

You Must Not Remain Indifferent: Personal Decency and Social Justice

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Judaism has a message that the world very much needs to hear: a vital insistence on the intersection between personal ethics and social justice. And that integration is made possible precisely because of our commitment to social justice and our commitment to *derekh eretz*—that is, personal decency expressed in an embracing commitment to Torah and to its commanding authority. For me personally, this is the definition of *tikkun olam*—the Jewish mandate to repair the world and make it into a place suffused with divine values—that inspires and energizes; it is the path I have personally chosen to travel in my own effort to repair a broken world and effect its redemption.

Our concern for social justice is legitimately Jewish—and psychologically adequate—only when it is the result of our loyalty to the Torah and to *mitzvot*. Unfortunately, we live in a world of shattered fragments. We live in a world in which it is impossible to hold on to the kind of politeness that demonstrates a shared humanity, a recognition of another's dignity—and this challenge threatens to destroy our society from within. Consider the following two telling examples.

I was once at the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library outside of Boston and saw a film clip whose sole purpose was to glorify the deceased President. The film documented the period of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it began with President Kennedy calling the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey, and the Vice President, Lyndon Johnson. These two important and powerful men were

summoned by their President in the midst of a national emergency, so they got into the chauffeur-driven limo and were rushed to the White House. There were guards at the door to ensure their security. The film showed the men emerging from the car. First came the Vice President. Summoned by the nation's leader at this time of crisis, he acted like any important man at such a moment would: he got out of the car and strode purposefully into the White House. The Vice President was followed by the Senate Majority Leader, Hubert Humphrey, who did the same thing. But as Humphrey got out of the car, he caught himself, turned to the guard who had opened the door, and thanked him. Only then did he stride into the White House. That little gesture is so telling precisely because it was not the point the film wanted to make—because Humphrey never made it into the White House as President, and because it is so rare to find someone who combines a passion for social justice (particularly in the public sphere) with an unwavering commitment to personal ethics (especially in one's private conduct).

Or consider the now nearly-forgotten “Nannygate” incident of the 1990s, in which President Clinton decided, in the first few days of his administration, not to appoint Zoë Baird as the first female Attorney General of the United States. She was removed from consideration after it was revealed that she had hired an undocumented worker as her child's nanny. Whether Baird had done so simply in order to save money, or whether she had consciously turned a blind eye to the legal issues, the question remains: how is it possible that Zoë Baird, who earned half a million dollars a year, chose not to secure childcare that was in full compliance with the legal requirements? The Clinton administration sought to whitewash the incident by underscoring that except in this regard, her record was unblemished. She was fully and strictly within the law—other than her crime, which she knowingly committed. (She later paid \$2900 in fines.) Leaving aside for the moment the fact that male political leaders are rarely (if ever) scrutinized regarding their childcare arrangements, one still has to

wonder: how is it possible that a woman passionate about social justice could have oppressed someone, by paying them too little to be able to have some retirement money later on?

It appears that in our secularized culture, we have bifurcated between following the dictates of the letter of the law, on the one hand, and doing the right and decent thing, on the other. Thus a high-ranking official who deals with the big picture—the equality of human beings, the liberation of the world, freedom from hunger and want, and poverty—does not have time to say “thank you” and an affluent political figure does not pay her own employees a living wage. On the other hand, too many of those concerned with individual acts of kindness and beauty think that politics is pointless, that all politicians are necessarily corrupt, and that mendacity is the way of the world. To that bifurcation, Judaism says: “No, it cannot be.” So long as we sever the letter of the law from its spirit—perhaps upholding the former in practice, but giving the latter little more than lip-service—then we are trapped. Only when we see these two as complementary approaches, and dedicate ourselves to both of them equally, can we hope to transform the world.

I have often asked the children in a bar mitzvah class to share with me who their heroes are. Sadly, I have to report that they don't have any heroes; indeed, from the puzzled looks on their faces when I pose the question, it seems that the very idea of heroes strikes them as hopelessly old-fashioned. How is it possible to be a teenager and not have a hero? Granted, the heroes that I had as a teenager were not as heroic in reality as I had imagined. But most important was not the particular identity of the heroes themselves, but rather the very fact that I *did* a particular image of them in my mind. How is it possible for a person grow up without ideals? How can someone grow up thinking that, deep down, everyone is only looking out for number one and that nobody cares about decency any more? What kind of children are we raising in this increasingly callous and self-centered world?

That cynical assessment has nearly paralyzed Judaism as well. We are so used to accepting the paltry standards of our secularized culture that we take those standards as norms—and then diminish and constrain our Judaism to fit inside that prison. We have abandoned what is truly breathtaking about our sacred heritage. Severing justice from ethics silences Judaism’s distinctive voice and robs its real message of a hearing. Think of the image (suggested by Rabbi Milton Steinberg, of blessed memory¹) of the ends of a string, each pulled in opposite directions. In our case, we have the perception of a tension between a commitment to social justice, on the one hand, and personal decency, on the other—pulling in opposite directions. Rabbi Steinberg said that the beauty of Judaism is to recognize that when opposing forces pull in two different directions, the only way to harmonize them is to introduce a third force, lifting up at the middle of the string. The upward lift removes the opposition: suddenly the two ends are united again, now pulling in the same direction. That lift-up force is God. Judaism insists that ethical righteousness and social justice both come from the same source, because the living God commands both. God cares how we treat each other—both at the one-on-one level of personal decency, and also at the more universal level of social justice. Both virtues, righteousness and justice, gain coherence when they are understood to derive from the same source. The sovereignty of God is the basis for the dignity of all human beings: every single one of us is a child of God, and every single one of us represents some unique facet of the Divine that nothing and no one else can replicate. We need to train ourselves to see each person as nothing less than a brand-new source of knowledge of God.

God’s Sovereignty and Human Dignity

There are several implications to the notion of the sovereignty of God, as explained above, that remain pertinent today. The first is the

affirmation of the U.S. Declaration of Independence that all people—or, at least, all free men (in Jefferson’s conception)—are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Thomas Jefferson knew that people are not equal, if only the here-and-now is used as the standard of measurement. Some people are better looking than others, some are brighter, and some are smarter, stronger, or more eloquent. We are clearly not equal, when it comes to qualities such as these; human equality is a lie, if judged on the scale of secular materialism. What does make us equal is our relationship to the Holy One, who created us and who is utterly and transcendently beyond any of us. Relative to that God, our differences become insignificant. We are equalized in God’s parenthood. And so the Declaration of Independence is based on the recognition that it is God, as Creator, that gives us our equal worth.

We need to return to that recognition. All of us are equal because God is equally concerned for all. If God is the Creator of All, then we need to recognize that the world that we inhabit is not ours. The world is not ours to do with exclusively as we please. We are not the only living creatures that matter; in fact, the Creator clearly intended for this to be a rich and variegated world with all kinds of living things teeming over it. *All* of those creatures are part of the symphony of praise that God receives with each new dawn. We need to recall that when we endanger other living things, when we treat the world with scorn, we are slapping God in the face, as it were. We are scorning God’s gift of creation, a beautiful planet. Moreover, the sovereignty of God is the linchpin for that preciousness—otherwise, the world and other people would be merely tools to be used for our own pleasure and short-term gain.

Finally, the sovereignty of God implies that all people have an intrinsic dignity. Whenever we belittle the dignity of any other human being, we are doing nothing less than belittling God.

The Torah makes those implications clear in several places. God says, at the creation of humanity, “Let us make people in our own

image” (Genesis 1:26). What does it mean to be made in God’s image? Surely not that God shares my appearance, or yours. It means that our ability to distinguish good from evil, our ability to be compassionate and kind and loving, our ability to hurt when other people hurt, and our ability to cry at other people’s pain and rejoice at other people’s triumphs is a way that we can most Godlike.

The Torah instructs us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). What a remarkable teaching that is! The Torah is not asking us to give precedence to another person at the expense of our own human dignity. Instead, this passage from Leviticus expresses the remarkable idea that if all of us are God’s children, and if all of us are made in God’s image, then we need to see that in divine image each other. Ultimately, one who cannot love one’s neighbor cannot love oneself.

Rabbi Akiva comments in the Jerusalem Talmud that this teaching from Leviticus is the guiding principle of the Torah, *a k’lal gadol*.² In our bifurcated world, we have split into two camps: we have one group of Jews who worry only about the big picture and let the details slip through their fingers, and we also have another camp of Jews who worry exclusively about the little deeds of kindness, ignoring the big picture.

Social Justice and Personal Decency: The *Talmid*, the *Tzaddik*, and the *Hasid*

What we need is Jews who will stand up for both sides of the equation: for a Judaism of both social justice and personal decency. What we need, in our day, is a return to a full-bodied Judaism. Surely in that richer, holistic Judaism there is a symbol that can unite these dual, competing aspirations into one synergistic fusion! According to the great scholar Gershon Scholem,³ there are three ideal models for

precisely this union in the Jewish tradition: the talmid *hakham*, the *tzaddik*, and the *hasid*.

The first model is that of the *talmid hakham*, the scholar or sage. This image teaches that we can use our minds in the service of God. A Judaism that prohibits asking certain questions or thoughts is a perversion of what Judaism ought to be. God demands the service of our mind no less than that of our heart. In fact, there is in Judaism such openness to the life of the mind that it even extends beyond the borders of our own people and of our own tradition. For example, Midrash Rabbah affirms that if someone insists that there is wisdom among the nations of the world, we are to believe it.⁴ And Maimonides instructs us to accept truth from any source.⁵

What a remarkable heritage: a Judaism unafraid to face the truth no matter who articulates that truth, and no matter what the context. A faithful Jew need not fear truth. To the contrary: we have elevated truth to a sign of God, *hotamo shel ha-kadosh barukh hu*, the sign of God is truth.⁶ And yet, says the midrash, if a person says that there is Torah among the nations they should not be believed, because wisdom and Torah are not one in the same thing.⁷ There is a hallowed place for knowledge in the service of goodness. But a truncated wisdom, removed from a context of personal decency, nurtures the perversions that so rankle contemporary life: people who can be passionate about justice but do not care about goodness, or a neighbor who loves goodness yet doesn't bother voting.

The second Jewish role model is the *tzaddik*, a righteous person. The Talmud offers various degrees of righteousness. There is the run-of-the-mill *tzaddik*, which can be any of us, and then there is the *tzaddik gamur*, the completely righteous person.⁸ The *tzaddik* is the role model for all of us, a person who takes God's will as his or her own personal agenda. A *tzaddik* makes his or her own pathway through life, seeking to become a walking *sefer torah*, so that the black words on the white page live through their actions and their deeds.

Doesn't the Torah itself say that people should see the way we behave and, based on the way we act, they should say "what a wise people, what a loving God"?⁹ How many people can look at the way we conduct our daily lives and make that inference? And yet, the *tzaddik* is the very core of who we are to be. But even with the example of the *tzaddik*, our tradition refuses to be overly particularistic. According to one midrash, the prophet Elijah is reported to have said, "I call heaven and earth to witness that whether one be Jew or gentile, man or woman, manservant or maidservant, the Holy Spirit will come to rest on each in direct proportion to [the worthiness of] the deeds that he or she has performed."¹⁰ Goodness is what defines a *tzaddik*. One who claims to be pious without being good is a fraud.

The third role model is the *hasid*, a religious enthusiast. A *hasid* is someone for whom God is the reason to wake up in the morning and do one more sacred act, one more good deed. One who seeks to make every moment holy time, and who sees each new action as a chance to unite with God—such a person is able to cultivate the passion and energy needed to repair the world.

While the *tzaddik*, the *hakham*, and the *hasid* all have unique qualities, the truth is that they are not separate categories. Instead, they overlap in important ways—so much so, in fact, that Rabbi Hanina ben Idi could ask: "Why are the words of Torah likened to water? To teach you that just as water flows from a higher level to a lower level, so too do the words of Torah abide only with one who is meek in spirit."¹¹ In short, one cannot be a sage without also being a *tzaddik*—although one can be a *tzaddik* and still be an ignoramus. Judaism values learning highly, yet values goodness even above learning.

The Messiah as Fusion of Personal and Social Ideal

These three types of holiness merge and enrich each other, leading us to Judaism's pre-eminent symbol for that fusion of the personal and the global, that blend of personal ethics, individual kindness, and social justice: the Messiah. One need not believe literally that an anointed person is coming to redeem the world, in order to yet find value in a metaphor that is inextricably linked to the personal. Why does the Talmud often prefer to speak of a Messiah rather than of a "messianic age"? I believe it does so precisely to prevent the bifurcation of what is politically right from what is personally compassionate. The Messiah is social justice personified. There can be no justice in theory only, that is indifferent to particular people.

The Talmud tells us that the Messiah will be found engaging in selfless acts of *hesed* such as binding the wounds of the leper by the gates of the city.¹² This is the same Messiah who will bring to an end depression and injustice, and who will gather us to our homeland in peace. This Messiah of world peace and healing spends time binding the wounds of sick individuals, thus embodying the goal for all Jewish piety: the fusion of the general and the particular, of kindness with justice. Maimonides was absolutely right when he said that it is a waste of time to speculate on when the Messiah is coming or who the Messiah will be.¹³ The Messiah is best understood as a hope, as an aspiration, as a dream. As such, the image of the Messiah *must* be irreducibly personal. Advancing social justice and caring about the individual needs of human beings is the epitome of the personal dimension, a messianic mission that summons us now.

Our role in that age of the Messiah is curiously similar to what our role is our own time. To answer the question of "When will the Messiah come?" the Talmud quotes from the book of Psalms: "Today, if you will only listen."¹⁴ In other words, we have to open our hearts now, acting as though the messianic age is already here. When our

hearts are attuned to the point that we love all human beings, that we see in every individual person someone sacred, precious, irreducible, and beautiful—that is when the Messiah will come.

That same talmudic passage relates: “Rabbi Zeiri said in the name of Rabbi Hanina that the Messiah will not come until the arrogant in Israel cease to be.”¹⁵ This seems paradoxical: when there are no longer any arrogant people and the Messiah will be able to come, then we will no longer need the Messiah, because the messianic age will have already arrived! If we live in such a way that we take the wounds of other people to be our own, to heal; if we live in such a way that one hungry person is an affront to our conscience, and then act to provide food; if we can’t sleep so long as there is one homeless person, and we can’t sleep because we were rude or cruel to someone—then the day of the Messiah’s arrival will be too late, because we will have already brought the messianic age ourselves.

That is what rabbinic tradition conveys. When the King Messiah appears, he will proclaim to Israel: “Humble one, the time of your redemption is near!”¹⁶ In other words, the reality that will characterize the age of the Messiah is precisely the morality that must precede the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah waits for us to act messianically, and won’t come until we do.¹⁷

What, then, can we do? I believe that the pertinent mitzvah is *lo tukhal l’hitalleim*, (Deuteronomy 22:3), that we must not remain indifferent. A Jew who is indifferent to the plight of others is effectively blaspheming against the memory of our people. A Jew who is indifferent to human suffering is denying God. Recognizing the sovereignty of God as Creator of the world implies a simultaneous acceptance of the supreme value of human dignity, together with the obligation to work to uphold that dignity in all people. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, “When a human being walks on the road, a troop of angels walks in front of that person shouting ‘make way for the image of the blessed Holy One.’”¹⁸ Imagine what a world it would be if we could train ourselves to hear those angels, if we could see

the heavenly host standing in front of everyone here, pointing to each one of us and saying “This is the image of God”—imagine how people would treat each other! “Great is human dignity,” the Talmud says, “since for its sake we may violate a prohibition of the Torah.”¹⁹ Imagine the kind of world it would be if all of us took the negative commandments of the Torah seriously, and then took human dignity even more seriously than that! Imagine if we were able to say that upholding the dignity of the most repulsive human being is more important than refraining from violating a negative commandment in the Torah—and we could make our assertion mean something, precisely *because* we revere the negative commandments of the Torah.

Communities as Centers of Social Justice

Many different organizations actively pursue agendas of social justice, and Jews are often among the leaders of those activist groups. Why, with such a plethora of other opportunities for involvement, should Jews, as part of the Jewish community, become involved in the broader arena of social justice? Why should religious organizations get involved in political controversies? And what should our agenda be, if we *do* feel impelled to become involved?

As Jews, we frequently turn to our religious traditions for life-cycle events, for history lessons, or for deepened spirituality. But our political convictions generally emerge from contemporary political theories, as though our ancient heritage has no wisdom to contribute to the question of how people ought to live together to create a just, fair world—that is, what our traditional liturgy calls “working to establish God’s sovereignty on earth.” In deriving our politics from Adam Smith or from Karl Marx (or even from John Maynard Keynes), we deprive ourselves of historical depth and Jewish authenticity—even as we accede to the reduction of the human animal to an economic pawn.

Most modern theories of political organization begin with the assumption that human happiness is to be found in economic justice, that people are motivated primarily by economic questions, and that oppression is primarily an issue of economic relations. Such a mono-dimensional view of humanity and of human society ignores the tremendous complexity of each of us and of our societies. Our motivations—whether emerging from patriotism, jealousy, idealism, or bitterness—often have little to do with economic theory, and a great deal to do with the difficulties of being truly human.

It is precisely here—in wrestling with our own impulses, in learning how to cultivate our own better natures—that economic and political theories have the least to offer. And it is precisely here that Torah has been working to transform and to elevate the Jewish people for millennia.

To reiterate: our concern for social justice is legitimately Jewish—and psychologically adequate—only when it is the result of our loyalty to the Torah and to *mitzvot*. Social justice is a *mitzvah*, neither more nor less obligatory than the *mitzvot* of Shabbat or *kashrut*. The same God who commands that we fast and pray on Yom Kippur also insists that we show deference to the aged. Recorded in the same Torah are the *mitzvot* of circumcising firstborn males and of prohibiting wanton destruction of the earth's natural resources. Both ritual profundity and acts of social justice are expressions of our obedience to the *M'tzavveh*, the Commander—whose authority, presence, and passion permeate the Torah (and later rabbinic teachings as well).

One cannot claim to be a servant of God without a commitment to make this world more just, more compassionate, and more Godly. We often quote the verse *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, “justice shall you pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20). As stirring as those words are, they have become muted through overfamiliarity.

As previously mentioned, I prefer to derive the impetus for Jewish social justice from another commandment found in the same biblical

book: the verse that commands *lo tukhal l'hitalleim*, “you must not remain indifferent” (Deuteronomy 22:3). The essential insight here is that the opposite of good is not evil, but rather indifference. And indifference—to human suffering, to human isolation, or to human hatred—contradicts everything that the Torah represents, and everything that Judaism holds sacred.

As Jews, we look to our ancestral traditions not merely for some ethnic color or occasional comfort, but as a pathway of response to God, as a tool for infusing sanctity and holiness into our own lives and into the world around us. Thus, our involvement in social issues must emerge from those traditions themselves. In other words, our context is the heritage of Torah.

It is no coincidence that the commandment most often repeated in the Torah is to be solicitous of the *ger*, the resident alien. It is surely deliberate that the most frequently repeated refrain is: “for you were slaves in the land of Egypt.”²⁰ Serious, committed Jews must be involved in questions of social justice because the Torah itself is passionately concerned with social justice. The very core of our tradition—the story of our liberation from Egyptian slavery—is a story about freedom and liberation, the story of a God who fights for the oppressed and for justice. To accurately reflect the priorities of the Torah, then, means that we must also become zealous on behalf of those who are excluded, downtrodden, or despised. A midrash in the Babylonian Talmud remarks that the first and last deeds recorded in the Torah were both deeds of kindness: God made clothes for Adam and Eve when they had no clothes, and God saw to the burial of Moses when there was no one around to bury him.²¹ To perform deeds of lovingkindness is to make the world more compassionate and more just. To walk in God’s ways is to act on political concern.

Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold of the Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel once offered a yardstick for evaluating the Jewish content of any practice. Noting the observation in the book of Genesis that humanity is made

in God's image, Rabbi Gold insisted that any practice that enhances or illumines God's image in other human beings is properly Jewish, and any standard that obscures or diminishes the reflection of God's image is anti-Jewish—regardless of its source or its antiquity. We act as good Jews when we cultivate the image of the Divine in our fellow human beings.

Rabbi Simon Greenberg, founding President of American Jewish University and for almost thirty years Vice Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, taught that the central task facing all of God's servants is to validate God's judgment at the end of Creation that the world is "very good." When we bolster that claim, we sign on as God's partners in the ongoing task of perfecting creation.

We must not remain indifferent.

Given that a vital part of a religious Jewish commitment is a passion for social justice, we still must ask about the details of that commitment. A religious Jewish agenda of social justice would include the following:

- Given that all human beings are made in God's image, we must actively support the equality of women. Women also reflect the divine image, and any diminution of women is a derogation of God. The dignity of women in the workplace and in the home, the right of women to control their own reproductive capacity, the right to childcare and equal pay for equivalent work—all these flow out of our Torah's conviction that there should be one law for all.²²
- Given that all human beings are created in God's image, asserting the dignity of people of all abilities (including those struggling with special needs) is a mandate for any social agenda. The right to access public spaces and buildings, the right to communicate, and the right to housing and meaningful work and social relations are all

fundamental to being human—for those with special needs as well as for the neurologically typical.

- That same conviction mandates that racial and ethnic prejudice cannot co-exist with God’s rule on earth. The practice of discrimination based on race—in housing, employment, social opportunity, or education—strikes at the heart of the Torah’s message of social justice. As religious Jews, we must speak out clearly and consistently for the dignity of all human beings and all human groupings. That insistence also means that the age of the jokes about a *goyishche kop*, or remarks about *shikes* and *shkotzim*, are no less offensive and improper than jokes about “jewing someone down” or comments about “Jewish-American princesses.” Characterizing and slandering ethnic, religious, or racial groups must be seen as no less than a rebellion against God and Torah, a violation of our covenant of peace.
- Hillel taught, “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.”²³ It is time that our diverse communities welcome gay, lesbian, and transgender Jews. For too long, such people (and their parents, siblings, friends, and relatives) have been isolated by the all-encompassing silence or hostility of our communities. Gays, lesbians, and transgendered people have a right to acceptance and understanding within the synagogues and communities of their childhood and their future. There are too many eager Jews among them who want to live Jewishly and who desire to contribute to Jewish life for us to continue a *de facto* policy of silent neglect.
- *Lo am ha-aretz hasid*, the Mishnah records: one cannot be pious if one remains ignorant.²⁴ Our Jewish traditions depend on the centrality of learning. In fact, Judaism may be unique among the world’s religions in insisting

that study is itself a form of worship. Consequently, the level of education available to the public is a matter of Jewish religious concern, as is the level of scholarship and intellectual prowess that the Jewish community requires of its leaders. Judaism cannot survive, let alone flourish, in a culture that does not cultivate learning. The mediocre quality of the nation's schools and colleges are a religious matter for us: the Jewish principle *talmud torah k'neged kullam* ("the *mitzvah* of Torah study equals all the rest") can and should be applied to education in general, and most definitely be broadly enough interpreted to include secular studies that bring increased learning to the world at large.²⁵

- A *midrash* teaches that God instructed the first humans to care well for this world, since there would be no creations to replace it.²⁶ We demonstrate gratitude for the gift of life and the marvel of creation by living responsibly with the rest of nature, by assuring that our children's children will also have clean air, water, food, and access to pristine, unspoiled wilderness in their own time.
- Finally, and arching above all the rest, we must involve ourselves in the *mitzvah of bakkeish shalom v'rodfeihu*, "seeking peace and pursuing it."²⁷

Humankind now has the power to reject all of creation, to undo the very foundations of biological existence on earth. It is our duty as Jews and as human beings to pressure our government to seek solutions to the constant possibility of nuclear annihilation. We may not have the answers ourselves, but we must convey our concern and our rejection of nuclear terror as a continuing way of life.

This list could go on and on: activism on behalf of the security of the State of Israel and peace with the Palestinians, the fate of the homeless in our urban centers, oppressed Jewry in Ethiopia, Arab

lands, and elsewhere. So long as our agenda reflects the clarion call of Torah and *mitzvot*, so long as we are responding not to the news media but rather to the injunction to love our neighbors, some may fault our religion, but they cannot fault our responsiveness.

Judaism is not content merely with decorous and vibrant synagogues. Judaism aims to mend the world and to transform the streets. To undertake a life devoted to *tikkun olam* means to be servants of God, and to be a servant of God means to care. That being the case, we cannot remain indifferent: “This is what the Holy One said to Israel: My children, what do I seek from you? I seek no more than that you love one another and that you honor one another.”²⁸

Imagine a world in which we all loved and honored each other. Such a world would surely hasten the coming of the Messiah, the symbol of social justice with human decency. In such a world, the children in today’s bar mitzvah classes—and all children—would have no shortage of heroes. They would know that they themselves are called to be heroes, and that they themselves must testify by their own actions that the hosts of angels are not liars. We would know that, just as the angels shout out that we reflect God’s image, our deeds announce the same beautiful truth. In such a world, the coming of the Messiah would be redundant...and that is precisely the purpose of Judaism.

NOTES

¹ Milton Steinberg, “To Hold With Open Arms,” in Jack Riemer, *Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), pp. 134–140.

² Y. Nedarim 9:4.

³ Gershom Scholem, originally published in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 38 (1969), pp. 346–364, and reprinted as “Three Types of Jewish Piety,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time*, ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 5–23.

⁴ Eikhah Rabbah 2:13.

⁵ Maimonides, *Sh'monah Prakim*, foreword.

⁶ B. Sanhedrin 64a.

⁷ Eikhah Rabbah 2:13.

⁸ B. Berakhot 7a.

⁹ Deuteronomy 3:7.

¹⁰ *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 10:1, ed. Meir Friedmann/Ish-Shalom (1904; rpt. Jerusalem: Wahrman, 5729 [1968–1969], p. 48.

¹¹ B. Taanit 7a.

¹² B. Sanhedrin 98a.

¹³ M.T. Hilkhhot Melakhim 12:2.

¹⁴ B. Sanhedrin 98a, citing Psalm 95:7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Pesikta Rabbati* §§35–37.

¹⁷ These rich legends about the Messiah make it clear that a true “Messianic Jew” is a traditional Jew who continues to wait for a Messiah—an individual who cherishes Jewish tradition and hopes and works toward a future of salvation for all.

¹⁸ Midrash Tehillim 17:8.

¹⁹ B. Berakhot 19b, Shabbat 81b and 94b, Eruvin 41b, and Menahot 37b.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 6:21 and elsewhere.

²¹ B. Sotah 14a.

²² This principle appears several times in the Torah, sometimes in the context of ritual law (e.g., at Exodus 12:49 and Numbers 9:14, 15:15–16 and 29) but also in a more general context (e.g., at Leviticus 19:33–34, 24:16, or 24:22), implying the broader legal principle that a just society cannot maintain separate sets of laws for citizens and sojourners.

²³ B. Shabbat 31a.

²⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:5.

²⁵ M. Peah 1:1.

²⁶ Kohelet Rabbah 7:20.

²⁷ Psalm 34:17.

²⁸ *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 26:6, ed. Friedmann, p. 143.