

SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND R. HASKEL LOOKSTEIN

(From Rav Chesed: The Life and Times of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, page 55-56)

Political or social activism was hardly the hallmark of American Orthodox rabbis in the 1960s. While a number of Conservative and Reform rabbis participated in the civil rights movement or protested U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, their Orthodox counterparts typically regarded such causes as too far removed from Jewish concerns to justify their involvement. Haskel Lookstein, while not personally active in those battles, early on recognized a connection between traditional Jewish concepts and modern social struggles. In a May 1966 sermon, which was the subject of a sizable article in the *New York Times*, he argued that the Talmud advocated principles similar to that of the civil rights movement. "It is the Talmud that says that no man is free if he must live in a segregated community, whether that segregation is the creation of law or the result of informal social consensus," he declared. "It is the Talmud that states that no man is free unless he has economic opportunity, a chance for employment, the social possibility to work in any geographical and economic area in accordance with his God-given and acquired talents." In 1971 he was one of the few Orthodox rabbis to publicly endorse Cesar Chavez's battles for the rights of farm workers, he urged his KJ members to boycott nonunion lettuce. Technically, all lettuce was kosher, he acknowledged, but lettuce produced "under exploitative conditions" should be regarded as nonkosher. Years later, during his tenure as president of the New York Board of Rabbis, R. Haskel engineered the adoption of a resolution urging "all Rabbis and their congregants" to boycott nonunion grapes, declaring such produce to be in violation of "ethical kashrut."