

Tzedek: Judaism's Mandate for Social Justice
In honor of JCA's 13th Bar Mitzvah Year

Adam Stock Spilker, Rabbi – Mount Zion Temple, May 15, 2009 / 22 Iyar 5769

From where do we learn that we are meant to pursue justice?

Fortunately, at Mount Zion we do not have to ask that question too often. The passion for *tikkun olam*, perfecting our broken world, is so engrained in who we are that we often take it for granted. Throughout our 152 years in which our world has gone from the telegram to twitter, you can point to moments of social change and Mount Zion members were there: founding the Neighborhood House as a settlement house for Eastern European Jewish immigrants, developing strong relationships with African American community pushing for civil rights, creating a joint investment group for our two communities and then fighting simultaneously to free Soviet Jewry and topple the injustices of apartheid in South Africa.

And then thirteen years ago, an organization founded to be a partner to synagogues-- a facilitator of justice--Jewish Community Action came upon the Twin Cities' scene. They helped us conduct our first in-reach eleven years ago which allowed the voices of our members set the agenda for Jewish Community Action and helped us begin to build momentum for further engaging in the wider concerns of our community. Many from Mount Zion have served on JCA's Board and been engaged in its advocacy. Just this year, our Board approved making Mount Zion an official affiliate of JCA, one of the first two Twin City synagogues to do so.

In the last dozen years, with JCA's support, we have deepened our capacity for justice. Nine years ago, we spent an entire year focusing on justice in all of our programming, learning and action including starting an emergency family shelter one month a year as part of Project HOME. This programmatic year earned us the Reform Movement's Irving Fain Social Justice Award in 2003.

We went through a congregational visioning process in 2003 where we heard from our members that the number one thing congregants were most proud of about Mount Zion - - and wanted to keep doing -- were our social justice efforts. These efforts we focused further -- through over one hundred one-on-one conversations -- on three organizations, Neighborhood House in the West Side flats of St. Paul where newer immigrant groups from Laos, Mexico and Somalia among others are receiving support, on Jeremiah Program, a residential facility for single moms who are trying to continue their education and on Jewish Community Action, JCA.

It is with JCA's continued support, training and organizing through not only Adele Brown who is on JCA's staff as Mount Zion's organizer but many others including Vic Rosenthal, JCA's executive director, that we conducted 18 house parties involving over 300 members in people's homes talking about the issues in our society we wished to address. After a thoughtful process and a Tzedek Summit right here in a packed sanctuary, we agreed upon focusing on children. A dedicated group of about 20 people took that large focus and over several months translated that to an effort that could make a difference: And that effort has been deceptively simple: connecting people in the Twin Cities with the financial and support services that are there for them if they only are aware of them. Meaning, the government and private groups have many grants, programs and others resources for people in need, but these people do not always know

about them. Through the Children's Defense Fund's website Bridge to Benefits, individuals can access the safety net and support waiting for them. Mount Zion members trained over 200 organizations, from United Way and their beneficiaries to Wilder Foundation to the St. Paul Public Schools to hospitals to Neighborhood House – anyone our members had a relationship with – to know how to make the tool of this website part of their intake plan, part of their counseling. And because of these trainings, over 16,000 individuals have accessed support they previously did not know about. For these efforts, Mount Zion was recognized last month a second time by the Reform Movement, with an Irving Fain Social Justice Award. Over 50 congregations were nominated; 13 were recognized. And our Children's Initiative is only starting to build up momentum, building on meetings with senators and representatives this past summer and over the year, to look at health care issues that are so timely and critical and how we can contribute to the dialogue in the public square.

In many ways, we have not seen the full potential of what Jewish Community Action can help us achieve. The power of building relationships among us to hear a collective voice for justice is age-old, but truthfully many churches had been doing a better job. Arnie Graf, from the Industrial Areas Foundation, who trained President Obama as an organizer, is now working with synagogues on faith based organizing. Jews for Justice has been working on building a national movement and in many ways, our Reform Movement's Just Congregations is fueling the momentum across the country for a relational way to build power for justice in our synagogues. Next month I will have an opportunity to spend a day with rabbis from across the country with Arnie Graf to learn more what we can do better at Mount Zion to build relationships, tell our stories, organize for making a difference in our community at a time when rational religious voices are so needed. And when I am at this meeting, I will know how fortunate I am, how fortunate Mount Zion is, that Jewish Community Action is helping to make this work possible.

A few years ago, one young man who grew up at Mount Zion, Aaron Izaksonas-Smith, said this about our congregation:

Through my Mount Zion education, I have been instilled with Jewish ideals of social justice; these ideals have been like a map to me. There are already great guides to this, the homeless shelter and people advocating for affordable housing are some. As Mount Zion finds new paths, action should become more important, social justice should not just be a map, but also a movement.

So it clear that justice is central to our synagogue; it is in our vision when we say: "In our holy community, we celebrate, comfort and create meaning in our lives while we seek justice in our world." But still my opening question stands, why? From where do we learn that we are meant to pursue justice?

It could be, as it seems, that we agree with South African Nobel prize winner, J.M. Coetsee, whom I heard quoted by a talented voice for interfaith action Eboo Patel. Coetsee says we all come into the world with the memory of justice.

The memory of justice. This fits; we Jews recite at Passover that we were present at the moment of the Exodus, as we say in the haggadah "When I myself went forth from

Egypt.” So we are born with a memory of the Exodus, the memory of freedom, the memory of justice.

We also teach it, underscore it in so many ways. We need look no further than this weeks *parshiot*, Behar-Bechukotai, where we learn of the social and economic innovation of the jubilee year. According to Rabbi Jill Jacobs who is rabbi in residence for Jewish Funds for Justice:

The *yovel* year [jubilee] is a sort of “super *shmitah*, a super sabbatical” when, in addition to the other laws of the sabbatical year, slaves are freed and land returns to its original owner. A person who becomes wealthy by accumulating much land, therefore, knows that he will possess this land for no more than forty-nine years. This periodic return of the land to its original owners reinforces God’s assertion that “the land is mine” and can never full belong to a human owner.

The Torah conspicuously does not mandate a full redistribution of land every 50 years. If, as some have argued, the Torah were a fully socialist document, we might expect a biblical demand to divide the land equally among all residents. On the other hand, as other have suggested, the Torah advocated an unrestricted free-market economy, the periodic redistribution of land would be nonsensical. Rather, the Torah – as well as later Jewish law – favors a checked market system that permits the ethical acquisition of wealth, with measures aimed at ensuring the market does not allow the poorest members of society to end up with close to nothing.”

This is therefore a succinct view of economic justice. The implications are profound and far reaching. We are in a once in 50 year and closer to once in a 100 year crisis. How our Minnesota legislature and governor resolve the current budget will have far reaching implications and implicate our generation for years to come. Yes, there are all kinds of economic reasons why not taxing the more wealthy, not re-instating taxes that were in place just 10 years ago, can make sense because the impact will trickle down negatively on those we are trying to protect. But overall, the arguments do not hold up. The focus must be on those who are at the breaking point, those 30,000 children who are at risk of losing their health insurance depending on the decisions in the coming days.

As a sign of the times: Project HOME which is the emergency overflow shelter organized by churches and synagogues in our county – we are hosting it in June --has had to open up a third site each month. More stay each night in the overflow shelters than in the county shelters.

In closing, we have to understand that we can still have joy and still have hope, but we have to be clear how we define joy. In Deuteronomy’s description of our upcoming festival Shavuot, it reads in chapter 16:9-12:

Then count seven weeks for yourself. From the time that you first put the sickle to the standing grain, you must count seven weeks. You shall then celebrate the festival of Shavuoth to God your Lord, presenting a hand-delivered offering according to the extent of the blessing that God your Lord has granted you. You shall rejoice before God your Lord in the place that God your Lord shall choose to be designated in His name. You [shall rejoice along] with your sons, your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites from your settlements, and

the strangers, orphans and widows among you. You must remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and thus carefully keep all these rules.

Rashi adds in a teaching I learned last year in the Old City in a little yeshiva on Mount Zion: "You shall rejoice," this is the command. How do we rejoice and with whom? God says, "if you take care of my four, I will take care of your four." The verse reads "You [shall rejoice along] with your 1) sons, 2) your daughters, 3) your male and 4) female slaves, the 1) Levites from your settlements, and 2) the strangers, 3) orphans and 4) widows among you" The last four mentioned, the Levites [who are landless], the strangers, the orphans and widows belong to God, according to Rashi. If we take as much care about them as we do the first four, our "sons, daughters and male and female members of our household", then blessings will come. We have to have faith even in times of scarcity to take care of others, for from that faith, from that justice, from that good, comes good.

Ken yihi ratzon.