

## **The Unique Power of the Human Being: A Sermon on Social Justice**

*By Rabbi Michael Schwab – Rosh Hashanah 5771*

Shanah Tovah.

I want you to imagine something. Something that might bring a little of the summer back into the normal hectic lives we are now living again. Imagine that you are arriving at the airport, bags already packed with bathing suits, sun screen, light clothing and that novel, or article, you have been wanting to start, or perhaps finish. You have a smooth check-in at the airport and are fortunate to find a quick security line and now you, or perhaps you **and** your family, are headed towards the gate to get on the plane that will take you to Cancun, Mexico. You smile as you reflect on the amazing last minute package deal you found for the entire family to travel to Cancun for what you consider to be an extremely low price. And your smile deepens as you imagine the beachside resort with all of the “extras”, at which you will be staying. Life is good.

When you arrive, life gets even better. It is warm and sunny in Mexico and the beach is beautiful. The resort has lots of food and

entertainment and helpful staff are everywhere. The hotel itself is gorgeous, the restaurants fun and the Caribbean water is spectacular. From jet skis to sandcastles, from gourmet dinners to sweet ice cream, it is all there. And you return to the Northshore more relaxed, with a great sun tan and fantastic memories.

This is the Cancun you saw, this is the Cancun most of you know. And for those who have never been to Cancun (like me until a few months ago), this is the Caribbean or Central American resort town that most of you **can** experience, or have experienced somewhere similar.

Yet, just down the street a bit, literally. Just beyond the reach of the American tourist, there is actually another Cancun. A different Cancun, which though you did not **see** it during your visit, played a large role in your wonderful vacation. There are no hotels in this Cancun, no fountains and gardens. No gourmet food, no water skis, no spacious lobbies. No air-conditioning, and there isn't even much ice cream. More importantly, there are no paved streets, no running water. No utilities, no solid homes. This Cancun is made up of

miles and miles of shack after shack. Structures that are constructed from scraps of wood and corrugated metal, that have inside them, thrown-together-often-broken-furniture, and hammocks or old mattresses for beds. The lucky ones have pirated electricity to run a couple of lamps, a hot plate or maybe a fan. The unlucky ones have nothing, sometimes not even the food or basic items needed for living.

I know this because this past spring I was privileged to travel with the American Jewish World Service to the Yucatan region of Mexico, in which Cancun is found, with about a dozen other rabbis, on a service trip to both aid residents in need that are living in that region and to learn about the root causes of the problems in places like Cancun. American Jewish World Service is an international development organization whose mission comes from the Jewish imperative to pursue justice in the world. It works to alleviate poverty, hunger and disease in the developing world through grants to grassroots organizations that will foster sustainable development and civil society. I went with them because I strongly identify with

their mission and I wanted to do what I could to help, not only from afar but in a more intimate way. It was during this trip that I experienced first-hand the “other” Cancun and explored its relationship to the Cancun that most of us know. It was during this trip that I rediscovered and renewed my commitment to the Jewish value of pursuing justice in the world, an aspiration that I think we all share in our hearts but which sometimes needs to be rejuvenated in order to help us actualize this value in the way we live our lives.

During my experience with AJWS, I learned that when Cancun was first envisioned as a resort town thousands of poor Mexican workers came from other villages or cities hoping to improve their family’s economic plight. Their home regions, while safe and familiar, were impoverished. So, with the encouragement of the Mexican government, they came to Cancun seeking opportunity, jobs and security within the tourist industry that was being built and staffed. Unfortunately, what they found were pitifully low wages, exhaustive working hours, increasingly abusive work environments and very little job security. This trend has only gotten worse as of

late with the current economic downturn and recent hurricane damage that destroyed a significant amount of infrastructure there. What started as a journey of hope, for many, ended in a destination of despair, of finding themselves now away from their home, without support, as poor as ever, with little hope of getting out of the spiral they have been in for most of their lives.

These are the people who work in the hotels, restaurants and other tourist service industries as the maids, busboys, maintenance staff, and support staff that facilitate the vacations of the many foreigners who come to Cancun. And they are paid an exploitatively low wage because the Mexican government's minimum wage law allows it **and** there are hundreds of other unemployed workers, with no resources to relocate, living in the shack towns I described, who would be willing to replace them if they quit or complained. When it comes to the survival of your family: a little money is better than no money at all. The fact is that the low wages paid to these workers are part of how companies can offer such great deals to tourists to

come and stay there. How some of us can enjoy such luxury for a relatively affordable price.

Lest you get such an impression, I am **not** telling you this to convince you that we shouldn't take vacations to places like Cancun or that saving money on a deal that is offered is necessarily a bad thing. **Everyone** in the world deserves a vacation and the fact is that the population in these countries needs the jobs that the tourist industry offers. Further, I share this with you not to produce guilt, in the worst sense of that word, or to condemn any of us as people; we are largely good people, just trying to do our best: to make our way in this world, to be happy and to do the right thing.

Rather, I share it with you because I want us all to be more **aware** of the part that we play, albeit often unconsciously, in the welfare of our fellow citizens of the world. How even the type of vacation we choose, the clothes we buy, plays a role in the world economy and therefore in the social welfare of real people, whose lives are affected by our choices. Judaism teaches us that as human beings we are inherently tied to all of God's other creations and that

we have an obligation to act responsibly towards them, including towards people whom we may not know and including even the animals, plants and resources of the earth. This is a beautiful reflection of our theological belief that because God is the source of everything, we are all holy and **equal** in value. Taking a vacation is great, getting a great deal might be even better, but we should be aware at least of not only the intended, but the **unintended** consequences of our choices, so that we can decide whether in each case it is the choice we really want to, or should, make.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker makes this very point through teaching a powerful text found in a 9<sup>th</sup> century *Midrash*, a rabbinic commentary called *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. He writes, “In chapter five there is a fantastic embellishment of what the Torah says happened on the third day of creation, when the waters were pushed aside and down to the deep, in order to make the creation of dry land and the sustenance of life on earth possible. Here is part of what the Midrash imagines: “At the beginning of day three, the earth was as flat as a board, with the waters covering it entirely. But when the word came forth from

on High, mountains and hills arose from the sides of the earth, and the waters were scattered about. Valleys were formed and the waters flowed into the valleys . . . and . . . into the deep beneath the surface of the earth as well. Rabbi Joshua said that . . . there is **one** fountain, whose source in the waters of the deep, sits directly on top of *Gehinnom* – Gehenom - (a fiery hell). Though it is so deep it would take one 60 years to walk down into the earth to reach it. This fountain flows from that hell, producing [warm] waters that provide **pleasure** for human beings above.”

What the rabbis are saying is clear: one person’s hell could too easily become another’s warm spring. Over a thousand years ago our sages recognized, and sought to oppose, the injustice of gaining from the misery of others. However, the real brilliance of the teaching lies in Rabbi Joshua’s additional comment: by positing that the spring located in that evil place was a 60 year walk downward into the earth, he was communicating the fact that our participation in this exploitation is usually **indirect**, often **accidental** and likely done in complete **ignorance**. Like the people in the *midrash*, we

would rarely knowingly and directly take advantage of people in this way. Yet, all the same, despite the in-directness of the harm, the image created by the rabbis of people bathing happily in the waters heated by hell, is supposed to jar us and motivate us to carefully consider our actions. We did not create the evil, or the spring that arises from it, yet our rabbis teach us that we must open our eyes and avoid bathing in it, whenever possible. We must attempt to understand where such springs flow in our own lives and then perhaps we can find, or create, a warm spring to bath in whose source is something more noble and pure.

You might be thinking at this point, correctly, that this perspective creates a reality that prevents us from ever being completely pure in our lives. That the picture I have painted makes us constantly complicit in immoral acts. As Rabbi Tucker states, “How could we possibly eliminate all of the taint of the waters of Gehinom from the things that we acquire to live and the investments that we make to support ourselves?” The answer is: it is true; we can’t be 100% pure. Yet, at least from my perspective, this fact does

not necessarily indict us or take away from the fact that we can still be good human beings.

Just as in anything in life, not being successful 100% of the time does not stop us from trying to be **as** successful as we are **able** to be. In this arena, we are at least able to be open-eyed, compassionate, caring, and not insular. We can reject the temptation to say of any suffering in the world, that it's not our fault, it's beyond us to fix and thus not our responsibility. We may not be able to avoid **all** harm in the world. "But since it is always distinctly possible that the fires of suffering anywhere are warming the springs in which we luxuriate, we must pay attention to the ways in which we can indeed help alleviate the suffering, even if it lessens our own pleasures sometimes"<sup>1</sup>.

Possibly the biggest lesson here then is our responsibility to open our eyes. As I said, my message is not about accusations or guilt. Instead, I am hoping that my message will encourage us to seek a more conscious awareness of how we allocate our resources, how we act as consumers in the world and how we involve ourselves

in the welfare of others, both **directly and indirectly**. We do so, so that as good, honest, hard-working people we can avoid contributing to the **injustices** of the world and instead support those who are working towards its improvement. For example, as fact, we should know that many of the clothes or other items that we buy, cheaply, are inexpensive because of the indecent labor practices overseas that produce them. That some of our vacations, which are such a great deal, are cheap because of the exploitation of the labor force there by those companies and those foreign governments which allow it. How we deal with those facts, is not simple: I still buy clothes, I still go on vacations to countries in the developing world. However, our awareness of these facts leads us to precisely the questions ethical human beings need to grapple with in order to make responsible choices.

These are complex issues: the intricacies of labor regulations and international trade agreements cannot be hashed out in one sermon. Indeed, many of these companies are fully compliant with the law. However, the question for us still remains: have we

considered whether they are **ethical**? Do we want to participate in the process that supports these systems? And if not, and this is the hardest one, in what way are we **capable** of seeking justice and **resisting** injustice in the way we use our purchasing power and in how go about our daily business.

One way we can help alleviate suffering is to support organizations like American Jewish World Service. For us, as Jews, they are the only organization whose primary work, as a Jewish entity, is to help communities in the developing world. Through the wonderful work they do **on behalf of the greater Jewish community**, AJWS spreads the good name of the Jewish people to the far corners of the world and Jews are now known in the areas AJWS helps for our great generosity and kindness. This, in and of itself, is no small thing in today's charged political climate. During my trip I saw first hand what a difference the grants and support they provide, make in the lives of those who receive them. AJWS truly follows Maimonides principle that the highest form of *tzedakah* is to teach a person to be self-sufficient so that they will not need charity

in the future. The long-term strategic help they offer continues to build up strong communities in Mexico as well as in thirty-six other countries, through almost five hundred grass-roots organizations, helping to create sustainable positive change in impoverished areas. Through organizations like AJWS we, as donors, volunteers and participants, can make a real difference in the developing world.

Another way we can help, is to make it clear to the companies from which we like to purchase goods or services, that we are concerned about their treatment of their labor force and the environmental impact of their manufacturing. If companies get more of a sense that people may decide from whom to buy based in part on their record in these areas, they will have more motivation to change their practices. In fact, this is exactly what happened only a short time ago with Nike, who because of public pressure made major improvements in their labor policies affecting their plant in Northern Mexico. By all accounts, this action, while making a huge difference in the lives of their workers, did little to decrease their profits (perhaps actually the opposite because of their improved public

image) and also did little to affect the sale price of their products.

Expressing our preferences as the consumer can make a huge difference.

And finally, we can also make a difference by choosing more socially responsible alternatives to do the very things we would have wanted to do otherwise. In other words, we can often follow very similar consumer patterns but do so through the use of socially responsible companies that produce products through more ethical systems. To guide you, you can, for example, find out the working conditions provided by manufacturers from websites such as [nlcnet.org](http://nlcnet.org), get ratings of products and companies from apps on your cell phones such as, “The Good Guide” or from websites such as “Responsible Shopper”. In the kosher world, you can do this too shortly through watching for the Conservative Movement’s socially responsible *Hecksher Tzedek* designation on various products and through the *Tav Hayosher*, a modern Orthodox ethical certification for kosher restaurants.

Since my trip, for example, I try to stay conscious of which retailers donate back a percentage of their profits to important causes and which have made efforts, for example, to improve the treatment of their workers. And while pursuing socially responsible alternatives often costs more, the contribution we make to the betterment of the world by doing so carries value far beyond those increased costs. Further, we not only help at that moment of making the more socially responsible choices but in doing so we help change the pattern of the way the world does business in general; we help make the future brighter for people who live in communities that suffer from being on the wrong end of these inequitable transactions.

And it is my belief that today, Rosh Hashanah, is the perfect day to commit ourselves to a more socially responsible approach to the world. As the day set aside for the celebration of the creation of the world, Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we can do **no less** as the caretakers of the earth, who were made in God's image for the very purpose of promoting the vitality and holiness of the world. So, when we ask ourselves, why would Jews spend their resources

helping those in Guatemala, Kenya and India? Why would I, your rabbi, spend time in the villages of the Yucatan and in the slums of Cancun? The answer is because we Jews need to know that while we have suffered, we are not the only ones who suffer. And in fact, **because** of our history, we should be especially sensitive to **all** forms of human suffering. And it is because we need to acknowledge that we, like all human beings blessed with freedom and relative prosperity, can unwittingly and unconsciously be part of others' suffering. And more importantly, on a day like today, it is because all of us need to remember that we can also be part of their **redemption**, their renewal, and it is in that way that we truly become willing, and voluntary partners with God.<sup>2</sup> Our willingness to reach beyond our comfort zone to the "other" can help us truly feel what it means to fulfill the mitzvah of *Tikkun Olam* – seeking the betterment of the world.

Simply put, doing the right thing, is doing the right thing -- no matter who you do it for. And it almost always feels good and almost always leads to better things. And while it is more than

appropriate to allocate the majority of our resources or attention to our own family, our own community, our own people, we are required to reach beyond that as well, even to those that we consider the “*Ger*” the stranger, both amongst us, literally, or amongst us, in the global sense. As the Torah says, “You shall not oppress a stranger for you yourselves have been strangers in the land of Egypt.” We have been that stranger in the world far too often in history; we know how important it is to make sure the “down and out” receive the aid they need. And we know what happens when others ignore the sufferings of the oppressed.

So, here we stand at the threshold of a new year and I say that we must loudly assert that there **can** be meaning beyond the absurdity that we often witness in the world, that we **do** have the power to create and to change, that there **is** a higher path than the one that we currently tread, that our actions **matter**.<sup>3</sup> And above all, we affirm that the world in which we live is a **holy** place, given to us as a blessing by God, and that our deeds, filled with love and Torah will

cause it and all who dwell in it, to rise above all of the suffering and evil forces that we sometimes witness.

This may be exactly what the famous prayer of the High Holiday liturgy, *Unetanh Tokef* really meant when it says, “*Uteshuvah, utefillah, utzedakah ma’averin et roah hagezeirah* – Through Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Justice, we can avert the **severity** of God’s decree”. Through Teshuvah we make amends with the past, our own past of activities that did **not** contribute to the betterment of the world, which allows us to free ourselves to boldly, without guilt, make new and better choices in the future. Through Tefillah, prayer, we can assert our values, articulate our commitment to such values in a public forum on a sacred day, to inspire us and carry us closer to action. And through Tzedakah, acts of justice, kindness and righteousness – we actualize these values, making the choices we know we should make, allocating our resources the way we know we must.

In a compelling fashion this central prayer posits that these three concepts, these three stages, when used together, actually allow

us to reduce the evil in the world, the severity of the decree. And in a more positive sense, we assert that they can guide us towards the honorable goal of building up the world and bringing it closer to the beautiful vision of what we know it can and should be.

This spirit, of reaching out to others in need and seeking to improve the world, is part of the very fabric of who we are as human beings. We have all been witness to the generosity of the human spirit at some time in our lives. Whether it be when seeing our children, or the children of others, perform an act of altruistic loving kindness and experiencing that warm exuberant feeling of witnessing the purity of that child's soul surface in his daily life. Or be it when we experienced the love and aid of a stranger who had no reason to go out of her way to help us. Or even perhaps when reflecting on our own act of justice, with pride and a sense of fulfillment. It is during these times, I am reminded of the capacity we have for unbounded human kindness, that our true nature, the divine part of us, understands that we **are** all indeed connected and that the suffering

and misfortune of one of us, is really the suffering and misfortune of us all.

That is part and parcel of what it means to be a Jew. We must strive to make a difference in the world and in the lives of others: each and every one of us. In fact, we are required to do so by God. We must, of course, make a difference in the lives of those we know: our family and friends, members of our community and the people of Israel. Yet, we must also make a difference, even in the lives of those we do **not** know, those we will never meet. It is a new year, a blank slate with which to fill our deeds. The time to begin is now. How will we fill it? As the prophet Micah said: “It has been told to you what is good and what God requires of you: Only to do what is just, to love mercy and walk humbly with God.” May we all have a New Year marked by our role in helping to make the world a better place this year than it was the year before. Shanah Tovah!

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Gordon Tucker, *Slavery Then and Now*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Rolando Matalon, *Dvar Tzedek: Rosh Hashanah 5768*