

Step Out of Line
Rabbi Marina Yergin

On September 3rd of this year, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was promoting her new book on Good Morning America. During the segment, a young child asked her, “What is the hardest part about justice?” Justice Sotomayor answered, “There really is no right or wrong answer. See in every case, there is a winner... and there's a loser. That's the hardest part of doing justice, [when] you know no matter how right you think you are under the law, ...you know that the other side doesn't feel like you've really done them justice.”¹

There are many situations where there is a right and a wrong, a winner and a loser; sporting events, family game nights, elections, lotteries, and social justice. The first examples are pretty easy to understand and are fairly intuitive. Social justice, however, is not an example that we typically think of as having winners and losers, but it can be. For example, a donation is made to one organization, which means other organizations didn't get that money. Or there's a volunteer event at one organization and so the other organization doesn't get volunteers at that time. Or lobbying for one topic causes people to not talk about other things on their mind. Or some people felt like their cause won, which invariably means that for others, their cause lost. You get the idea.

Judaism has struggled with this winner and loser idea in a different way – focusing on universalism and particularism. There are many ways to define these terms, but I think the best way is to use Hillel's famous quote “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”² which shows particularism – focusing inward on our own community, specifically, the Jewish community. However, Hillel doesn't stop there, he continues with “But if I am only for myself alone, what am I?”³ This second part shows universalism– we can't just be about ourselves – we must seek to treat humanity with the values that Judaism holds dear – not in a proselytizing way, but in a way that expresses our ethics and values.

Hillel is not the first person to discuss this dichotomy. In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abraham and the Jewish people, which was then reaffirmed with the Jewish people as a whole at Mount Sinai. This covenant is why we are called the chosen people and defines how we have a special relationship with God. This covenant focuses on the particularistic nature of Torah

¹ Sotomayor, S. (2019, September 3). Good Morning America. (G. Stephanopoulos, Interviewer) ABC. Retrieved from <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/supreme-court-justice-sonia-sotomayor-wanted-detective-nancy/story?id=65355974>

² Pirkei Avot 1:14

³ Ibid.

and Judaism – highlighting our unique connection to God and to one another. However, if we go back a few chapters to Genesis 9, we know that God makes a covenant with Noah, who is not a Jew, and his descendants. The Rabbis then explain that this shows us how “God established a universal covenant with all humanity through Noah even before a covenant was instituted with the people Israel!”⁴ This idea helps us understand that these concepts of universalism and particularism have existed for a long time and that they aren’t to be ignored or one chosen over another. The drive to not only worry about Jews, but to be there for all of humanity, is core to who we are as a people.

Even though this has been so important to us, there have also been times of concern. Going back generations, in the 1500s we see Jewish ghettos where Jews were separated from the rest of the society around them. They had their own educational system, currency, government, law enforcement, and even their own languages – Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic -- just to name a few. In some cases, being separated was good for the Jews because they were able to maintain their lifestyles based on Jewish law and rituals. But, in many cases, it made them a target for anti-Judaism – discrimination based on their religious practices and beliefs. When Jews kept to themselves, they felt safer and didn’t feel the tug of whether or not they had to follow *halacha*, Jewish law, or *dina de malchuta dina* – the Talmudic principle that says the law of the land is the law. As Jews were integrated more and more into society, given the right to participate in secular activities, and defined as citizens with the rights and protections granted by the laws of the country or empire they were living in at any given time, the topic of law and its role became a larger discussion – one the rabbis concerned themselves with frequently.

When we understand Jews’ history of persecution, we also understand the conflicting views towards government. Jennifer Grayson, in an article for *The Reform Jewish Quarterly* explains,

“...From its inception, Rabbinic Judaism developed in a context in which Jews had no political sovereignty. After the destruction of the Temple and the failed Bar Kochba uprising, the Rabbis sought to create a vision of Judaism that could survive in the absence of any imperial backing for Jewish religious authority. Thus, their political ideology was characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, the Rabbis of the Mishnah acknowledged

⁴ Ellenson, R. D. (2014, May). Universalism and Particularism: Jewish Teachings on Jewish Obligation. (S. Ravid, Ed.) *The Peoplehood Papers*(12), 17-19. Retrieved from <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/universalism-and-particularism-jewish-teachings-on-jewish-obligation/>

the need for ‘government’ to exist. As one sage cautioned, ‘Pray for the welfare of the government, for if it were not for the fear of it, man would swallow his fellow alive.’⁵ Still, the Rabbis warn against placing one’s trust in governing authorities. ‘Be careful about the government,’ another sage warns, ‘as they approach a man only when they need him. They seem like good friends in good times, but they don’t stay for him in time of his trouble.’⁶ Overall, the Rabbis of the Mishnah accepted the necessity of government, but they characterized involvement in politics as inherently risky and antithetical to Rabbinic values...”⁷

Knowing these rabbis’ fears, do we listen to them and take a step back from our secular society? I’m not sure that’s the correct answer. Instead, the contradicting texts we see in Judaism – how we are to keep Jewish law but also live the law of the land, and how we are supposed to pray for government and also not trust it – lead us to recognize that participating in today’s social justice is not one easy answer; it is a struggle in and of itself.

For me, this feeling of winners and losers is so overwhelming that sometimes it stops me in my tracks and makes me feel like I can’t do anything right when it comes to social justice, and so instead of creating a situation where there are losers, I also avoid letting anyone be a winner and just not do anything. When I came to Temple Beth-El over 4 years ago, I wanted almost nothing to do with social action. It wasn’t my thing. I didn’t grow up talking politics or social justice; not that my family didn’t find it important or valuable, but it was considered a personal decision – what you chose to do to help people or how you voted – and not typically talked about in a Jewish context. But, here I am now, working on social justice in a variety of ways through [Temple Beth-El](#) and [RAC-TX, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism’s Texas initiative](#). In order to get to this point, I had to step significantly outside of my comfort zone. I have learned what it means to advocate for issues from both a Jewish perspective and an American perspective. I have learned about the community organizing structure and how it can be applied to Temple Beth-El and other Jewish organizations. I have taken the time to meet with congregants, community members, a variety of religious leaders, and national social justice champions to learn from them and bring that back to all of you. But I can’t do this work on my own.

⁵ Pirkei Avot 3:2

⁶ Ibid. 2:3

⁷ Grayson, J. (Summer 2019). Politics and the Rabbinate: A Medieval Perspective. (E. R. Glickman, Ed.) CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly(Summer 2019), 36-50.

Often when talking about social justice in a Jewish setting, we hear the Biblical quote “Justice, justice shall you pursue,”⁸ but what does it really mean? What can we learn from that? “Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, a 13th Century Torah commentator, [explains that the word justice is repeated because it] stresses, ‘justice whether to your profit or loss, whether in word or action, whether to Jew or non-Jew.’”⁹ We say the word twice to highlight that justice is not for one cause or purpose, but for every person and every cause. The other highlight from this text is that “we are told to pursue justice...we are not to wait for the right opportunity to come along, the right time and place, but instead we are to be actively seek[ing] opportunities to practice justice.”¹⁰

Temple Beth-El has provided a multitude of opportunities, in large part thanks to Ross Halfant, our Social Justice Fellow. We participate in direct service work at a variety of locations for all ages on weekends, weekdays, and evenings. We provide meetings for you to delve into topics that matter most to you and figure out how we can better our society with our [Head, Heart, Hands, H3, groups](#) who are exploring topics ranging from the environment to voting rights and everything in between. We participate in advocacy work by lobbying – as teens with our [L’Taken Social Justice Seminar](#) and as adults every other year at the [Religious Action Center’s Consultation on Conscience](#). We discover new resources using multiple ways to engage with each month’s [NEFESH](#) theme, a program which stands for Neighbors Elevating Faith, Education, Service and Hope, that has won us [an award from the Union for Reform Judaism](#) and a grant from the Grants Distribution Fund of the Jewish Federation of San Antonio. We have elevated our b’nai mitzvah service project programming with [#MitzvahQuest](#). We have deepened conversation by hosting educational panels and presentations on topics ranging from history to legislation – local, state, and national endeavors. We engaged hundreds of congregants in a [civic engagement campaign](#) to strive to make us a 100% voter congregation along with other Reform congregations in the United States. Through all of this, we have strengthened our relationships with one another, with our Judaism, our city, our state, and our country.

All of that is wonderful and exciting, but it can’t just be driven from Temple staff and a few lay leaders. We can provide all of the opportunities, but each of you are the only ones who can experience it for yourself. The questions each of us must ponder are: How am I going to make a difference in the world? How can I

⁸ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁹ Schwartz, R. H. (2017, October 17). Jewish Teachings on Social Justice. Retrieved September 20, 2019, from The Times of Israel - Blogs: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jewish-teachings-on-social-justice/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

understand the struggles our Jewish texts present in the context of our modern struggles? How am I going to make sure I talk to someone with whom I've never had a conversation to learn how they are experiencing the world? How am I going to make an overwhelming issue into something personal and tangible? How do I balance what to focus on?

All of these questions and options seem daunting and overwhelming – I am overwhelmed by them. It seems like a never-ending list of issues to focus on and projects to do – I mean the Religious Action Center has over 70 issues they are focusing on AT ONE TIME!!! No one is asking you to put together the biggest rally in the US or to organize all of the schools in your local school district or to put together the largest educational campaign to teach people all over the world about an issue. Instead, at this time of year, the High Holy Days remind us to wake up and to listen to one another – to seek forgiveness and build relationships. We should take this time to truly look inside ourselves and see what we are reaching towards and then go do something. Even if it feels small or insignificant, it is important to remember that it is more than was done the day before.

In Talmud, four rabbis teach “All who can protest against [something wrong that] one of their family [is doing] and does not protest, is accountable together with their family. [All who can protest against something wrong that] a citizen of their city [is doing and does not protest], is accountable together with all citizens of the city. [All who can protest against something wrong that is being done] in the whole world, is accountable together with all citizens of the world.”¹¹ Aryeh Cohen, in his book *Justice in the City* explains that when the text says “protest” it is pretty clear from the direct translation of the Hebrew *m'cha-ah*, that it “means verbally demanding that another stop doing something.”¹² The other piece that jumps out from this text is the phrase “can protest.” According to Rashi, “the 11th-12th century commentator from Northern France, ‘can protest’ means that one’s protest has the possibility to be effective.”¹³ I find this fascinating that not only are we told we will be held responsible if we don’t do anything for those that are being wronged, but a reminder that our words could be very effective. To me, it’s quite empowering to know that so long ago, we had similar concerns as today – should we speak up and would our voices be heard if we did indeed speak up? The rabbis basically tell us that they may be heard, but that is not the point – the point is to be there for everyone around you by saying something.

¹¹ Shabbat 54b-55a

¹² Cohen, A. (2012). *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press. p. 44

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 45

Earlier, I used Hillel's quote from Pirkei Avot to explain particularism and universalism, but there is another part of this famous quote. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?"¹⁴ So I ask you, if not now, when?

Just a week ago (YK: less than 3 weeks ago), Alex Borstein accepted the Emmy award for Best Supporting Actress for *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. In her acceptance speech, she told everyone how her grandmother survived the Holocaust by asking a Nazi guard "What happens if I step out of line?" and the guard responded by saying, "I don't have the heart to shoot you, but somebody will." Borstein's grandmother stepped out of line and survived. Borstein finished her speech by imploring everyone to "Step out of line!"¹⁵ As Jews, we can each choose to accept things as they are, or we can have the courage to start making changes in the world around us. How will *you* step out of line this year?

¹⁴ Pirkei Avot 1:14

¹⁵ Borstein, A. (Performer). (2019, September 22). Emmys/Television Academy. Microsoft Theater, Los Angeles, California, USA. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/televisionacad/videos/734361340338889/UzpfSTeZOTUzMzY2OjEwMTE0NDANzMzOTgxNTkw/>