

# **Jewish Social Justice Beit Midrash**

## **Session 1: Defining “Jewish Social Justice”**

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## Introduction

“Justice, justice shall you pursue!” (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Texts from the Torah, the voices of the prophets, the rulings of the rabbis and the words of Jewish leaders and activists throughout time instruct us on moral matters and call us to take action in the world around us. But what does “Jewish social justice” mean? How do we pursue justice in Philadelphia today as those rooted in Judaism and Jewishness? How does our social justice work spring from and shape our Jewish identities?

## A Note on Paired Learning

*Chevruta* is the Aramaic word for “partnership” or “friendship.” This learning style is a traditional Jewish approach to study in which two partners sit down to engage a text through discussion and debate. *Chevruta* learning may often feature one or more of the following as well:

- **Reading aloud:** Rather than reading silently to themselves, partners in *chevruta* take turns reading the text aloud to each other and listening to the text being read.
- **Line-by-line reading:** *Chevruta* partners alternate reading each sentence slowly one at a time, allowing the words to sink in and providing additional time for reflection. This is especially common when learning shorter pieces of material.
- **Learning out loud:** Partners share their responses to the text under consideration out loud, articulating reflections, thoughts, feelings and questions. If appropriate, learners mark up the text if that helps them engage with the material.
- **Reflecting back:** Each partner verbally reflects back how they have heard what the other person has shared, being careful not to put words in your partner’s mouth, but rather allowing the initial speaker to listen to their own perspectives through the words of someone else and offer clarifications, as necessary.
- **Asking questions:** In response to comments, partners ask each other questions, both supporting and challenging the other’s textual interpretations.
- **Open-ended task:** The goal is not to complete a predetermined number of sources or set of pages, and there is no “beginning” or “end” to the text. Instead, the learning unfolds at its own pace, with partners deciding how quickly or slowly to proceed and how much is “enough.”
- **No set path:** While a facilitator may prepare questions and observations to accompany selected texts, these are available as a catalyst for learning, and partners are expected to generate their own questions and insights, and to use the questions as a jumping-off point, not an exhaustive list.

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**1. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 (1985 Jewish Publication Society translation)**

*Deuteronomy is the last of the Five Books of Moses, also called the Torah or Pentateuch. It consists largely of a lengthy speech by Moses recapitulating the Israelites' journey and the laws laid out for this. In this excerpt, Moses is speaking of the sabbatical year or shmitah, when all existing debts are canceled, and emphasizing the need to provide for the poor, even if doing so is counter to one's immediate financial benefit.*

<p>If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching," so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.</p>	<p>כִּי-יְהִיֶה בְךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ, בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ, בְּאַרְצְךָ, אֲשֶׁר-יְקַוֶּה אֱלֹקֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ--לֹא תֵאֶמֶץ אֶת-לִבְבְּךָ, וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת-יָדְךָ, מֵאַחֶיךָ, הָאֶבְיוֹן. כִּי-פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת-יָדְךָ, לוֹ; וְהֶעֱבַט, תַּעֲבִיטֵנוּ, דִּי מִחֲסָרוֹ, אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ. הִשְׁמַר לְךָ פֶּן-יְהִי דָבָר עִם-לִבְבְּךָ בְּלִיעַל לֵאמֹר, קִרְבָּה שְׁנַת-הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה, וְרָעָה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאַחֶיךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן, וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ; וְקָרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל-יְקֹוֹק, וְהָיָה בְּךָ חֲטָא. נָתַן תִּתֵּן לוֹ, וְלֹא-יִרַע לִבְבְּךָ בְּתִתֵּן לוֹ: כִּי בְגָלַל הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה, יִבְרַכְךָ יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, וּבְכָל מַשְׁלַח יָדְךָ. כִּי לֹא-יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיוֹן, מִקִּרְבְּךָ הָאָרֶץ; עַל-כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶיךָ, לֵאמֹר, פָּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת-יָדְךָ לְאַחֶיךָ לְעֵנֶיךָ וְלְאֶבְיוֹנְךָ, בְּאַרְצְךָ.</p>
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- What does the text ask of us? What does the text caution us against?
- What are the consequences for not following the text's command?
- The text commands us both how to act and how we should feel about those actions. How might that be problematic?
- The text initially conditions the command on the *possible* presence of a needy person in the community, and concludes by saying that such a person's presence is a certainty. Why do you think that might be so?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**2. Isaiah 58:1-14 (1985 Jewish Publication Society translation)**

*This excerpt from the biblical Book of Isaiah is traditionally read on the morning of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), a fast day and the holiest day of the Jewish religious year. Isaiah, a prophet who flourished around the 8th century B.C.E., spoke regularly of the importance of economic justice and exhorted those around him to address the needs of those who were*

*marginalized. Here, he admonishes the Jewish people for fasting without taking seriously the real meaning and intention of the ritual, and emphasized the need to pair ritual with a just and merciful relationship with other people and righteous action in the face of injustice. Reading this passage on Yom Kippur challenges listeners to measure their fasting and prayer against their behavior in other contexts. Note: the speaker's voice shifts from G-d to the people and back to G-d in verse 3.*

Cry with full throat, without restraint; Raise your voice like a ram's horn! Declare to My people their transgression, To the House of Jacob their sin. To be sure, they seek Me daily, Eager to learn My ways. Like a nation that does what is right, That has not abandoned the laws of its God, They ask Me for the right way, They are eager for the nearness of God: "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?" Because on your fast day You see to your business And oppress all your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention, And you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such As to make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the LORD is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then, when you call, the LORD will answer; When you cry, He will say: Here I am. If you banish the yoke from your midst, The menacing hand, and evil speech, And you offer your compassion to the hungry And satisfy the famished creature -- Then shall your light shine in darkness, And your gloom shall be like noonday. The LORD will guide you always; He will slake your thirst in parched places And give strength to your

קרא בגרון אל-תחשך, כשופר הרים קולך; והגיד לעמי פשעם, ולבית יעקב חטאתם. ואותי, יום יום ידרשון, וידעת דרכי, יחפצון; כגוי אשר-צדקה עשה, ומשפט אלקיו לא עזב, ישאלוני משפטי-צדק קרבת אלקים יחפצון. למה צמנו ולא ראית, ענינו נפשנו ולא תדע; הן ביום צמכם תמצאו-חפץ וכל-עצביכם תנגשו. הן לריב ומצה תצומו, ולהכות באגרף רשע; לא-תצומו כיום, להשמיע במרום קולכם. הכזה, יהיה צום אבחרהו יום ענות אדם נפשו; הלכף כאגמן ראשו ושק ואפר יציע הלזה תקרא-צום ויום רצון ליקוק. הלוא זה, צום אבחרהו פתח חרצבות רשע היתר אגדות מוטה; ושלח רוצים חפשים וכל-מוטה תנתקו. הלוא פרס לרעב לחמך ועניים מרודים תביא בית: כי-תראה ערם וכסיתו, ומבשרך לא תתעלם. אז יבקע כשחר אורך, וארכתך מהרה תצמח; והלך לפניך צדקך כבוד יקוק יאספך. אז תקרא ויהוה יענה תשוע ויאמר הינני: אם-תסיר מתוכך מוטה שלח אצבע ודבר-און ותפק לרעב נפשך ונפש בענה תשבוע; וזרח בחשך אורך ואפלתך כצהרים. ונחך יקוק תמיד והשביע בצחצחות נפשך ועצמתך יחליץ; והיית כגן רוה וכמוצא מים אשר לא-יכזבו מימיו. ובנו ממך חרבות עולם מוסדי דור-ודור תקומם; וקרא לך גדר פרץ משבב נתיבות לשבת. אם-תשיב משבת רגלך עשות

bones. You shall be like a watered garden, Like a spring whose waters do not fail. Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, You shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called "Repairer of fallen walls, Restorer of lanes for habitation." If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, From pursuing your affairs on My holy day; If you call the sabbath "delight," The LORD's holy day "honored"; And if you honor it and go not your ways Nor look to your affairs, nor strike bargains -- Then you can seek the favor of the LORD. I will set you astride the heights of the earth, And let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob -- For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

חִפְצְךָ בַּיּוֹם קֹדֶשׁ; וְקִרְאתָ לַשַּׁבָּת עֲנֵג, לְקִדּוּשׁ  
 יְקוּק מְכַבֵּד וְכִבְדָתוֹ מַעֲשׂוֹת דְרָכֶיךָ מִמְצוֹא  
 חִפְצְךָ וְדִבַר דְבָר. אַז תִּתְעַנֵּג עַל-יְקוּק,  
 וְהִרְכַבְתִּיךָ, עַל-בְּמוֹתַי (בְּמִתִּי) אֶרֶץ; וְהֶאֱכַלְתִּיךָ,  
 נְחִלַת יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיךָ כִּי פִי יְקוּק דְבַר

- What criticism does Isaiah level at the community? What positive consequence is offered for positive behavior?
- How does the text distinguish between ethical behavior and ritual?
- Why might this text connect with Yom Kippur?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

### 3. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah 14a (Sefaria translation)

*The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates, and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century. Tractate Sotah ("a woman suspected of marital infidelity") is a section that addresses certain acts of ritual speech and presents a number of tangentially related stories.*

And Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said, "What is the meaning of the verse, 'After Hashem, your G-d, shall you walk (Deuteronomy 13:5)?' Is it possible for a man to walk after the divine presence? And isn't it already stated, 'For Hashem your G-d is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24)?' Rather, To follow the character traits of G-d. "Just as he clothes the naked, as it is written, 'And the Lord G-d made for Adam and his wife cloaks of leather, and he clothed them (Genesis 3:21);' so too you shall clothe the naked. The Holy One, Blessed be He, visited the sick, as it is written, 'And he appeared in Ailonei Mamrei [while Abraam was in pain] (Genesis 18:1);' so too you shall visit the sick.

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב (דברים יג, ה) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה והלא כבר נאמר (דברים ד, כד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה מה הוא מלביש ערומים דכתיב (בראשית ג, כא) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב (בראשית יח, א) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה ביקר חולים הקב"ה ניחם

The Holy One, Blessed be He, comforted mourners, as it is written, 'And it was, after the death of Abraham, and G-d blessed his son Isaac (Genesis 25:11);' so too you shall comfort mourners. The Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written, 'And he buried him in the valley (Deuteronomy 34:6);' so too, you shall bury the dead." "Cloaks of leather (alt. skin)-" [It is an argument of] Rav and Shmuel. One said, "Something that comes from leather." The other one said, "Something that the skin benefits from." Rabbi Simlai expounded, The Torah begins with loving-kindness and ends with loving kindness. It begins with loving kindness, as it is written (Genesis 3:21), "And God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and he dressed them." It ends with loving kindness, as it is written (Deuteronomy 34:6), and He buried him in a valley."

אבלים דכתיב (בראשית כה, יא) ויהי אחרי  
 מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו  
 אף אתה נחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים  
 דכתיב (דברים לד, ו) ויקבר אותנו בגיא אף  
 אתה קבור מתים כתנות עור רב ושמואל  
 חד אמר דבר הבא מן העור וחד אמר דבר  
 שהעור נהנה ממנו דרש ר' שמלאי תורה  
 תחלתה גמילות חסדים וסופה גמילות  
 חסדים תחילתה גמילות חסדים דכתיב  
 ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור  
 וילבישם וסופה גמילות חסדים דכתיב  
 ויקבר אותנו בגיא

- What attributes does the text ascribe to G-d?
- What does the text urge us to do, and by what logic does it do that?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

#### 4. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Makkot 24a

*The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century of the Common Era. Tractate Makkot ("lashes") is a section that addresses rules for courts and administering punishments.*

Micah came and established them [the commandments] on three, as it is written "It has been told to you, O man, what is good, and what does G-d require of you?: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your G-d." (Micah 6:8) "To do justly", this refers to laws. "To love mercy", this refers to kind deeds. "And to walk humbly with your G-d" this refers to bringing out the dead and bringing in the bride. And is it not even more so for other matters? If matters which are usually not done discretely [like funeral and bridal processions], the Torah says to perform them with discretion, then matters which usually are done discretely [like charity], how much more so [should they be performed discretely. Isaiah returned and established these on two, as it is said (Isaiah 56:1) "So says, God, guard justice, and do righteousness".

בא מיכה והעמידן על שלש דכתיב  
(מיכה ו, ח) הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה  
ה' דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט  
ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת עם (ה') אלקיך  
עשות משפט זה הדין אהבת חסד זה  
גמילות חסדים והצנע לכת זה הוצאת  
המת והכנסת כלה והלא דברים קל  
וחומר ומה דברים שאין דרכן לעשותן  
בצנעא אמרה תורה והצנע לכת דברים  
שדרכן לעשותן בצנעא על אחת כמה  
וכמה חזר ישעיהו והעמידן על שתיים  
שנאמר (ישעיהו נו, א) כה אמר ה'  
שמרו משפט ועשו צדקה

- What three directives does Micah condense the Torah to? How does the Talmud understand them?
- How does the text understand discretion? What role does discretion play in acting for justice?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

#### 5. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 7a

*The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century of the Common Era. Tractate Berakhot ("blessings") is a section that governs the recitation of blessings and prayers.*

Rab Zutra ben Tuviah said in the name of Rav: "May it be My will that My mercy may subdue My wrath; and may My mercy prevail over My attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the quality of mercy and enter on their behalf within the line of strict justice."

אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב  
יה"ר מפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי ויגולו  
רחמי על מדותי ואתנהג עם בני במדת  
רחמים ואכנס להם לפני משורת הדין.

- How does this text balance mercy and anger in the context of justice?
- How do you understand that balance in general?

- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

### 6. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Metziah 30b

*The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century of the Common Era. Tractate Bava Metziah (“the middle gate”) is the second of three sections that address civil law and damages.*

R. Yohanan taught, “Jerusalem was destroyed because its inhabitants judged according to the law of Torah.” Should they instead have made arbitrary judgments?! Rather, [the teaching means that] they based their judgments on a strict interpretation of Torah law, instead of acting within the spirit of the law.

דאמר ר' יוחנן לא חרבה ירושלים אלא  
 על שדנו בה דין תורה אלא דיני  
 דמגיזתא לדיינו אלא אימא שהעמידו  
 דיניהם על דין תורה ולא עבדו לפנים  
 משורת הדין

- How does this text balance the spirit and the letter of the law?
- To what extent do you agree with the text?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

### 7. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 49b (AJWS translation)

*The Babylonian Talmud is a compendium of Jewish laws, debates and stories compiled in Mesopotamia during the early sixth century of the Common Era. Tractate Sukkah (“tabernacle”) focuses on the holiday of Sukkot.*

- Our Sages taught: acts of loving kindness [gemilut chasadim] are greater than financial giving [tzedakah] in three ways: Acts of tzedakah involve only one’s money – gemilut chasadim can involve both money or one’s personal service. Tzedakah can be given only to the poor – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the rich and for the poor. Tzedakah can be given only to the living – gemilut chasadim can be done both for the living and the dead.

ת"ר בשלשה דברים גדולה גמילות חסדים  
 יותר מן הצדקה צדקה בממונו גמילות  
 חסדים בין בגופו בין בממונו צדקה לעניים  
 גמילות חסדים בין לעניים בין לעשירים  
 צדקה לחיים גמילות חסדים בין לחיים בין  
 למתים

- Why does the text suggest that loving kindness is greater than financial giving? Are there other reasons you can think of to support this stance?
- To what extent do you agree with the text?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**8. Moses ben Maimon, Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3, Chapter 53 (translation by Jessica Fechter, edited for gender neutrality)**

*The Guide for the Perplexed is a Jewish philosophical treatise authored by Maimonides, a rabbi and physician, in the 12th century during his time in Egypt.*

The word *tzedakah* [financial giving] is derived from the word *tzedek*, which means justice; justice being the granting to everyone who has a right to something, that which one has a right to, and giving to every being that which corresponds to their merits.

ומלת צדקה, היא נגזרת מצדק, והוא היושר, והיושר הוא להגיע כל בעל חק לחקו, ולתת לכל נמצא מן הנמצאות כפי הראוי לו

- How does the text understand *tzedakah*?
- To what extent do you agree with the text?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**9. Mesillat Yesharim 5:21-22 (Sefaria translation)**

*Composed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in 18th century Amsterdam, Mesillat Yesharim is a treatise on Jewish ethics and behavior.*

It is the attribute of mercy which causes the reverse of the three things we have mentioned. That is, it provides that the sinner be given time, and not be wiped out as soon as he sins; that the punishment itself not involve utter destruction; and that the gift of repentance be given to sinners with absolute lovingkindness, so that the rooting out of the will which prompted the deed be considered a rooting out of the deed itself. That is, when he who is repenting recognizes his sin, and admits it, and reflects upon his evil, and repents, and wishes that the sin had never been committed, as he would wish that a certain vow had never been made, in which case there is complete regret, and he desires and yearns that the deed had never been done, and suffers great anguish in his heart because of its already having been done, and departs from it for the future, and flees from it then the uprooting of the act from his will is accredited to him as the uprooting of a vow, and he gains atonement. As Scripture states (Isaiah 6:7), "Your wrong will depart, and your sin will be forgiven."

אמנם, מדת הרחמים היא הנותנת הפך השלשה דברים שזכרנו: דהינו, שיתן זמן לחוטא ולא יכחד מן הארץ מיד כשחטא, ושהעונש עצמו לא יהיה עד לכלה, ושהתשובה תנתן לחוטאים בחסד גמור, שתחשב עקירת הרצון כעקירת המעשה, דהיינו, שבהיות השב מכיר את חטאו ומודה בו ומתבונן על רעתו ושב ומתחרט עליו חרטה גמורה דמעיקרא כחרטת הנדר ממש שהוא מתנחם לגמרי והיה חפץ ומשתוקק שמעולם לא היה נעשה הדבר ההוא ומצטער בלבו צער חזק על שכבר נעשה הדבר ועוזב אותו להבא ובורח ממנו, הנה עקירת הדבר מרצונו, יחשב לו כעקירת הנדר ומתכפר לו. והוא מה שאמר הכתוב (ישעיהו ו'): וסר עונך וחטאתך תכפר, שהעון סר ממש מהמציאות ונעקר

The wrong actually departs from existence and is uprooted because of his suffering for and regretting now what had taken place in the past. This is certainly a function of lovingkindness and not of justice. In any event, however, it is a type of lovingkindness which does not entirely negate the attribute of justice. It can be seen as according with justice in that in place of the act of will from which the sin arose and the pleasure that it afforded, there is now regret and suffering. So, too, the time extension constitutes not a pardoning of the sin, but rather G-d's bearing with the sinner for a while to open the door of repentance to him. Similarly, all of the other operations of lovingkindness, such as "The son benefits his father," (Sanhedrin 104) and "Part of a life is like the whole life" (Kohelet Rabbah 7:48), mentioned by our Sages, are aspects of lovingkindness wherein small amounts are accounted large. But these considerations do not militate against nor actually negate the attribute of justice, for there is good reason to attach importance to them.

But for sins to be pardoned or ignored would be entirely contrary to the concept of justice, for then there would be no judgment and no true law in relation to things. It is, therefore, impossible for such a situation to obtain. And if the sinner does not find open to him one of the avenues of escape that we have mentioned, it is certain that the attribute of justice will not emerge emptyhanded. As our Sages of blessed memory have said (Yerushalmi Ta'anith 2:1), "He withholds His wrath, but He collects what is His."

במה שעכשיו מצטער ומתנחם על מה שהיה למפרע.  
 וזה חסד ודאי שאינה משורת הדין, אך על כל פנים הנה הוא חסד שאינו מכחיש הדין לגמרי, שהרי יש צד לתלות בו, שתחת הרצון שנתרצה בחטא וההנאה שנהנה ממנו בא עתה הנחמה והצער. וכן אריכות הזמן איננו ויתרון על החטא, אלא סבלנות קצת לפתוח לו פתח תקון. וכן כל שאר דרכי חסד: כענין ברא מזכה אבא (סנהדרין קד), או מקצת נפש ככל הנפש (קהלת רבה ז כז), המוזכרים בדברי החכמים, דרכי חסד הם לקבל את המעט כמרובה, אך לא מתנגדים ומכחישים ממש מדת הדין, כי כבר יש בהם טעם הגון להחשיב אותם.  
 כג אך שיותרו עבירות בלא כלום או שלא ישגיח עליהם, זה היה נגד הדין לגמרי, כי כבר לא היה משפט ודין אמיתי בדברים, על כן זה אי אפשר להמצא כלל. ואם אחד מן הדרכים שזכרנו לא ימצא לחוטא להמלט, ודאי שמדת הדין לא תשוב ריקם. וכן אמרו ז"ל (ירושלמי תענית פ"ב): מאריך אפיה וגבי דילה.

- How does this text see the interplay of justice and lovingkindness?
- How do these two concepts engage with forgiveness and repentance?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

### 10. Exodus 22:20-23 and Commentary by Ibn Ezra

*Exodus is the second of the Five Books of Moses, also called the Torah or Pentateuch. Rabbi Abraham Ben Meir Ibn Ezra authored a commentary on the Torah in 11th century Spain.*

**a. Exodus 22:20-23**

<p>You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth.</p>	<p>וְגַר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם  בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: כָּל-אֲלֻמְנָה וַיְתוּם לֹא תַעֲנוּן:  אִם-עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ כִּי אִם-צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי  שָׁמַע אֲשַׁמַּע צָעַקְתּוֹ: וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהִרְגַתִּי אֶתְכֶם  בְּחָרֹב וְהָיוּ נְשִׁיכֶם אֲלֻמְנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יְתֻמִּים:</p>
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**b. Commentary by Ibn Ezra on Exodus 20 and 23**

<p><i>A stranger</i> - And after the text says you shall not wrong, it uses the plural form, but then it says if you do wrong them, uses the singular. This is because whoever sees a person oppressing an orphan or a widow and does not help the orphan and the widow, he too is considered as an oppressor.  <i>If you wrong them</i> - and here is the punishment. If a person oppresses and there is no helper, the punishment comes to everyone. That is why after this verse comes ‘My anger shall blaze and I will kill you’ - all of you.</p>	<p>וגר. ואחר שאמר לא תענון לשון רבים. אמר  אם תענה. כי כל רואה אדם שהוא מענה יתום  ואלמנה ולא יעזרם גם הוא יחשב מענה.  אם ענה. והנה העונש. אם אחד יענה ואין עוזר  העונש על כלם. על כן בא אחריו וחרה אפי  והרגתי אתכם כולכם. ואמר כי אם צעק יצעק  אלי. על היתום וכן דין האלמנה. רק היתום  יתכן שיהיה קטן ולא ידע לדבר כמו הא למנה</p>
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- What does the text from Exodus instruct? What are the consequences for disobeying?
- How do these texts understand the role and responsibility of the individual and the community?
- Who are the “stranger,” “widow,” and “orphan” today?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**11. Judy Chicago, “Merger Poem”**

*Judy Chicago is a Jewish feminist artist, writer and teacher. “Merger Poem”, one of Judy Chicago’s most popular texts, was originally written in conjunction with The Dinner Party, which is widely regarded as the first epic feminist artwork, in the mid-20th century.*

And then all that has divided us will merge.  
And then compassion will be wedded to power  
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.  
And then both men and women will be gentle.  
And then both women and men will be strong.  
And then no person will be subject to another’s will.

And then all will be rich and free and varied.  
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many.  
And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance.  
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old.  
And then all will nourish the young.  
And then all will cherish life's creatures.  
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth.  
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

- How does Judy Chicago's vision of a perfected world relate to Jewish texts and values?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

## **12. Leonard Fein, “Smashing Idols and other Prescriptions for Jewish Continuity”, 1994.**

*Leonard (Leibel) Fein was a Jewish social justice activist in the United States who lived in the 20th and 21st centuries. In this article, Fein argues that Jewish devotion to social justice is a powerful engine for Jewish continuity.*

The fact is that the Jews are a people that live most creatively and most productively and most humanly and most Jewishly precisely at the intersection of universalism and particularism, precisely where “If I am not for myself, who will be for me” encounters “If I am only for myself, what am I?” But the balance between the two sets of claims, sometimes coincident, and sometimes competing, is inherently unstable. In every generation, there are those who would weight the scales heavily in the one direction or the other. In this generation, the generation that has mourned the Kingdom of Night and that has marveled at the Republic of Hope, any stable balance seems at best a distant hope.

We emerge from the Kingdom of Night divided between those who believe that because the world turned its back on us, we owe the world nothing and those who believe that because the world turned its back on us, because we, above all others, know how unbearable is the insult, how lingering the injury, we cannot and must not and will not be among the back-turners.

We enter the Republic of Hope in search, at last, of balance, only to discover that there the competition between the claims of the universal and the claims of the particular is even more fierce, in part because so much more is at stake, in part because these issues play so differently in the context of a sovereign Jewish state.

A healing ideology for the Jewish people would seek to restore the creative tension between the competing claims on our conscience and on our energies, the claims of the particular and the claims of the universal, the claims of being for ourselves and of being for others - not only because that tension is a source of creativity, and not only because it is authentic, but also because it is right, it is proper, it is substantively at the heart of how we believe the world may best be repaired, each with its own god and we with ours, learning to walk together in order together to ascend the holy mountain.

- How do you see this tension between “universalism” and “particularism” playing out today in the Jewish community and in social activist circles?

- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**13. Liel Leibovitz, “Dear Social Justice Warriors: Your Religion is Progressivism, Not Judaism,” *Tablet*, 2016**

*Liel Leibovitz is an Israeli-American journalist in the present day.*

Don’t get me wrong: I take no inherent issue with progressive values, nor do I believe that they’ve positively no place in Judaism. But progressive values—or conservative convictions, or libertarian streaks, or any other variety of ideological sentiments—have no place in religion unless they spring, exclusively and clearly and forcefully, from theology. Otherwise, the City of God and the City of Man become one and the same: a dull and loud place in which no spirit can ever soar.

It’s time we ended this farce. Those of us who find little use for Judaism except as a stage on which to perform the pageantry of progressivism should kindly take a bow and leave for other precincts that better suit their interests. They do the rest of us no favors by sticking around and insisting that we contort our beliefs to mean nothing more than whatever political agenda happens to be fashionable at the moment. The rest of us, those still interested in being Jews, will do what those still interested in being Jews have done for millennia: We’ll continue to find new and meaningful ways to grapple with the questions of our faith. Our answers will be diverse. Some of us will emerge with a thirst for reform; others, with insights into old traditions. Some will find joy in Orthodoxy; others, meaning in the Renewal movement. But all of us who remain should take three vows: to engage with Judaism on its terms, not our own; to refrain from arguing that this engagement somehow gives us the authority to make claims on anything but the faith itself; and to have the intellectual and moral decency to realize that while political and theological questions sometimes converge, they are never, at their essence, the same questions. As Jews, there’s really nothing else we ought to do.

- What is Liebovitz’s critique of Jewish social justice activists?
- Based on the biblical and rabbinic sources above, how might you respond to Leibovitz?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?

**14. Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*, 2009**

*Jill Jacobs is a present-day rabbi and Jewish social justice activist in the United States.*

When Jews engage in the public discourse as Jews, we should bring Jewish law and principles into the conversation in such a way as to enrich, rather than shut down, the discourse. We should also bring into this dialogue Jews and others who are engaged in public life; the conversation among rabbis, public policy experts, grassroots activists, and Jewish communal professionals should generate a nuanced understanding of how the Jewish community might approach individual issues. This approach precludes quoting a simplified

version of Jewish law or text in order to prove a point, or asserting that Jewish law unequivocally demands a certain approach to an issue. Rather, Jewish sources should help us to see various sides of an issue, challenge our assumptions, and help us to formulate a response that takes multiple factors into account. The commitment to living our Judaism publicly should then push us to take public action on these principles, both as individuals and as a community.

If we succeed in facilitating this rich conversation, we will create a new kind of Jewish politics in America. Rather than trade sound bites, we will continue the talmudic tradition of dialogue, in which various questioners and commenters engage in an often messy conversation that eventually leads to a fuller understanding of the situation at hand. Jews who now exercise their commitments to public life outside of the Jewish community will find a place within this community, as they contribute their own wisdom and observations to the conversation. Individual Jews and Jewish institutions will strengthen their commitment to public life, as the question of how to address current issues becomes part of the general Jewish conversation, rather than something separate from it or as an add-on to discussion of Shabbat, kashrut, and other aspects of Jewish practice. We will witness the emergence of a Judaism that views ritual observance, study, and engagement in the world as an integrated whole, rather than as separate and distinct practices. The Jewish community's deepened involvement in public life will change the face of religious politics in America, as other communities will recognize the Jewish community as an important and authentic religious voice in the public square of America.

- According to Jacobs, what does it mean to pursue Jewish social justice?
- How might this text apply to 21st century Philadelphia?
- How does this help to define Jewish social justice for you?