

Prophetic Voices

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For years I have been inspired by the words of the great Talmudist and Jewish philosopher Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his magnum opus, “Halakhic Man”:

“There is nothing so physically and spiritually destructive as diverting one’s attention from this world. And, by contrast, how courageous is halakhic man who does not flee from this world, who does not seek to escape to some pure, supernal realm. Halakhic man craves to bring down the divine presence and holiness into the midst of space and time, into the midst of infinite, earthly existence,” (41).

In my spiritual activism and leadership, I receive tremendous inspiration from the mandate of Jewish commandments and of the eternally ringing voice of G-d from Sinai, and it is through the lens of the Jewish tradition that I view my deep commitment to synagogue community organizing. Being a traditional Jew does not for a moment exclude me from the larger pluralistic Jewish discourse or the American political discourse on social change and welfare. And thus, I am moved to engage in CBCO and its methodologies of one-to-one meetings, house meetings, power analyses, and actions.

While my social justice leadership—in organizing, service learning, education, and advocacy— has primarily been among the pluralistic Jewish community where we can flourish among the beautiful collage of Jewish diversity, as a future Orthodox Rabbi, I must admit that I find tremendous satisfaction and encouragement from facilitating this discourse in the *halakhic* community.

One of the great appeals for me when I joined the Orthodox community many years ago was the strong sense of unquestioned duty that members typically embrace. A discourse of law, absolute obligation, and concomitant ethics provides structure to a day of service to God, the Jewish people, and humanity. The questions are most often not “Is there a God?” or “Am I obligated?” but rather “How am I obligated?” and “How can I best fulfill these duties?”

It is precisely for this reason that our effort to build the first Orthodox Social Justice and Community Organizing leadership training organization (*Uri L'Tzedek*) has really taken off. Our initiatives (immigration, workers justice, domestic violence, etc.) are introduced in our *Tzedek Beit Midrash* where we explore the Bible, Talmud, Rabbis and philosophers to understand the tradition's wisdom on these value-laden social issues. But as *Shammai* teaches, "Make your study of Torah a fixed habit; Say little and do much," and so our work does not stop there. This *beit midrash* then mobilizes its attendees to shift from the rigorous hermeneutics of texts and human narratives to the language of community organizing and social change. This is the real challenge. In a community that is often times so dedicated to text study and yet also sadly to passivity in social systemic change beyond the parochial, it is our conviction that our sense of duty for laws of ritual must apply with an equal force to laws and ethics of *Kavod Habriot* (honoring all people), *Tzelim Elokim* (serving with the consciousness that all people are created in the image of God), and *V'ahavta L'reecha Kamocha* (loving another like oneself).

There are times when my personal inspiration and sense of commitment to fighting injustice stems from the core existential self of my raw humanity. Ideally that fire would always be lit, but I feel blessed that on the days when my conscience simply isn't enough to move me to respond to the call of duty that there is a growing modern orthodox community that challenges, supports, and inspires me to engage in this work. At the Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School (YCT), I am surrounded by inspirational peers who are trained by JFSJ in Community Organizing and who are seeking to walk in God's ways via pursuing justice wherever we are called as Rabbis and as humans to act.

Rabbi Soloveitchik later wrote, "The actualization of the ideals of justice and righteousness is the pillar of fire which halakhic man follows, when he, as a rabbi and teacher in Israel, serves his community," (91). It is my dream and mission to build my rabbinate around fighting for justice for all people.