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Jewish Texts for Study and Reflection

Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism*

The following texts are for study and reflection. They may be used at Caring Community, Jewish Family Concerns and board meetings where the issue of caring and “in reach” are being discussed or for general study sessions of Creating Caring Congregations issues and ideas.

- You can use these basic questions in relation to the following texts:
- How does my congregation relate to the message of the text?
- Are the needs of the individual members of our community addressed in a caring, spiritual, Jewish-value-centered fashion?
- Do we, as an extended spiritual family, provide opportunities for our members to seek meaning from the experiences of their lives?

1) The ‘non-profit’ institution neither supplies goods or services nor controls. Its product is neither a pair of shoes nor an effective regulation. Its product is a changed human being. The non-profit institutions are human change agents. Their product is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into a self-respecting adult; a changed human life altogether.

Peter F. Drucker: *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, Harper Business. 1990.

2) Rabbi Hillel taught, “Do not separate yourself from the community” (Pirke Avot, 2:4). Mitzvot bring the individual into the context of community. As we have seen, performing mitzvot provides us with another prism through which the spiritual life can be evaluated. Through the fulfillment of mitzvot, particularly those being adam ‘haveiro’ (between individuals), we are brought closer to God. That’s one of the many reasons why Rabbi Joshua ben Korcha taught, “one should always be alert as possible to perform a mitzvah.”

Bab Talmud, Nazir, 23b

3) Love is a beginning and ending of all learning. The Hebrew word for Heart begins with the last letter of the bible and ends with the first letter of the bible. “Why?”

“Because.” Said Jacob, “life is lived forward but understood backward. We arrive at the end of our learning only to discover what has been true from the beginning.” [See also Kierkegaard: “life must be lived forwards. But can only be understood backwards.”]

Noah ben Shea: *Jacob the Baker: Wisdom for the Hert’s Ascent*

4) The biblical word for “community” is Edah, deriving from the Hebrew word Yiud, meaning unique destiny. We form a community whenever we let go of the labels we use to define both other and self and in their place create space for the full and free emergence of our soul prints. This is the life and liberty that we need to view as our inalienable right. The purpose of community is not to control—that is the function of labels—but to care for and nurture the soul of every person’s unique destiny.

Edah also means “witness.” In biblical myth, community is the crucible for witnessing each other. The epigram of the prophet Isaiah, “You are my witnesses,” is usually taken to mean that the human being is God’s witness. In the soul print understanding of what I call edah—consciousness we are called to witness the God in each other. In this kind of community, we try to see each other with God’s eyes. We need only to imagine how we might like God to see and understand us despite all of our foibles—and then turn that same perception out on the world. When we become witnesses, then our communities—like that of the monks in the story—will thrive and prosper. We become our own messiah. In the language of the mystics, we are engraved on the divine throne of glory.

Marc Gafni: *Soul Prints*

5) Religion is not a way of satisfying needs. It is an answer to the question: Who needs man? It is an awareness of being needed, of man being a need of God. It is a way of sanctifying the satisfaction of authentic needs.

The central commandment is in relation to the person. But religion today has lost sight of the person.

Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, Schocken Books. 1972

6) We have built organizations, but how Jewish is their membership? Our synagogues are beautiful, but homes are a wilderness. We have developed forms of living socially as Jews. Jews attend Jewish meetings, belong to Jewish organizations, and contribute to communal and national funds. But when left alone, or retired in our home—they are poor in religious spirit. The American is known as a joiner. And we too, have made a cult of belonging. The true goal includes becoming a Jew as well as belonging to a synagogue. And this is a lifelong process.

Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, Schocken Books. 1972



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PRAYER

HELP US TO USE OUR STRENGTH | Hoda'ah

***Your might, O G-d, is everlasting;
Help us to use our strength for good and not for evil.***

***You are the Source of life and blessing;
Help us to choose life for ourselves and our children.***

***You are the support of the falling;
Help us to lift up the fallen.***

***You are the Author of freedom;
Help us to set free the captive.***

***You are our hope in death as in life;
Help us to keep faith with those who sleep in the dust.***

***Your might, O G-d, is everlasting;
Help us to use our strength for good.***

* These materials were submitted by the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism in association with the Religious Action Center (RAC). The Commission assists congregations in establishing social action committees that will help them to apply ethical Judaic principles to contemporary issues. The Commission on Social Action and the Religious Action Center implement the policy positions of the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.