



## “SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SPIRITUAL SEARCH”

Several years ago, when BHC created the Goodwin Center, as a third worship location, we had a discussion: “What to write over the ark?” This Sanctuary and the Hoffberger Chapel presented no clear guidance. Those Ten Commandments way are not really an inscription. In the end, we chose from the first portion of the Torah, a phrase that appears six times in Genesis 1, ‘Vay’hi Erev vay’ki voker,’ in the Hebrew. Translated it means: ‘There was evening and there was morning.’ This unusual choice implies a range of possible messages. Those messages could also be pulled out of the most common of ark inscriptions, ‘Da Lifnai Mi Ata Omaid, Know Before Whom You Stand.’ This evening, let’s just focus on two possible understandings. That classic ark inscription challenges us to match our behaviors with God’s instructions, for we are always standing before God. Or the inscription might just be inviting us to search for God, aware that it may not be so easy. Or in BHC’s specific Creation quote, are we being asked to consider the source of creation or our responsibility to care for that which has been created?

I would suggest that for Reform Jews in general and Baltimore Hebrew Congregation specifically, the action comes more naturally than the spirituality. Most of us seem to find it easier to work to improve our world than to search for God.

Consider the stories and images we hold up regarding our own congregation’s history. We hold services each Shabbat and holiday. However, our legends are not about a certain Shabbat service in 1955, for example. We talk about Rabbi Lieberman being arrested to integrate Gwynn Oak Park in 1963 and Rabbi Saltzman’s being arrested with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the next year, long before he came became BHC’s rabbi. We remember resettling Vietnamese refugees and immigrants from the Soviet Union. Don’t get me wrong. We are rightfully proud of the work that BHC has achieved in what we tend to call Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.

Even if you came to BHC from another Reform synagogue, our current bevy of Tikkun Olam initiatives likely rings familiar. We collect food at the Chapel entrance, providing a crucial portion of the GEDCO Cares Food Pantry’s supplies. Now, we are also collecting clothes to support the work of CHANA, our Jewish community’s response to domestic violence. Our BHC Justice volunteers are active across of range of current social issues. Fitting with our societal awareness of the environment, BHC members continue to envision green initiatives, be it gardening, dreams of fruit trees, energy efficient HVAC ... you name it. Honestly, it is easier to gather BHC members for a current events discussion or a march, than for an adult education course or a service. It is who we are.

A few pages ago, we read:

“Avinu Malkeinu: Strong was the faith of generations before us... Ours is a different age—less confident and certain, more tentative in its trust.” (p.74)

Mishkan Hanefesh’s introduction to this humble prayer of acknowledges our reality. These words echo our last prayerbook, thus reminding us that our “less confident.... more tentative” generation is simply following in a trend stretching back decades.

Out to dinner with friends, it is more common to discuss the politics of the day than the nature of our own theological beliefs and doubts. Let’s not be too comforted just because our behavior isn’t unusual. Our prayers intend to shake us out of our comfort zone.

Rabbis and activists find it so easy to quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s response to marching with Dr. King in Selma, most commonly “I was praying with my feet” and actually “... our march was worship.” This pithy redirection from actual communal prayer is often presented as a natural outgrowth of Judaism’s commitment to Tikkun Olam. However, consider the source. Heschel didn’t reject worship. He just wasn’t limited by it. His marching grabbed the world’s attention, because he was famous for his works of spiritual searching. Even further, that inspiring quote about marching and prayer is taken out of context. Earlier in those comments, Heschel said: “It is vital to learn how to stand before God.” (drawn from David Ellenson Righteous Indignation, Or Rose et al, Jewish Lights Publishing, in p.ix)

‘Da Lifnai Mi Ata Omaid, Know Before Whom You Stand,’ Rabbi Heschel called directly upon an adapted Talmud quote found so often above arks. As we gather for prayer, Jewish tradition charges us to clarify our intentions. Judaism calls for a balance of searching and acting.

The same charge is behind these Ten Commandments or those at near the Chapel entrance. Our actions were always understood to be linked to our reaching towards God and holiness. That search sets the goals for our behavior. We could think of this as an equation: our search clarifies our values which lead to our actions. This is admittedly an imperfect equation, but one that has always been at the core of Jewish communities. Surely, it isn’t radical for a rabbi to call for learning and praying, along with marching and volunteering.

Such study and prayer does not assume a more traditional Judaism. Rather, our own Reform Judaism implores us in this direction. Near the beginning of our prayerbook, Rabbi David Ellenson, former President of Reform Judaism’s Hebrew Union College, has written an essay. Describing our tentative nature, he admits:

“Faith is never easy. The rabbis of the Talmud—exemplars of belief—frequently spoke of the hiddenness of God... Despite a desire for certainty, religious hesitancy and uncertainty are inescapable elements of human life... Nothing in our lives leads us to affirm a belief that a God who acts in this way, [who actual reviews and measures our actions each year], is present in the life of our world.” (p.xxii)

Rabbi Ellenson challenges us to move beyond literal readings of prayers and towards openness to the vast array of modern Jewish thought. He is encouraging us to learn deeply and then act upon our learning. His advice is not only for his rabbinic students. Think about it, the essay has been placed in all of our hands. The more we learn and ponder; the deeper the impact on our lives and our actions. The invitation is to serious thought, as Rabbi Ellenson continues:

“Releasing ourselves from a literal reading of the machzor frees us to embrace the meaning of the High Holy Days and find value in the prayers, regardless of our theological beliefs.” (p.xxiv)

This advice assumes that we are exploring our theological beliefs. However, it also assumes that we will take our liturgy seriously, but not literally. We are thus explicitly freed to question and explore. Baltimore Hebrew Congregation and Reform Judaism should be defined by that very questioning.

Our yearning should actually be wide open to challenge. So please consider the prayers in your hands and your heart during these High Holy Days.

Furthermore, I invite you to explore your heritage, world and your mind here at BHC. Join us for Shabbat morning Torah Talk. On Sunday mornings, come study Current Israeli Challenges with me and Ancient Israelite intrigue with Rabbi Amy Scheinerman at Sunday PEP courses throughout the fall, starting on October 8. In the spring, you can study other wide open themes with Rabbi Sachs-Kohen and BHC member Dr. Susanna Garfein. These opportunities and others are not just about learning facts, but about exploring your own thoughts. You can explore your spiritual search by attending any service or setting a time to come talk with Rabbi Sachs-Kohen, me or one of the cantors. It is true, that just as marching for justice involves real effort, so does Jewish searching.

When we engage in social justice efforts, we hopefully understand that one meeting won't solve an issue. Similarly, deepening our spiritual search isn't a one-off proposition. We are engaging in a longer process. The late Rabbi Harold Schulweis challenged us with a single Hebrew word, *Efshar*, perhaps. (from *Jews and Judaism in the 21st Century*, edited by Edward Feinstein, Jewish Lights, 2007, p.149-150)

*Efshar*, perhaps, is possibly the most Jewish of words, as it points towards discovery. *Efshar*, Perhaps we can explore the creativity of some traditional and most modern Jewish thought. Perhaps we can more open to learning and praying in addition to *Tikkun Olam*. Possibly, we can accept the reality that our searching will not lead to complete answers, but may still be satisfying. Learning together may lead us to a deeper sense of connection with the holy and the human, with surprising outcomes.

All this basic texts can lead us to the same outcome. Be it the Ten Commandments, the beginning of Genesis, or 'Know before whom you stand'; the message is clear. Seek and act; not one or the other. I could never be concerned about BHC's ability and drive to act for social justice and the human good; but those efforts would only be intensified were we to deepen our learning and spiritual searching. Perhaps. Ken Yehi Ratzon, may it be God's will.