, most famously the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, were led by Jews and shaped by Jewish organizers and members. Rabbis and other Jewish leaders spoke out against the conditions these Jews faced, both in the workplace and in their neighborhoods. Jewish intellectuals passionately debated how to best achieve equality and opportunity for all at public universities such as the City University of New York and later in the pages of influential publications like *Commentary* and *Dissent*.

WOMEN'S EQUALITY

Women-led movements were among the most successful of the 20th century, from the suffragettes to the Progressive Era reformers, from Emma Goldberg to Betty Friedan. Jewish women's groups were also influential. The National Council of Jewish Women, the women's associations of the Reform and Conservative movements, Hadassah, and others sought both to support the broader struggles to end discrimination and achieve full equality, and to change the role of women in Jewish life. The 1970s saw massive organizing around the Equal Rights Amendment and other legislative and legal changes, while the Reform movement ordained the first female rabbi in the United States, Sally Priesand, in 1972.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

From the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, Jews and Jewish organizations were at the forefront. Among Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s earliest and most ardent supporters was Jewish businessman Stanley Levinson, who helped fundraise for and publicize Dr. King's efforts. At the March on Washington in 1963, Rabbi Joachim Prinz addressed the rally just before Dr. King gave his "I Have A Dream" speech. Two of our nation's most significant laws for social justice and equality - the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 - were drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. The legal strategy for ending segregation and discrimination in housing, transportation, schools, and accommodations was led in part by lawyers from the American Jewish Congress in partnership with the NAACP. And perhaps the most iconic photo of a rabbi in American history features Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. King to Selma, Alabama, in March 1965.

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1980 – 1989

THE 80S SAW A COMMUNAL SHIFT AWAY FROM JEWISH LEADERSHIP IN THE STRUGGLES FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY, WHICH LED TO A RESPONSE BY NEW ORGANIZATIONS. JEWISH FUND FOR JUSTICE, AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE, AND TIKKUN MAGAZINE ALL WERE FOUNDED BETWEEN 1984 AND 1986. AT THE END OF THE DECADE, THEY WERE JOINED BY THE SHEFA FUND. IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT.

FREE SOVIET JEWRY

After starting among students in the 1960s, the movement to free Soviet Jewry garnered mainstream support in the 70s and by the 80s had become a top priority of almost every Jewish institution in the country. The 1987 March on Washington brought together 250,000 people representing 300 organizations in a show of solidarity with Soviet Jewry – one of the largest rallies in American history. The movement reached its climax in the late 1980s with the fall of Communism and the mass exodus of Jews to Israel and the United States.

ANTI-APARTHEID ACTIVISM

As the movement to end apartheid in South Africa grew during the 1980s, established Jewish organizations felt caught between concerns about the African National Congress and opposition to apartheid. Many individual Jews, however, felt a deep-seated responsibility to speak out against apartheid. During Nelson Mandela's 1990 visit to New York City, the inaugural action of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) held the only Jewish reception for the former political prisoner.

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

The escalation of the arms race and accidents at nuclear plants energized the anti-nuke movement during the 1980s. One million people gathered in Central Park in 1982 in what remains the largest protest in American history. Prominent rabbis, including Alexander Schindler and Balfour Brickner, were leaders in the movement. At the grassroots, New Jewish Agenda, an early manifestation of the Jewish social justice movement, was active in mobilizations and advocacy. And movement thought leaders like Carl Sagan, who published *A Nuclear Winter* in 1983, reflected a significant and new Jewish presence.

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In cooperation with Congregation B'Nai Jeshuran, you are invited to join Jews for Racial and Economic Justice at a special Shabbat service to welcome Mr. Nelson Mandela to New York City and rededicate ourselves to the struggle for racial and economic justice in New York.





1990 – 1999

THE 1990S WERE A PERIOD OF DRAMATIC GROWTH FOR THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE SECTOR, WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS STARTING UP ACROSS THE COUNTRY. ECONOMIC GROWTH COUPLED WITH DRAMATIC REDUCTIONS IN VIOLENT CRIME GAVE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS ROOM TO MOVE A LONG-DORMANT AGENDA.

SMASHING IDOLS

In 1994, the Nathan Cummings Foundation published “Smashing Idols and Other Prescriptions for Jewish Continuity,” by Leonard Fein, a 56-page manifesto for the Jewish social justice sector. Written in response to the new Jewish communal focus on “continuity,” Fein made a powerful case for a renewed devotion to social justice among Jewish institutions.



SYNAGOGUE ORGANIZING

For decades, churches had been joining congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) networks to organize around issues of local concern. The 1990s saw synagogues begin to follow suit, helping to shift the network towards a true interfaith organizing model. Leading the way was Temple Israel in Boston, which went on to help lead the successful campaign to bring universal health care to Massachusetts. CBCO in the Jewish community continued to grow over the following decade, with initiatives like the Jewish Fund for Justice's national gatherings, and later, the URJ's Just Congregations building the momentum.

LIVING WAGE

In the 1990s, tired of fighting for a minimum wage that kept workers in poverty, activists began to push for what they called a "living wage." They demanded that employers working under public contracts pay enough that their employees be lifted out of poverty and no longer qualify for public entitlement programs. An early living wage victory was supported by a new DC-based organization, Jews United for Justice. Soon dozens of states, counties, and municipalities had passed living wage laws, helping to open people's eyes to the prevalence of the working poor.

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2000 – 2009

THIS WAS THE DECADE THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT BROKE THROUGH. MERGERS HELPED TO CONSOLIDATE ALIGNED ORGANIZATIONS, WHILE NEW GROUPS SPRUNG UP TO MEET EMERGING AREAS OF NEED. JEWS AND JEWISH GROUPS HAD A HAND IN SOME OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE SOCIAL CHANGE WORLD, FROM LOCAL AND NATIONAL INCREASES IN THE MINIMUM WAGE TO THE RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA TO THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA. FURTHERMORE, REFORM, CONSERVATIVE, AND RECONSTRUCTIONIST INSTITUTIONS COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO SOCIAL JUSTICE. THIS DECADE ALSO SAW THE FIRST LARGE GATHERING OF THE FIELD, AT A CONFERENCE ORGANIZED BY THE JEWISH COUNCIL OF URBAN AFFAIRS IN CHICAGO, WHERE HUNDREDS OF JEWS CONVENED AND BEGAN TO SEE THEMSELVES AS A MOVEMENT.

SAVING DARFUR

During the middle years of the 2000s, the Jewish community was widely mobilized to end the genocide in Darfur. Spearheaded by the American Jewish World Service, the effort reached deep into the Jewish world in a manner not seen since the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1980s. In 2006, 100,000 people rallied on the Mall in Washington, and by June the movement had delivered one million postcards urging the U.S. government to take steps to protect civilians in Darfur.

AGRIPROCESSORS & FOOD WORKER JUSTICE

What began as a raid by immigration agents on a kosher meat processing plant in Iowa galvanized a nationwide movement to consider the treatment of workers when assessing the sanctity of food. Conservative rabbis began to develop a new standard of kashrut, while in the Orthodox movement, Uri L'Tzedek created the Tav HaYosher certification for ethical kosher restaurants. T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights (then Rabbinic for Human Rights - North America) supported tomato pickers seeking better wages and working conditions. Organizations like the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs and Jewish Community Action, stood with undocumented immigrant workers and helped lead early efforts seeking comprehensive immigration reform.

JEWISH SERVICE & LEADERSHIP

This was the decade of Jewish service and leadership development. Yearlong service programs like AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, provided recent graduates with a chance to combine Jewish learning with hands on experience at local community service organizations. American Jewish World Service, Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice (then Jewish Funds for Justice), the Union for Reform Judaism, and others took thousands of mostly young Jews on intensive service learning trips around the U.S. (including many to the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina), as well as abroad. Leadership training programs, from the Selah Leadership Program to the Jewish Organizing Institute (now JOIN for Justice), from the Seminary Leadership Project to the Jeremiah Fellows, increased the effectiveness of Jews committed to social change.

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2010 & BEYOND

BY 2011, THE AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE HAD GROWN LARGER THAN THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, JEWISH NATIONAL FUND, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE, AND JEWISH FEDERATIONS OF NORTH AMERICA. BY 2013, BEND THE ARC HAD LOCAL CHAPTERS, AFFILIATES, AND OFFICES IN SIX CITIES. THE JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE ROUNDTABLE, FIRST CONVENED IN 2009, CREATED A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SHARED LEARNING THAT INCLUDES AMONG ITS ACHIEVEMENTS A NATIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGN. FROM LARGE-SCALE INTERVENTION ON THE FEDERAL FARM BILL TO ITS DECISIVE ROLE IN NEWSCORP'S DECISION TO END ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH TV PERSONALITY GLENN BECK, THE MOVEMENT HAS BECOME A FORCE ON HIGH-PROFILE ISSUES. COLLECTIVELY THE SECTOR IS WELL POSITIONED TO HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON THE DECADE'S KEY STRUGGLES TO CREATE A MORE JUST WORLD.

MARRIAGE EQUALITY

After decades in which even civil unions for LGBT couples seemed impossible, the movement for marriage equality won major victories at the polls in four states on Election Day 2012. Keshet, founded in Boston in 1996 as a local organization, emerged as a national voice of LGBT Jews. At the local level, groups like Jews United for Justice in Maryland and Jewish Community Action in Minnesota organized and mobilized Jews and persuaded other faith communities to join them.

DOMESTIC WORKERS

In 2010, New York became the first state to pass a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, extending to this exploited group basic worker protections. One of the most important partners during the 10-year campaign was Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. Today, national and statewide efforts are underway, with the support of Jewish social justice groups, to provide domestic workers with the rights afforded to other workers by U.S. labor law.

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS

In 2013, the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable is helping to coordinate comprehensive immigration reform efforts by a majority of its member organizations. Momentum for reform has been building after years of organizing and advocacy. In 2012, President Obama issued an order protecting many young undocumented immigrants from deportation, a move supported by most Jewish organizations. Relationships between immigrant and Jewish groups have been strengthened by years of partnership on campaigns to protect exploited workers, expand immigrant access to public services, and fight the criminalization of undocumented status.

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SHAPING HISTORY

EACH GENERATION LEAVES BEHIND ITS OWN LEGACY. LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR WORKERS. EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL. AN END TO LEGAL DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RACE, GENDER, OR RELIGION. TODAY'S BLOSSOMING JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT WILL HELP SHAPE THE LEGACY OF THIS GENERATION.

As important as the great challenges it tackles, and the history it helps to shape, the movement may be known most for the range of Jews who lock arms with fellow change makers from other communities. Given the divisions that exist within our community, the diversity of the Jewish social justice movement is a testament to its wisdom, significance and potential. Rabbinical students and secular Workmen's Circle members; LGBT synagogue daveners and yeshiva graduates; grandparents who marched with King and environmental activists with Baby Bjorns; Ashkenazim and Sephardim and Mizrachim. Jews by culture, Jews by choice and people married to Jews. Their partnership provides a glimpse of what we will see in the coming years: Jews practicing their Judaism in the town square of American life, expressing their most deeply held values and taking action for causes greater than themselves.

With a strong sense of collective purpose, anything is possible. May we go from strength to strength.



PHOTO CREDITS:

AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE

AVODAH: THE JEWISH SERVICE CORPS

BEND THE ARC: A JEWISH PARTNERSHIP FOR JUSTICE

HAZON

HEBREW IMMIGRANT AID SOCIETY

JEWS FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

JEWS UNITED FOR JUSTICE

RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER FOR REFORM JUDAISM

T'RUAH: THE RABBINIC CALL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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THE NATHAN
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THE JEWISH SOCIAL
JUSTICE ROUNDTABLE