



What's Jewish About Social Justice?

Time: at least 4 hours, plus breaks

Goals:

- To study and comprehend several different Jewish perspectives on justice work and movements.
- To have a basic understanding of some of the history of the Jewish left.
- To have a basic exposure to some textual Jewish values of Social Justice.
- To feel comfortable acknowledging both the prevalence of Justice values imbedded in the Jewish tradition and strands of deeply oppressive thinking in the same tradition. Ideally, Corps members will understand the ongoing Jewish practice of evaluating if, how, and when to reframe oppressive tropes into liberatory ones.

Outcomes:

- CM's will be able to articulate 2-3 distinct perspectives on what connects Judaism and social justice.

Reading to hand out:

The Erasure of the Jewish Left, Rachel Cohen

<https://medium.com/thelist/the-erasure-of-the-american-jewish-left-1dd41335a46b>

Materials:

- Paper and pens for journaling
- [Hang these photos and blurbs around the room before hand but keep them covered up with another piece of paper.](#)
- [We Were Strangers video](#)
- Something to play/ project this video
- Three pieces of butcher paper: Human dignity in sacred Jewish texts, Prophetic justice, Tikkun Olam.
- 5 Butcher papers that all say "What is Jewish about Social Justice?"
- Slips of paper with discussion questions listed below throughout the workshop.

Books cited/ for further study:

The Prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel

Jewish Radicals, Tony Michels

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A Black Theology of Liberation, James Cone.

Use of Space:

- Consider if there are different spaces (rooms or sections of rooms) where different sections of this workshop can be done. This can help keep CM's fresh.

Program:

I. Framing and CM Perspectives 30+ min

Framing from Program Director or facilitator/speaker:

"What's Jewish about social justice?" is a surprisingly tricky question. Many Jewish people engaged in justice work do so in fundamentally different ways and for different reasons. Many Jewish people engaged in justice work feel they are inspired, motivated, or even obligated to do so as Jews but struggle to articulate why. For many people the answer is a complicated combination of some of the perspectives we'll list today but even in the Jewish Social Justice world we rarely explore them all. All are equally valid, rich, and complex.

CM Perspectives

- What are we bringing to the space? "For you, what is Jewish about Social Justice?" "For you, where, if anywhere is there a connection between Judaism and Social Justice?" Have corps members share (in groups of 2 or 3) answers/musings they may be bringing to the space. If people don't have answers at all they can share more questions they have about this topic.

A Range of Perspectives.

This is a sampling of some of the major influences in Jewish Social Justice work and thinking. This is by no means exhaustive but represents a broad range of some of the most prevalent influences/ways of thinking about Judaism and justice.

(Write these 5 points on butcher paper, as well as the "some of these perspectives" section.)

1. Prophetic values/ human dignity in sacred texts
2. Foundational liberation narrative in Exodus
3. Histories of Anti-Jewish oppression
4. Histories of the Jewish Left
5. Community/ family involvement.

Some of these perspectives are:

- Rooted in secular humanistic values from a Jewish secular perspective.
- Shared religious values with other faith traditions of the world.

- Particularist (rooted in Jewish texts that only Jews read or rooted in Jewish histories that are unique to Jewish people).
- Universalist (rooted in Jewish texts that multiple peoples hold sacred or rooted in Jewish histories that are not unique to Jewish people. Or rooted in common universal values that are also shared with many other peoples.)

All of these are perspective that have moved serious agents of social change to make significant impacts in the world. We do not necessarily need to internally rank or tease apart our own motivations (or others'). The goal is to further explore histories and perspectives that already spark something in us but that we may never have been taught or explored overtly.

- A note on history and perspective: some of these perspectives are rooted in Jewish history. This means that for some Jews this history is linked to family but let's be careful not to assume that is the case for everyone. For Jews of choice or for Jews whose families were not part of the movements referenced here today, these histories can still play a critical role in Jewish identity or approaches towards social justice. Family can also mean chosen family. Let's all be sure to keep that in mind.

II. Perspectives in Depth (about 3 hours)

We'll now move through these 5 perspectives giving special attention to ones that may not typically be explored in depth..

1. Prophetic values/ tropes of human dignity in sacred texts 40+ min

Brainstorm on butcher paper with the group.

- Put up three pieces of butcher paper with the words: Human dignity in sacred Jewish texts, Prophetic justice, Tikkun Olam. Have folks move through the space adding their first associations. Once everyone is done have them sit back down and read a few associations from each piece of paper.
- **Tikkun Olam**
Many people cite Tikkun Olam as a connection between Judaism and Social justice- i.e. the call to repair the world. However it's important to note that Tikkun Olam is typically used to describe Jewish direct service or charity work specifically rather than structural change work. The word initially had a different meaning. Tikkun Olam was a concept popularized by the mystical kabbalists to describe the shattered vessels of light at the beginning of creation and the holy process of repairing and gathering the vessels and light now. It was a mystical process of repairing creation and while we can now re-interpret this image in a justice framework it was initially about mystical elevation rather than justice work or charity.

- **The Prophetic**

When talking about the tradition's most prominent and burning voices for social justice one looks first to the prophets. We (will/ have- depending on the order of programs) study prophetic texts in depth but here we'll do a bit of an overview. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a prominent theologian who influenced Jewish thinking in both the Orthodox and Conservative worlds- and who was active in the civil rights movement- wrote a book about the Jewish Prophets and their collective voice in 1962. The prophets appear throughout the Biblical canon. A few appear in the Torah but most are centralized in the books of Neviim (meaning prophets) including the major 3 (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and minor 12 .

Heschel argues that the prophets are rooted in the human and divine realms. They are deeply saddened and angered by human sin against G-d and against humanity (specifically the poor and/or vulnerable). They are dramatic and indignant. **Heschel writes, "The prophet's words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless. But if such sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?"**

For the prophet's indifference against the suffering of the poor at the hands of a wealthy class exploiting their labor is itself a wild unspeakable injustice. **"The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven"**

According to Heschel, the prophets did not believe in moderation or reform. They would call out injustice against society's most vulnerable standing in the streets and before kings. Heschel wrote (using ableist language). **"Balancing is possible when the scales are unimpaired and the judge's eyes sound. When the eyes are dim and the scales unsure, what is required is a power that will strike and change, heal and restore, like a mighty stream bringing life to a parched land. There is a thirst for righteousness that only a mighty stream can quench."** The prophetic vision is drastic, radical, and structural.

- **Human dignity in sacred texts**

A major rabbinic principle in interpreting the Torah is that no word is superfluous. Every word is significant and holds its own unique meaning. Commandments are not repeated unnecessarily. The commandment "to love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" appears more than any other commandment in the Torah! More than Shabbat, more than Kashrut! This commandment is a central imperative. The term "ger" which can mean sojourner, immigrant, stranger, or convert refers to a person who would have been socially and economically vulnerable. Various iterations of the verse appear

36 times! Which coincidentally (or perhaps not) represents double 18- the number which represents Chai/life in Hebrew. The value of one's own life and the life of another.

- **The sacred value of all**

In the creation narrative G-d breathes life into the first clay human, and we learn that all humans are created in G-d image (Genesis 2:7). In many Jewish communities involved in justice work, this verse- or if not the verse itself than the universal human dignity it speaks to- is a pillar of faith. All that breathes is holy and deserving of life with dignity. For some the creation story is central and loving G-d means loving all. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his famous telegram to President Kennedy in 1963. "Please demand religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate negroes."

For others, spiritually, defined generally and not in relation to G-d or the creation narrative, means that reality, life itself is sacred and that every living thing should be understood as holy. For others this same concept is understood as a universal value but in secular, rather than religious terms.

Journaling

Give everyone a few moments to journal.

- What are your first reactions to these types of arguments which link spirituality and sacred texts to justice work? What resonates with you? What does not? What if anything, feels particularly evocative for you?
- Afterwards, a few volunteers can share thoughts if they would like.

2. Foundational liberation narrative 20+ min

- There are two biblical narratives which Jews mark regularly in psalm, song, and blessing throughout weekday and Shabbat prayers- the creation narrative and the exodus story. Both are centrally important to Jewish theology. The exodus story is one of popular liberation- an enslaved people leave the shackles of their torments and are affirmed as fully human and loved by G-d. Only then do they journey on to Sinai. James Cone, the founder of Black Liberation Theology in the late 70's and early 80's, argues that for Christians (and Jews) the exodus story is proof of the centrality of liberation and justice in the Hebrew Bible. Cone said often that this sacred narrative portrays G-d's revelation as liberation and visa versa, proving G-d's love and solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the world.
- Have volunteers read the following experts from James Cone's "Black Liberation Theology" as a group.

Pg 45 " According to black theology, revelation must mean more than just divine self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*. To know God is to

know God's work of liberation in behalf of the oppressed. God's revelation means liberation, an emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation."

Pg 47 "It is important to note the history in which God chose to grant a self-disclosure. It was granted to an oppressed people, and the nature of the revelatory deed was synonymous with the emancipation of that people. The exodus of Israel from Egypt was a revelation-liberation. In this revelatory event, Israel came to know God as the liberator of the oppressed, and also realized that its being a people was inseparable from divine concomitance (*the fact of existing or occurring together with something else). Thus Yahweh was known primarily for the deeds done for Israel when other political powers threatened its existence as a community."

- It's clear that Jewish people are not the only group who hold this story as sacred and foundational. It's important to note that this can be a strong tie for shared interfaith work.
- The importance of this liberation/revelation/exodus tale can be powerful whether or not one believes that the narrative is historically accurate or sacred but not historical. For those who believe it is historical, this can mean G-d is a redeemer who is deeply committed to liberation. For those who do not believe it is historical, there are theories that parts of the narrative were written by oppressed Jews in Babylonian exile. Meaning the Jewish people, in a time of profoundly violent domination told a sacred story about the power of liberation as a means of maintaining hope. Either way, we know that for centuries, rabbis understood this story as one of the most important in all of Judaism. As James Cone said, "It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors."

Discussion questions for the whole group:

- Where have you seen this liberation narrative mobilized for justice work? How has that felt to you?
- What are your reactions to Cone's words?
- Does knowing some of the historical-critical ideas about where this narrative comes from impact your understanding of the Exodus saga? How so?
- Does hearing this narrative impact you differently in Jewish or interfaith contexts?

3. Histories of Anti-Jewish Oppression 30+ min

- Jewish people have, across the globe and across history, often experienced persecution and oppression. From the Babylonian exile (which decimated the population more than the Holocaust) to forced expulsions around the planet, Jewish communities have known oppression deeply. When it comes to empathizing with the oppression of other peoples there are many ways Jewish communities have reacted.

- **Separatism:** Jewish communities have sometimes internalized their trauma to the extent that even after the trauma itself, they may baton down the hatches, claiming that given their vulnerable position they only have the capacity, resources, and power to pay attention to their own persecution and suffering. This makes sense. But it is also an important perspective to push back against because it can generate religious triumphalism (thinking Jews are better than others), Jewish exceptionalism (thinking Jews have suffered more than any other people and we therefore deserve more empathy/concern than other peoples) and general callousness in the face of human suffering. If a Jewish community with this perspective is predominantly white and/or middle class, it can also lead to racism and classism.

- **Empathy:** “Do not oppress the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This commandment is delivered 36 times, as we mentioned before. The basic intent of this verse still applies today, “Do not oppress the stranger for you know the heart of the stranger”. Meaning, you have felt the pain of the oppressed therefore do not become an oppressor.
 - While Jews still faced many forms of prejudice in the United States by the 1960’s and 70’s, much had changed. Jewish people who remembered the recent era before they had been racialized as white, where they too faced prejudice quotas in housing, work, and academia as well as general violence, used this rhetoric in their involvement in the Civil Rights movement.

- **Solidarity/ Mutual struggle:** Throughout the 1860’s- 1950’s Jewish people were deeply involved in radical leftists/socialist movements from Warsaw to NYC. We will explore this history in just a moment, but it’s important to note that these predominantly working class people organized alongside other poor immigrant communities. This era saw mass mobilization of grassroots people power. Jewish people (often young, immigrant, working-poor women) fought alongside other communities for collective liberation- including safer working conditions and better pay. Poor Jewish people even organized with poor Italians and Irish folks against sweatshop owning wealthier Jews. Jews stood for themselves but also in mutual solidarity with other oppressed people during this era.

- Jewish people today react to social injustices with this same range of responses to the oppressions we have faced in the past. Consider the following video which comes from The Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in their campaign for immigration reform.

- [Show the following video from the We Were Strangers Too Campaign](#)
- **Discussion:**
 - What are your reactions to this video?
 - Here JCUA used shared history and not, for instance, a biblical call to justice, even though the phrase “We were Strangers Too” is a biblical one. Why might they have chosen this approach (connecting histories of oppression) over one of the other perspectives we are discussing today?

- Where have you seen this strategy/perspective utilized?
- Where in your family and or/ past communities have you seen separatism, empathy, and/or mutual solidarity in action or speech?

4. Histories of the Jewish Left 60+ min

- Jewish people are the inheritors of a profound history of powerhouse social justice activism- which we rarely learn about. Let's explore for a moment some of that history, why most American Jews are never taught it, and what it can teach us about ourselves.
- **Interactive Timeline Activity:**
 - [Set up these photos around the room with descriptions.](#) Have everyone stand up and spread around the room randomly.
 - Have readers volunteer to read each sign out-loud.
 - Give out three-colored post-it notes. Green for family/personal connection, blue for inspiration, yellow for discomfort (or whatever colors are available.) It is helpful to write the key for what each color represents on butcher paper.
 - Have everyone spend 3-5 minutes silently walking around the room and placing post it-s on each of the photos that inspires, discomforts, of represents a familial/personal connection to them.
 - Once everyone have placed their post-its have everyone quietly walk around the room once again to get a general feel of what we are bringing into the space.
 - Ask for a volunteer or two to talk about their note for each category.
- **Readings and Discussions**

Now that we've sampled a few moments on a broad modern Jewish timeline we're going to zoom in to one particular moment, the Jewish Labor movement.

 - Jewish people have also been involved in many other social justice movements but this is perhaps both one of the most defining periods in the history of Jewish Social Justice and the most erased. Some of us may have learned this history as part of our Jewish educations, and some may not have. How many of you were taught about about jewish labor history and Jewish radicalism? Why do you think this is only sometimes taught? Why might an institution want to teach this? Why might they prefer to focus on other aspects of modern Jewish history?
 - Have volunteers read the following- written on powerpoint or read to the group from a hand out. This is an except from historian Tony Michel's book Jewish Radicals.
 - "The Jewish labor movement encompassed an array of trade union political parties, and voluntary associations centered in New York City, home to the world's largest Jewish population, but active in cities across the country.

Organizationally decentralized, the Jewish labor movement was also ideologically diverse. Within its ranks, proponents of various brands of socialism- social democracy, communism, anarchism, and left-wing versions of Jewish nationalism- vied for popular support. They often differed fiercely and occasionally violently with one another, but Jewish socialists of all persuasions occupied common ground in their desire to create a cooperative, egalitarian society, freed from poverty and bigotry.

The Jewish labor movement was arguably the largest upsurge of activism in American

Jewish history. Although we cannot determine precisely how many joined its ranks,

statistics provide some measure. A quarter of a million Jews belongs to the socialist-led United Hebrew Trades, an umbrella organization composed of union locals (especially, but not only, located within the garment industry) with predominantly Jewish memberships. The socialist daily *Forverts*, the most widely circulated Yiddish newspaper in the world and a powerful actor in American Jewish life, boasted more than two hundred thousand readings in the years following World War I. The Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle) fraternal order counted eighty-seven thousand members at its peak in the 1920's. Beyond the realm of formal institutions, an untold number of individuals marched in parades, participated in rent strikes and consumer boycotts, crowded around soapboxes, and flocked to celebrations and frustrating for one cause or another. How many of these men and women considered themselves dedicated socialists or just casual participants? Historians will never know exactly. What we do know is that tens of thousands of immigrant Jews accepted the leadership of radicals, joined organized they founded, and absorbed many of their ideas, not so much as doctrines but as ' a whole climate of opinion that cemented both socially and intellectually, a Jewish world in turmoil,' to quote the historian Moses Rischin. In deed and in thought, Jewish radicals challenged established customs, ways of thinking, and dominant institutions within the Jewish community and American society broadly."

- In groups of 3-4 have people skim [the following article](#) focusing on these sections- will underline a copy. Send this article out the week before so people have a chance to read more in depth.
- "Most young American-Jews never learn that in 1909, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union led the first mass strike of women in American history — 20,000 workers took to the streets, organized by and significantly comprised of Jewish socialists. Most young American-Jews are never taught about the "Great Revolt" of 1910, where the Jewish-led Cloakmakers union

organized a strike of 60,000 workers, winning substantial improvements in labor conditions. And most American-Jews have no knowledge of the Jewish Labor Bund, the international revolutionary organization that claimed thousands of American-Jewish members. While most Jews today know *The Jewish Daily Forward* used to be published in Yiddish — many are unaware that it was a self-proclaimed leftist paper, proudly backing the Socialist Party for thirty-five years.”

“The dynamic and vigorous history of Jewish radicals — socialists, anarchists, communists, and their leftist descendants — has been erased from the collective narrative that American-Jews teach today. In the wake of the Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel, and the fight against the Soviets in the Cold War, an unprecedented level of importance was placed upon the idea of communal consensus. It was seen as more important than ever for Jews to coalesce and collectively rally against our enemies — real and perceived. While this idea of a “communal tent” sprang in part from positive impulses, it nevertheless has wrought injurious consequences for modern Jewish life. Today, the American-Jewish diaspora fears, and consequently, avoids reckoning with its radical history; such an interrogation would demand revisiting the basic lens through which we’ve conceptualized the past 120 years.”

- Discuss in groups.
 - What are your reactions to these writing? Do you feel critical of, or inspired by, the connections drawn here?
 - The article closes with a discussion of Jewish “consensus” as dangerous for progressivism. Do you agree? Where do you think we are today in terms of struggles or opportunities for the Jewish left?

5. Contemporary family/community involvement 20+ min

- Some synagogues, communities, collectives, social networks, and families feel justice work is part of their social fabric. People fundraise together, mobilize together, and educate together. While at some level, these groups are likely the inheritors of one of the perspectives listed above, people sometimes cannot identify the influences that have created the sense that Judaism and social justice are linked. But they feel it, act on it, and build together none-the-less. This social cohesiveness leads people to feel justice work as a core part of their Jewish families, communities, or friendships. It is a powerful motivator in it’s own right- feeling proud to act collectively and to pass on and share values.
- **Pair and Share**
 - Have CM’s break into pairs and discuss communities they have been a part of where justice work is a significant thread of the fabric of the community (can include this year in Avodah).

- What are the strengths and challenges that come from doing justice work when it is bound up with a specific community?

III. Reflections 20+ min

Spectrum Activity

- Have everyone stand up. To start let's stand in a spectrum. If you know what sociometry is really well stand in the right corner of the room- if you have no idea stand in the left corner. If you sort of know stand somewhere in the middle. (See where folks line up.) Sociometry is simply a visual way of representing information about who is in the room.
- Point out 5 sections of the room
 1. Prophetic values/ human dignity in sacred texts
 2. Foundational liberation narrative in Exodus
 3. Histories of Anti-Jewish oppression
 4. Histories of the Jewish Left
 5. Contemporary family/community involvement.
- Two Rounds
 - 1. Stand somewhere in the room near or between or somehow in relation to any perspective(s) that you have felt inspired by in the past or feel struck by now. "Other motivations for justice work".
 - Have volunteers share why they are standing where they are.
 - 2. Stand somewhere in the room that represents a perspective you'd like to learn more about.
 - Have volunteers share why they are standing where they are.

What are we taking with us?

- **Final Brainstorm**
 - How would you now answer the question: What is Jewish about Social Justice?
 - Let CM's know "I still don't know" is a fine answer! But encourage them to try out a few different formulations.
 - Have people write out answers on pieces of paper and then tape them on to the butcher paper or write directly onto the paper. People can write multiple answers. Have CM's wander the room to explore what their peers wrote.
- **Pair and Share**
 - What have you learned today that you are taking with you?
 - In what circumstance might each of the five perspectives we have discussed today be most compelling? When would prophetic text or Jewish history or the

exodus narrative be most powerful as a tool for advocating for a particular cause? Does it depend on the audience? The cause? Your own beliefs?

- What, if anything, do you feel plays a role in connecting Judaism and Social Justice that was left out today? What, if any, perspectives would you add to the list?
 - Open for larger closing thoughts.
- Have everyone go around and close with a feeling word.
 - Thank the group! And encourage CM's to check out the full versions of the resources used today if they would like to learn more.

Debrief Notes with Miriam: 10/30

Overall the program went really well and according to the script, just shortened some sections depending on time or expanded some conversations based on the direction the group took it in.

- Corps members were enthusiastic, and engaged
- Hunger for more information so more frontal portions worked well
- Really engaged around text in historical context and clear progressive analysis
- Evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, especially about diversity of facilitation tactics
- Asked questions that brought information out of the group
- Longer discussion of the 2nd temple than was planned but worked really well to talk more about historical Torah and anti-Jewish oppression

Things to work on:

- SRY: Edit JFREJ notes
- Fine tune how much reading there is from paper - question for program staff or future facilitators to pick between everything that's possible.
- May be helpful to build in a few more longer discussions with the group

Other notes:

- Miriam can do a workshop on historical Judaism including destruction of the 2nd temple
- Or topical conversations on gender and sexuality
- What is the purpose/practice of text study?

From Jewish Radicals by Tony Michel:

The Jewish labor movement encompassed an array of trade union political parties, and voluntary associations centered in New York City, home to the world's largest Jewish population, but active in cities across the country. Organizationally decentralized, the Jewish labor movement was also ideologically diverse. Within its ranks, proponents of various brands of socialism- social democracy, communism, anarchism, and left-wing versions of Jewish nationalism- vied for popular support. They often differed fiercely and occasionally violently with one another, but Jewish socialists of all persuasions occupied common ground in their desire to create a cooperative, egalitarian society, freed from poverty and bigotry.

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Excerpts from "The Erasure of the American Jewish Left" by Rachel Cohen:

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Discuss:

- What distinguishes this period of Jewish history? Why do you think there was so much progressive political activity among Jews?
- What happened? What happened to Jews and what happened to American politics to change our political orientation?
- How might this history be useful to us today?
- Do you find this to be a compelling way to link Judaism and social justice?



About Avodah

Avodah is building a new generation of Jewish leaders to work on our country’s most pressing social and economic issues. We provide emerging Jewish leaders with the tools, experience, and networks they need to work for an end to poverty in America.