

Justice, justice, blah, blah, blah

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish FundS for Justice

Our *parashah* this week begins with that most famous of Jewish social justice rallying cries: *tzedek tzedek tirdof*—justice, justice, you shall pursue. Within the Jewish world, these words have become a stock means of “Jewifying” virtually any political position. Googling “justice, justice, you shall pursue” and its assorted other translations turns up more than 1000 uses of this phrase, which variously justify opposition to the war in Iraq; support for Israel’s actions in the Palestinian territories; opposition to Israel’s actions in the Palestinian territories; and support for reproductive choice, universal health care, and hundreds of other issues.

In some cases, an author or speaker enriches the discussion by quoting a commentary on this verse (most often one that attempts to explain the double use of the word “tzedek”). In other cases, the phrase acts only as a Jewish stamp on the position in question.

For some people, the mere mention of a Hebrew word or a biblical verse is sufficient to make an issue or event feel Jewish. In general, however, throwing around a few key words and phrases such as “*tzedek tzedek tirdof*,” “*tikkun olam*,” or “prophetic Judaism” does little to advance the Jewish progressive agenda. Rather than persuade other Jews to integrate social justice work into their lives, our casual use of these terms only convinces the “mainstream” that we aren’t really interested in having a meaningful relationship to Judaism.

Many individuals and organizations do transcend this “*tzedek tzedek tirdof*” approach. Jews United for Justice in Washington, DC holds a monthly “*Tikkun Leil Shabbat*” program that integrates Jewish learning, *davenning*, social justice education, and community building. The Progressive Jewish Alliance in California (LA and the Bay Area), Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, and other similar groups regularly incorporate text studies into their programming. While I was at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, we hosted a full-day learning program each year.

Text studies such as these can go far toward deepening our understanding of Jewish perspectives on social justice issues. Of course, the style and intention of any text study depends on the presenter and the audience. In general, text studies on social justice issues have the potential to deepen some people’s relationship to Judaism, to help some to find a comfortable entrance into social justice activism, and to provide others with the spiritual sustenance necessary to continue their work.

Ideally, such explorations of text also challenge preconceived notions and offer new perspectives on current issues. While it may be tempting to construct text studies that reinforce one’s existing positions, it is more productive to allow ourselves to be challenged by difficult texts and to open ourselves to new perspectives. Many times, I have had the experience of finding that a difficult text forced me to understand a new

aspect of some issue, or—conversely—that some current event helped me better to understand a traditional text.

The worlds of text learning and of social justice work sometimes seem far apart. Historically, there has not always been crossover between those committed to learning and those committed to social justice work. Indeed, a recent commenter on this very site complained that the yeshiva where he teaches had to move its classes during the Los Angeles immigration rally this spring. For that writer, anything other than sitting and learning constitutes *bittul Torah* (a waste of time that could be devoted to Torah study). On the other hand, I have periodically encountered groups of activists who resist any mention of Jewish sources, lest “religion” taint our activism.

Instead of accepting either of these extremes, many of us are developing communities of people for whom social justice work and Jewish learning are integrated parts of our Jewish lives. By creating a dialogue between traditional texts and our experiences in the world, we can discover new perspectives on contemporary issues, and can find new life in ancient texts. Rather than accept the conventional wisdom that Jewish law speaks only to ritual practice, we can also reassert the continued relevance of the Jewish legal tradition for our social and political lives. Instead of bifurcating our lives, we are moving beyond the “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*” platitudes and finding a deeper connection between the wisdom of our tradition and our work in the world.