

[A Vision for an Orthodox Judaism Rooted in Social Justice](#)

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz is the President and Dean of the Valley Beit Midrash, the Founder and President of Uri L'Tzedek, the Founder and CEO of The Shamayim V'Aretz Institute, the Founder and President of YATOM, and the author of 14 books on Jewish ethics. This article appears in issue 41 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I. A Commitment to Orthodoxy

In the last decade and a half, I have been fortunate to study in a great variety of *yeshivot* and to have forged deep connections with many types of Jews. I have happily lived in Washington Heights and studied at Yeshiva University, where I encountered some life-changing minds and souls in the *beit midrash* and in the academy. I deeply enjoyed my years in Religious Zionist *yeshivot* in Efrat and Jerusalem, learning with my revered teachers Rabbis Shlomo Riskin, Chaim Brovender, and Nathan Lopes Cardozo; I have also grown immensely in my time studying in ultra-Orthodox *yeshivot* both in Jerusalem (in Mea Shearim) and America (in a Lakewood Kollel). Through these experiences I feel an expansive connection, having significant relationships in the “yeshivish” community, in Chabad, in ultra/centrist Orthodoxy, in Modern/Open Orthodoxy, and of course even among those outside of Orthodoxy and Judaism. I appreciate the diversity of Orthodoxy, of Judaism, and of humankind.

In concert with these experiences, my four years of rabbinical training at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School (YCT), founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss, transformed me in ways I could never imagine through some of the most critical, immersive, and introspective Torah analysis I have encountered. As a result of my experiences to date and especially because of my study with and learning from such compassionate mentors and luminary *talmidei hakhamim*, I feel deeply committed to halakha, *talmud Torah*, and to the welfare of the entire Orthodox community. In addition, I deeply value our relationships with non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews, our secular studies, our Zionism, and our support for increased leadership for Orthodox women. We strive to be Torah-rooted and very broadly integrated Jews, and to recognize and admire the diversity of Jewish life in general and Orthodox life in particular.

To me, the great contribution of Modern Orthodoxy is that we are committed to a Judaism that holds the fundamental paradox of being simultaneously particularistic and universal. Our commitments are not solely to the roughly 10 percent of Jews in America who identify as Orthodox, but to the entire community, to *kelal Yisrael*. We are fully committed to Jewish law, supporting Jews and the State of Israel, and celebrating the uniqueness of Orthodox Jews and Judaism. And we are also fully committed to partnership with non-Jews, fighting global injustice, and celebrating our differences and commonalities with other peoples. I have found through the building of the Orthodox social-justice organization Uri L'Tzedek that the latter can be just as Jewish as the former when it is rooted in Torah and Jewish ethics. We are Torah Jews and global citizens, and those identities inform and inspire each other.

To have true faith in the Torah is to believe that it has a message for the world. The totality of our study cannot be an occasional or even regular sermon, class, or *beit midrash* study session. Rather, these core values must be manifest in many ways throughout our lives. This is what I find so compelling in a renewed approach to halakha, that it strives to integrate our entire lives—even those parts frequently labeled secular—into a life of Torah. We understand that God's presence is in the history we are living, and so we do not hide from the present, from the world around and within us. For me, halakha is not about blind irrational submission, but about intentional transformation on many levels (*tikkun atzmi*, *tikkun kehilla*, *tikkun medina*, *tikkun olam*). Halakha can literally be translated as “progress.” While it's deeply rooted in the past and guided by core Torah values, it's primarily future looking to help solve societal problems, bring holiness into our lives, and cultivate the ethical personality.

II. The Diversity of Orthodoxy

As Modern Orthodox Jews, we affirm that Orthodox Judaism is stronger when we embrace our diversity. Diverse people committed to halakhic life come together to learn, pray, lead, and celebrate in an inclusive and expansive manner. We appreciate kabbalistic thought and rational thought, Israeli Judaism and diaspora Judaism, masculine spirituality and feminine spirituality, outreach campaigns and in-reach campaigns, Kollel learners and philanthropists, those content and those agitated. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put the diversity of Orthodoxy well:

Orthodoxy is not a denomination. It encompasses astonishing variations ... different groups evolved widely different responses to modernity. ... Orthodoxy, then, is diverse. ... To what might we compare it? Perhaps the best analogy is a language. A language is determined by rules of syntax and semantics. But within that language an infinite number of sentences can be uttered or books written. Within it, too, there can be regional accents and dialects. Orthodoxy is determined by beliefs and commandments. These are its rules of syntax and semantics. But within that framework lies an open-ended multiplicity of cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and cultural styles.^[1]

In “Confrontation,” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik cautioned that “The Westernized Jew maintains that it is impossible to engage in both confrontations, the universal and the covenantal, which, in his opinion, are mutually exclusive” (II:1). Rabbi Soloveitchik rejected that one must either be solely human, American, and secular or solely Jewish, religious, and separated.

III. The Challenge of Integrity

Today, sadly, many Jews have either pulled back into isolation or acquiesced into full assimilation. To truly affirm both the Torah and an open approach to the world has become increasingly challenging. But, to counter those trends, it is not enough to just check a box of affiliation or identity. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught us that simple party affiliations or language affirmations do not reveal true beliefs:

There is denial that is like an affirmation of faith, and an affirmation of faith akin to denial. A person can affirm the doctrine of the Torah coming from “heaven,” but with the meaning of “heaven” so strange that nothing of true faith remains. And a person can deny Torah coming from “heaven” where the denial is based on what the person has absorbed of the meaning of “heaven” from people full of ludicrous thoughts. Such a person believes that the Torah comes from a source higher than that! Although that person may not have reached the point of truth, nonetheless this denial is to be considered akin to an affirmation of faith. “Torah from Heaven” is but an example for all affirmations of faith, regarding the relationship between their expression in language and their inner essence, the latter being the main desideratum of faith.[\[2\]](#)

IV. Uri L’Tzedek

In the spring of 2007, in the YCT *beit midrash*, I founded Uri L’Tzedek, the first and only Orthodox social-justice movement in the world, after receiving an initial micro-grant of seed funding from the inspiring YCT Chairman Mr. Steven Lieberman. I was honored that Rabbi Marc Angel, the founder of this distinguished journal, spoke at the celebration. Over the last years, we have grown tremendously due to the herculean efforts of many staff members, volunteers, board members, and stakeholders. Uri L’Tzedek has become the American center of Torah-based social-justice thought as it inspires and challenges the Orthodox community to aspire to a higher ethical standard.

There is a formidable test the Orthodox community must grapple with. Can we represent serious Torah learning, rigorous halakhic observance, and the best interpersonal *bein adam l’havero* relationships, but also show that those aren't weights that make us parochial, but that are wings that help us to fly as global ambassadors for *kavod haBeriot*? Someone living on 23 cents per day affects our souls as much as the Tosafot we can't totally grasp yet, and we can burn the midnight oil on both. I

fear we may not get there but I also have tremendous hope because I believe the divine light with the soul we have in our care, when fueled with Torah learning and *tefillah*, can be very deep and can hold a lot more than imaginable.

Building Uri L'Tzedek has been about making the case that the Torah in its purest and most authentic form *does* have something significant to say in the world. It has been about presenting options for young Orthodox leaders to grow and make a difference in a new way.

We have succeeded in many regards as we have touched tens of thousands through educational programming, trained hundreds of young Orthodox leaders in immersive fellowships, expanded the Tav HaYosher ethical seal nationwide, launched and made progress on dozens of campaigns, supported over 50,000 asylum seekers at the border, and have become an activist force in the community. We have founded the progressive Orthodox rabbinic association (Torat Chayim), with over 350 rabbinic members throughout North America, Europe, and Israel. There is still a long way to go. We have not yet succeeded at convincing the Orthodox community that social justice is a crucial part of being a religious Jew, that every *shul* needs to be organizing for the vulnerable, that every *shul* needs to integrate social justice into its curricula, and that the Torah matters universally. Many are consumed with fears of Jewish survival. Noble as it is, we believe the discourse needs to shift from survival to “thrival,” meaning: How does the Jewish people not only survive but thrive with a unique message and impact to contribute to the world?

V. An Orthodox Approach to Social Justice

We know that many non-Orthodox Jews are deeply involved in social justice, which is great. But what does it mean for Orthodoxy to have a unique approach here?

I walked up to Nelson Mandela’s former prison cell on Robben Island (just off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa) wondering what I would feel. Mandela, due to his political and ethical convictions, was locked away for decades. Somehow, after all that pain and sorrow, he kept faith in humankind. He writes in his autobiography:

Because of the courage of the ordinary men and women of my country, I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man’s goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.[\[3\]](#)

A commitment to social justice consists precisely of this optimism: that no matter how dark times get, we see the dignity and potential in every human being. All individuals have rights and obligations. In times of despair, a people can only look toward their personal and national self-interest, but this leads to greater universal tragedy. It is in the most trying times that we must especially

remember the other.

Uri L'Tzedek was founded to apply the wisdom of Jewish law and values to the most pressing moral issues of our time based on the premise that observant Jews have unique obligations toward the vulnerable (poor, sick, abused, oppressed, and alienated). The Torah prioritizes the language of obligation to the language of rights to ensure that we are all empowered as agents of responsibility. The Orthodox community is very committed to Jewish life, with an enviable commitment to Torah study, prayer attendance, and mitzvah observance. Religious idealism (messianic fervor perhaps) is matched by the pragmatic charge to daily ethical leadership. A further benefit to making the Orthodox community a home for social-justice leadership is how consistent ritual practice is in the community. This steadfastness allows for the structure and reflective space that empowers the activation of values learned through rituals. Think about a child who walks onto a stage to sing a song. If the child does not have lyrics, they will spend most of their energy thinking of the words. If the words are set, the child can focus on singing as well as possible. When ritual is set, we can sing in life better. Psychologists have shown that, when children have a large backyard without fences to play in, they play in only a small section, but when there is a fence, they play in much more of the backyard. Structure and foundation provide us stability and thus courage. This has practical relevance to how a religious social-justice movement can be built. The Orthodox social-justice movement begins by building on our strong commitment to our obligations of *ben adam l'Makom*, which serves as a foundation to actualize our ethical commitments of *ben adam l'havero*. But it also goes further, ensuring that those prior commitments become a foundation for service on the level of *ben adam l'kehilla* and *ben adam l'olam*.

Further, the Jewish tradition understands that God is on some level at the center of social change, yet the burden is upon us, as humans, to enact that change. We need not perfectly understand the nature of the world to fully throw ourselves into creating change. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains this point well:

If we were able to see how evil today leads to good tomorrow—if we were able to see from the point of view of God, creator of all—we would understand justice but *at the cost of ceasing to be human*. We would accept all, vindicate all, and become deaf to the cries of those in pain. God does not want us to cease to be human, for if he did, he would not have created us. We are not God. We will never see things from his perspective. The attempt to do so is an abdication of the human situation. My teacher, Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitch, taught me that this is how to understand the moment when Moses first encountered God at the burning bush. “Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Ex. 3:6). Why was he afraid? Because if he were fully to understand he would have no choice but to be reconciled to the slavery and oppression of the world. From the vantage point of eternity, he would see that the bad is a necessary stage on the journey to the good. He would understand God but he would cease to be Moses, the fighter against injustice who intervened whenever he saw wrong being done. He was afraid that seeing heaven would desensitize him to earth, that coming close to infinity would mean losing his humanity. That is why God chose Moses, and why he taught Abraham to pray.[\[4\]](#)

While the opportunities for a powerful Orthodox social-justice movement are immense, there are also barriers.

- The observant community often values study over action. The benefit is the great commitment to Torah study, but the loss is a community that lacks change leadership.
- There is a parochialism and insularity that comes from the historical experience freshly emphasized in the traditional mind.
- There is a conservatism and stagnation in thinking that comes with a fear of failing at the great enterprise of preservation of culture.
- The top-down power structures in rabbinic authority at times perpetuates a culture of disempowerment and a lack of critical, autonomous thinking.
- Committing to live an observant life and to have one's children educated in the Day School system requires a tremendous amount of time and resources.

Ultimately, the main challenges endemic to the community are apathy and cynicism. The Rambam explains that cynicism is the antithesis of the religious impulse. He explains that we must ultimately view every life choice as if our choice will tip the scale of the salvation of the world or the destruction of the world.^[5] There is no room for cynicism or disengagement if the world and the fate of all humanity rests upon our shoulders.

While the Orthodox social-justice movement has learned from other social-justice organizations and continues to have much to learn from their decades of experience, a great deal has also been learned from the pedagogical approaches of the well-established Orthodox institutions. While the explicit existence of the organization is very new, the ethos of the movement spans millennia. Although the Jewish people have often been disempowered to stand on the front lines for change, today we have new opportunities.

Sometimes study can get in the way. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein writes powerfully about an experience that influenced his perspective on balancing learning with action.

A couple of years after we moved to *Yerushalyim*, I was once walking with my family in the *Beit Yisrael* neighborhood.... We came to a corner, and found a merchant stuck there with his car. The question came up as to how to help him; it was a clear case of *perika u-te'ina* (helping one load or unload his burden). There were some youngsters there from the neighborhood, who judging by their looks were probably ten or eleven years old. They saw that this merchant was not wearing a *kippa*. So they began a whole *pilpul*, based on the *gemara* in *Pesachim*,^[6] about whether they should help him or not. They said, "If he walks about bareheaded, presumably he doesn't separate *terumot u-ma'asrot*, so he is suspect of eating and selling untithed produce...." I wrote R. Soloveitchik a letter at

that time, and told him of the incident. I ended with the comment, “Children of the age from our camp would not have known the gemara, but they would have helped him. “My feeling then was: Why, Ribbono shel Olam, must this be our choice? Can’t we find children who would have helped him and still know the gemara? Do we have to choose? I hope not; I believe not. If forced to choose, however, I would have no doubts where my loyalties lie: I prefer that they know less gemara but help him.^[7]

Thus, Rabbi Lichtenstein teaches that when we do not act instinctively on our values, our Torah education has failed us. The purpose of our learning is to help to develop the right instincts based upon our cherished values. Learning Torah and internalizing its teachings properly should ensure that we are public exemplars at home and in the streets. The paradigmatic case of *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God’s Name) is in the financial realm,^[8] because this classically is the main realm where Jews would interact with non-Jews and thus convey their values and integrity. Religion is truly lived in the streets, not in the sanctuary. It is at work, in the checkout line, and in our leisure time where we put our values into practice. It is about how we vote, what we buy, and how we spend our free time.

Fortunately, there is evidence of support for social justice within the Jewish community. The Nathan Cummings 2012 Jewish Values Survey^[9] asked American Jews if Jewish values “are somewhat or very important values that inform their political beliefs and activity.” Core findings were:

Statement	Somewhat/Very Important (percent)
The pursuit of <i>tzedek</i>	84
Caring for the widow and orphan	80
<i>Tikkun olam</i>	72
Welcoming the stranger	72
Political beliefs and activities are informed by a belief that every person is made in the image of God	55
A commitment to social equality is most important for Jewish identity	46

While the number of Orthodox participants was less than 10 percent,^[10] we should be hopeful that among the Orthodox, there is a tremendous potential and desire for social-justice activity. These values are currently less embraced in the American Orthodox community, and that was why Uri L'Tzedek and an Orthodox social-justice movement needed to be founded.

The Jewish tradition is full of values and laws concerned with justice. We must go out into the streets and experience the suffering of others if we wish to take a position and understand that Torah is meant to be lived and internalized with a subjective experience. The Alter Rebbe tells the story of a grandfather learning with his grandson. A baby in the other room begins to cry. The grandfather pauses the learning and goes to soothe the child. Afterward, the grandfather scolds the grandson. "If the cry of another does not cause you to pause in your learning, then your Torah is null and void." Religious life requires engagement with the world and a deep responsiveness to the suffering of others. This experience will look different for each of us as we will be surrounded by and called toward different social-justice responsibilities.

The ultimate Jewish ethic is to defend the vulnerable since it draws upon our highest values and laws such as *pikuah nefesh* (saving the life of another), *kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying the Name of God in public), and *ohev haGer* (loving the stranger). "God upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing them with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."^[11] Ibn Ezra teaches the extent of our collective responsibility: "Do not oppress ... for anyone who sees a person oppressing an orphan or a widow and does not come to their aid, they will also be considered oppressors." We must intervene and emulate God and be compassionate in all of our ways. But this cannot stop at one-time acts of kindness. It must enter in the realm of systemic change.

Based on the verse Leviticus 25:35, that we must "strengthen him" (the one who has stumbled), Rashi teaches: "Do not wait until he has gone down and fallen, because it will be difficult to raise him up. Instead, strengthen him at the time where his hand is slipping. What is this like? To a load upon a donkey. When it is still on the donkey, one can support it and make it stand. Once it falls to the ground, even five cannot make it stand." Rashi is teaching that we must embrace preventive justice attacking the root cause of social ills ensuring a society that is just for all. Rashi teaches that this is not only the most moral path but also the most cost effective.

It is all too easy to neglect global suffering when it is remote. David Hume once suggested that individuals care more about a pain in their finger than about the loss of a life on the other side of the planet. Elie Weisel, in a speech in 1986, said: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And, the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. Because of indifference one dies before one actually dies."^[12] The prophetic voice and halakhic mandate do not allow us to retreat from responsibility.

If we believe in Jewish virtues, we have to study them and make them manifest in our lives. What is one way we can begin to understand the universality of Jewish social-justice action? At the most basic level, the imperative to save life is basic to the Torah's understanding of interpersonal responsibility; it is undeniable that the ethos of Judaism is about affirming the inherent holiness of life. No one makes this case more strongly in contemporary thought than Rabbi Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, one of Modern Orthodoxy's (and Judaism's) most influential theologians. On the topic of Judaism's propensity to regard the sanctity of life as inviolate, Rabbi Greenberg writes:

Judaism's ultimate dream ... is to vanquish death totally. In fact, since God is all good and all life, ideally there should be no death in God's creation in the first place. Classic Judaism therefore taught that when the ultimate redemption is achieved, when the Messiah comes, all those who

have died will come to life again. Resurrection of the dead will nullify death retroactively.[13]

For activists searching for reasons of solidarity, Rabbi Greenberg's statement is a powerful reminder that we are to affirm life in this world. And, as Rabbi Greenberg teaches, we don't have to consider only the *quantity* of life, but also the *quality* of life, an idea he suggests has increased weight in the post-Holocaust era. In an earlier generation, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote:

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.[14]

Thus, through the appreciation of life, we not only affirm an ethical commitment to others but also a belief in God. It is for this reason that embracing *Tzelem Elokim*—that all people are created in the image of God—is so foundational to Jewish values. The essence of the creation in relationship to the Creator is an undeviating bond. And because of this link, we learn repeatedly of its importance to the idea of humanity's shared and singular heritage. As it says in the Talmud:

Adam was created alone in order to teach us that causing a single to perish is like destroying the entire world, and saving a single soul is like saving the entire world. Another teaching: Adam was created alone for the sake of peace, so that we cannot say to each other: "My ancestor was greater than yours." We are all created from the dust of the earth ... and none of us can claim that our ancestors were greater than anyone else's.[15]

Moreover, because *mitzvot ben adam l'havero* may actually have more religious weight than *mitzvot ben adam l'Makom*, social-justice work naturally follows a path of treating every human being with the respect they inherently deserve. On this point, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, one of the most prominent pre-war Lithuanian rabbis, writes:

For "among two hundred is to be found a hundred," [a common rabbinic idiom], meaning that in all mitzvot between man and his fellow there is also a component between man and God. Why then should they be lessened by being between man and his fellow? And it is for this reason that the Rosh saw mitzvot between man and his fellow as being more weighty, for they contain both elements.[16]

As we can discern from the above passage, to be religious is to emulate the compassionate ways of God. Thus, this is the most fundamental principle that underlies all Torah study and related Jewish social-justice activities:

Rabbi Elazar quoted this verse, “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice (literally, “to do *mishpat*”), to love goodness (*hessed*), and to walk modestly with your God.”^[17] What does this verse imply? “To do justice” means to act in accordance with the principles of justice. “To love goodness” means to let your actions be guided by principles of loving-kindness. “To walk modestly with your God” means to assist needy families at their funerals and weddings [by giving humbly, in private].^[18]

Engaging in Jewish social-justice work as a religious enterprise means that activists don’t merely seek the win. To paraphrase Levinas, human “uniqueness lies in the responsibility for the other.” The means to social betterment have to be just and holy to ensure just and holy ends. Rabbi Ya’akov Yitzchak of Pzhysha (the “holy Yehudi,” an eighteenth-century Hassidic Rebbe) was asked: “Why in the verse, ‘Justice, justice you shall pursue’^[19] is the word ‘justice’ repeated?” The rebbe answered that the repetition is meant to convey that not only must the ends we pursue be just, but so too must the means we employ to achieve those ends.^[20]

Yet, there is a disconnect: Who are the ones who have to bear the burden of repairing the world and bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice? The work of repair cannot be solely upon the gentiles (who make up the majority of the world's population) while Jews, a small minority in the world, benefit but do not contribute. Rabbi Soloveitchik was adamant about this point:

Since we live among gentiles, we share in the universal historical experience. The universal problems faced by humanity are also faced by the Jews. Famine, disease, war, oppression, materialism, atheism, permissiveness, pollution of the environment—all these are great problems which history has imposed not only on the general community but also on the covenantal community. We have no rights to tell mankind that these problems are exclusively theirs ... the Jew is a member of humanity.^[21]

Working to bring more peace and justice into this world is a substantial task. It is not enough to look into legal codes solely to inform our decision-making processes and moral considerations. Indeed, becoming involved and engaged Jewish social-justice advocates is complex and the ethical charge is constantly evolving. Consider the words of Ramban on this matter:

Now this is a great principle, for its impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of a person’s conduct with one’s neighbors and friends, and all of one’s various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries. But since God mentioned many of them—such as “you shall not go about as a talebearer,^[22] “you shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge,”^[23] “neither shall you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,”^[24] “you shall not curse the deaf,”^[25] “you shall rise before the elder,”^[26] and the like—God reverted to state in a general way that, in all matters, one should do what is right and good, including even compromise and going beyond the requirements of the law.^[27]

Indeed, peace and redemption depend on work happening in every corner of the globe. Religious conscience has the potential to ensure peace while also having an effect of furthering justice, compassion, and dignity in regions of the world where these notions are not concrete. In social-justice work, there is a true need to harmonize gratitude in the quiet prayerful presence of God, while also knowing there is real suffering and brokenness in the world. Therefore, one of the most powerful tools in this field of work is the strength to refuse to look away and be silent.

For a religious global citizen, it is not enough merely to seek personal piety. That commitment must be converted into altruism. We must zoom out of the minutiae and see the bigger picture. A personal example, which was transformative for me, exemplifies this challenge.

Around 15 years ago, I led a Yeshiva University service-learning volunteer trip to rural Thailand through the American Jewish World Service. A few days into the trip, the students were informed that there was going to be an anti-HIV parade in the village. The custom is for adults to serve as educators and models by wearing costumes that promote safe sex through the use of condoms. Some of the YU students approached me and asked whether or not it was appropriate for them to wear these outfits as the village leaders requested. I told them it was up to them to decide on their own based upon their values and comfort levels. Two or three of the students decided that since HIV was such a rampant problem in this developing country that it was appropriate for them to take part in this educational initiative. What they didn't expect was to return back to their campus with pictures of them posted on classroom doors demeaning their experiences and articles questioning whether they should have been serving "idolaters" in the first place. The response shook me at my core. These students bravely went beyond their comfort zones to serve others, and their Yeshiva peers mocked (and some faculty reportedly condemned) their service. It was one of many experiences I have that reminded me how much courage it takes to be an Orthodox social-justice activist swimming against a stream of complacency and insularity.

For years, I was the only observant Jew struggling to pray, keep kosher, observe Shabbat, and continue learning Torah on my own during service missions abroad. It was always lonely in the desert with my Gemarah and shovel. Today, we have a growing culture of young observant Jews committed to creating grassroots change in society to better protect the vulnerable and dismantle injustice. We have many more obstacles to overcome, but I remain hopeful that the next generation of Orthodoxy will see social-justice activism as a top fulfillment of the Torah's calling.

[1] *One People?*, 92–93.

[2] *Orot Ha'emunah*, 25.

[3] *Long Walk to Freedom*, 457.

[4] *To Heal a Fractured World*, 22–23.

[5] *Hilkhot Teshuvah*.

[6] Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 113b.

[7] *By His Light*, p. 249.

[8] Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 86a.

[9] <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/04/jewish-values-in-2012/>

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Deuteronomy 10:18–19.

[12] *US News & World Report*.

[13] Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, Touchstone, New York, 1988, p. 183.

[14] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, p. 41.

[15] Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 38a.

[16] Elchanan Wasserman, *Kovetz Maamarim* (ed. R. Eliezer Simchah Wasserman), Jerusalem 1963, pp. 42–43.

[17] Micah 6:8.

[18] Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 59b.

[19] Deuteronomy 16:20.

[20] See Martin Buber (trans. Olga Marx), *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, Routledge, New York, 2002, 7.

[21] Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, & Reuven Ziegler, eds.), *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc. New York, 2008, p. 203.

[22] Leviticus 19:16.

[23] Leviticus 19:18.

[24] Leviticus 19:16.

[25] Leviticus 19:14.

[\[26\]](#) Leviticus 19:32.

[\[27\]](#) Ramban commentary on Deuteronomy 6:18; see also David Hartman, *From Defender to Critic: The Search for a New Jewish Self*, Jewish Lights, Woodstock, VT, 2012, p. 43.