

Teaching Judaism and Social Justice

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Introduction

Jason Schulman: Anecdotal evidence and a less-than-thorough Google search suggest that more and more colleges are now offering their students a course of study that earns them a minor in “Social Justice Studies.” The program varies by institution—some call it a Human Rights & Social Justice Minor, or a Social and Economic Justice Minor—but the trend has clearly caught on. These social justice-focused concentrations are available to students across the country, at schools like Georgia Tech, Middle Tennessee State University, and the University of Iowa (to pick just a few at random).

The growth of this curricular option is, one suspects, driven from forces above and below: students demanding that their institutions offer programs of study that meet the political and social moment we’re in, and also the leaders of those institutions working to get ahead of the curve in making such offerings.

The courses and concentrations in social justice studies are mostly taught by scholars in other humanities departments, including Gender Studies, Religion, Anthropology, and sometimes, Jewish Studies. (We’re putting aside the unique Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco.)

For this Roundtable, we asked four scholars who have developed and taught courses related to Judaism and social justice to reflect on their

teaching. Despite their differences, all these faculty members are grappling with developing (and modifying) courses grounded in the Jewish tradition but malleable to the changing needs of American society.

Eric Caplan

I created the course “Jews, Judaism, and Social Justice” in 2010 and have taught it five times. In addition, on two occasions, I have cotaught a course on Jewish and Christian social justice with colleagues from the School of Religious Studies at McGill University. The basic structure of the syllabus is the same for both courses.

I begin by looking at selections from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and codes that support—directly or indirectly—the participation of Jews in social justice efforts focused beyond the Jewish community. Such passages occupy a small place in the Jewish literary canon. Accordingly, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing to our time, Jewish authors and activists have devoted much energy to showing that pursuing social justice is and should be a Jewish imperative. Because of time constraints, I focus this part of the course on materials of the last fifty years and give the most time to writers who have been especially creative in grounding this imperative in Jewish text, history, and culture (e.g., Leonard Fein, Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Michael Lerner, Arthur Waskow, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz).

The next and longest section of the course examines rich Jewish responses to a variety of social issues. Here, I look at materials of the last one hundred years (when available). We spend one class each on immigration, criminal justice, the environment, First Nations, and LGBTQ+ rights, and multiple classes on economic policy, Jews and African Americans, and Israel/Palestine. Authors in this section include Aryeh Cohen, Jill Jacobs, Danny Siegel, Abraham Liessin, Carol Ruth Silver, Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, Martin

Buber, Henrietta Szold, Marc Ellis, Peter Beinart, Yitz Greenberg, Sharon Brous, and Elliot Rose Kukla.

The course concludes with a selection of recent articles that critique efforts to link Judaism to social justice. These critiques take different forms. Some, for example, condemn a writer for asserting that Judaism has something to say about a given social issue; others argue that it is a mistake for Jews to give time and money to issues that can be tackled by other Americans while the Jewish community faces challenges that will only be rectified by Jews.

To complement the material studied in class, students write a significant paper on the work of one Jewish social justice organization. They choose from a list of organizations whose work is substantial and whose website and social media presence is sufficiently deep to be studied fruitfully. Because very little secondary literature exists on most of the groups, the students work largely with these primary source materials.

Below are three quick observations from my experience of teaching Jewish social justice to undergraduates.

1. Students prefer studying social issues over reading rationales for pursuing social justice. This is why the second section of my course only concentrates on material of the last fifty years. Originally, I also had students read articles such as Aḥad Ha-'am's "Priest and Prophet" (1893), Sadie American's "Organization" (1893), and Abraham Cronbach's "Judaism and Social Justice, Historically Considered" (1915).
2. The course attracts students whose politics align most closely with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Some are hypercritical of more centrist positions, reading into such texts conservative sensibilities that are often not there, and most struggle to engage seriously with right-wing critiques of Jewish social justice, no matter how carefully argued (for example, Hillel Halkin's "How Not to Repair the World"). I find myself playing devil's advocate or asking for textual proof more often than in my other courses.

3. It is a challenge to teach Jewish responses to multiple social issues over the course of a century. In the section on poverty, for example, Tuesday's class may look at the Rabbinical Assembly of America's "Pronouncement on Social Justice" (1934), while Thursday's class may analyze the Conservative Movement's "A Rabbinic Letter on the Poor" (1999). Each piece needs to be placed in its historical context and the significant difference in the policy positions advocated in the two documents needs to be accounted for. The following week, a different social issue may be addressed, with a different set of factors influencing each piece and causing the changes of point of view over time. Accordingly, I've learned to teach fewer articles under each heading and to choose two or three issues to examine over multiple weeks.

It is a pleasure teaching this course. Class discussions are animated and rich. All the pieces that I've referenced are included in the anthology, *Jewish Social Justice Thought in North America, 1880-2022*, which I am editing for the Jewish Publication Society. The book will be published in late 2023.

Recommended Reading:

Carol Ruth Silver, *Freedom Rider Diary: Smuggled Notes from Parchman Prison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 3-18.

Suzanne Seriff

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit."

—Proverbs 18:21

One of the lessons I have learned as the Director of the Social Justice Internship Program at the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin is that life has a funny way of inserting itself at just the right moment to spark a conversation that might change the world.

The innovative sweet spot of our internship program—now in its fourth year—is a trifecta of a ten-hour-a-week

internship, Jewish text study, and community stories by visiting speakers focusing on social justice concepts such as *tikkun 'olam* and *zedakah*. Students secure internships based on their interests and possible career goals—including at a wide range of arts, health, social service, and advocacy organizations throughout Central Texas. One organization supports art programs for the homeless, another teaches classical guitar to historically underserved populations, a third coordinates health services for migrants, and one records the stories of those impacted by state violence in Texas.

Most students are exploring Judaism for the first time. The weekly focus on topics such as poverty alleviation, food justice, art-based activism, health equity, immigrant rights, and homelessness is brought to life through Jewish textual study, lively classroom conversation, and guest appearances by Jewish leaders. These leaders share their stories of how they have found their way to a committed life of *tikkun 'olam*.

In the fall of 2021, week 11 was no ordinary week. The topic of text study was “combating hate.” Our guest speakers were the executive director and a board member of the Central Texas Anti-Defamation League. Just that week, Austin had been targeted with antisemitic acts by individuals as well as a nationally recognized hate group. Public-school property was defaced with swastikas and homophobic and racist symbols; neighborhoods were harassed with antisemitic banners; and a fire was started in the doorway of an Austin synagogue.

Our ADL speakers centered their timely discussion on what they refer to as a “pyramid of hate,” demonstrating how biased attitudes and stereotypes can escalate into acts of violence, and ultimately, genocide. Over the preceding week, “Bias-Motivated Violence”—the second-highest tier of the pyramid—had gone from unthinkable to a reality in the eleventh largest city in the United States. How did this happen? What insight could students bring from their own lives? The opportunity to bring these questions alive in real time is a unique aspect of this

program that the Schusterman Center brings to undergraduates at UT.

The dialogue after our speakers’ presentation—even via Zoom—was as lively and passionate as any I had experienced. As always, it was led by a student, who facilitates related text study. The student focused on the Jewish concept of *lashon hara*, the evil tongue. As a trans student raised in the Texas Bible Belt, they held this topic particularly close to their heart. As they wrote in their weekly reflection:

“There was no other topic on the list that has been more relevant to my life than hate speech. I glimpsed the devastating effects of intolerance in childhood, in the ways that girls were held responsible for the behavior of their less well-behaved male peers, when I saw white children get off scot-free after terrorizing racial minorities at my school or when I and numerous others experienced ostracization for reasons ranging anywhere from being too poor, too queer, or simply too different to ever be a meaningful part of the community. ... Everything I witnessed firsthand at school is just the predecessor for the more extreme acts of discrimination and violence affecting our nation today.”

It was only after our close text study of *lashon hara*, placed in the context of hate-based violence in our own backyards, that students began to connect the abstract ethical idea of justice with the power of the tongue—both as a catalyst for peace as well as a precursor to violence. In the last session of our class, over a meal of potato latkes and smoked salmon, guest speaker Rabbi Neil Blumofe, the senior rabbi of an Austin synagogue, led a final text study on the concepts of *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination in each of us) and *lashon hara*. What emerged was not only a recognition of the power of the evil tongue but also a newfound commitment to use the power of our mouths—our words—to combat that evil. As one student so eloquently stated:

“It is our moral obligation to speak up and end the negative talk. Do not be a silent bystander.”

Another brought the conversation back around to a renewed insight into the concept of justice, after our foray into the ideas of *lashon hara*:

“Justice is everywhere—it’s in the way we treat others, it’s in the way we use language, it’s in the way we give, it’s in the way we advocate for each other. I want to catalyze change in the world by incorporating justice into everything I do both personally and professionally. I want to leave my value judgments behind and award all human beings (who are created equally in the image of the Divine) the dignity they deserve.”

Recommended Reading:

Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009).

Stephanie Ruskay

At JTS, where I helped start a postgraduate certificate in Jewish Ethics and Social Justice, I lead a seminar for students in the certificate program to reflect on how the academic courses they are taking inform the justice and service work they are already doing.

When I talk about social justice, I mean that each person has equal access to opportunity and resources. They may not all have exactly the same amount, but access exists and the structures that create inequity are recognized and intentionally mitigated. Jewish tradition does not require equity (in the sense of all having the same amount) but it requires everyone to contribute to the well-being of those in their orbit. People are not solely responsible for themselves. Others have a right to benefit from their abundance. And even those without abundance have a responsibility to those with less than they have.

Exploring social justice issues through a Jewish lens, with an imperative to act on what we learn, is our goal in our Jewish social justice program. Yet, too rarely do we ask “what is actually just?” We focus on finding texts that support our understanding of social issues and we develop skills to become outstanding community organizers. But we don’t ask frequently enough, “What does this justice look like and how do we know we are right?”

We take shortcuts. The world is moving quickly. We live in a polarized time. We convince ourselves we know what is just, so we organize and protest and act. We develop affinity for those who see the world as we do and hatred and resentment for those who see it differently. We think they do not value justice. They must not or they would share our values and priorities.

It is too tempting to conflate our religious commitments with our political beliefs. I like doing it as much as the next person, but it is lazy. I have facilitated classes on Jewish texts related to social justice, offering “proof” that Jewish tradition compels us to act for justice and to particularly care for people who are poor and underserved. Sometimes I cherry pick. Since our texts include complicated portions that offend, or they meander, creating a compendium of Jewish social justice resources requires picking and choosing and leaving a lot on the cutting room floor.

This is a moment for truth and not partisanship. This is a time for studying and reflecting and learning the sources that tell us that something we believe in politically is not possible by Jewish law; for example, I personally oppose gun ownership but I do not believe bans would be grounded in Jewish law.

This moment of division calls for us to keep front and center the question, “what is just and how do I know?” We can only know by encountering viewpoints that are different from our own, from speaking respectfully with people who see the world entirely differently than we do.

I try to live by the Jewish value that study that informs action is the most valuable. In contemporary American life it is countercultural to carve out time for study. To say I don't know. To admit that our texts do not say a whole lot about this aspect of contemporary justice but I am committed to pursuing it anyway.

Truth currently feels like a treasured commodity. As I think about teaching this seminar again, one way that I plan to contribute to protecting truth, the bedrock of our democracy, is to ensure that learning and action on Jewish perspectives to social justice take a clear-eyed approach that does not begin with a preordained outcome. Our work today as Jews who care and teach about and act for justice is to ensure that we make time and space for thinking and exploring texts that are unrelated to causes for which we are acting. Additionally, we must ensure that we are also acting on issues of the day while continuously clarifying for ourselves if the outcome we are pursuing is defensibly just or more an instinct.

Ultimately, I want to stress that action is just as important as learning. This will cause some discomfort. Some prefer the contemplative, sometimes solitary, world of study. For those philosophers and ethicists among us, the challenge I offer is to lean into acting for justice more frequently. Do not silence the need to keep asking, "is this just?" but don't let it always lead, and prevent action. We must not, and cannot, wait until we have it all figured out. Act now, while still continuing to think.

Thinking and acting in concert are important antidotes to the divisiveness and inequity in which we live. Ideally, they are done in relationship with people whose experiences and attitudes differ from our own since this broadens our capacity for change.

Let us all choose to study and act in new ways that unsettle us a bit and stretch us to act outside our comfort zone. The world needs us.

Recommended Reading:

Aryeh Cohen, *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

Elizabeth Heineman

What do you do when teaching "Jews, Judaism, and Social Justice" for the first time? To students who have a purely intuitive understanding of social justice, who may or may not know anything about Judaism or Jewish history and life, and who are anxious to get out of the classroom and into the community—which is inaccessible due to COVID-19?

This was the situation I faced in spring of 2022 at my large midwestern public university. I began the semester assuming the current iteration of the course would be a stopgap. Next time, I told myself, I'd organize it around a community engagement project. I ended the semester thankful for perhaps the most rewarding teaching experience of my nearly thirty-year career.

The "stopgap" was to allow process and pedagogy to be the point rather than the means to an end (the "end" being mastery of subject matter, such as historical implications, critical analyses, and present-day applications of concepts like *tzedek* or *tikkun 'olam*). But there are many good pedagogies. If pedagogy was to be the end and not the means for a class called "Jews, Judaism, and Social Justice," it would have to embody both Jewish practice and social justice principles.

In developing my pedagogy, I was strongly influenced by Svava,ⁱ the UnYeshiva,ⁱⁱ and its parent organization, Judaism Unbound,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as the work of secular educators uniting pedagogical and social justice practices such as Jesse Stommel^{iv} and Cath Denial^v. Our tools were chevruta, midrash, and ritual. Class meetings involved a brief lecture (sometimes) and chevruta followed by full-class reflections (always). The two major written assignments were midrashim putting a Jewish text into conversation with social justice concerns. And our major collaborative project was a secular social justice seder.

Students initially acknowledged some discomfort with open-ended, one-on-one conversation in which the core question was: “What does this text bring up for you?” But they adapted rapidly, and the conversations were remarkably serious. Keeping the texts very short (no more than a few lines) and reminders that chevruta is a three-way dialog among both partners and the text helped to keep students accountable: they couldn’t wander off onto a tangent without returning to a discussion of how their comments related to the text. But those tangents often brought to light important insights based on one partner’s life experience, another class, or perhaps that day’s news headlines. More fundamentally, they practiced compassionate listening (across generations as well as across the desk), respectful engagement, and critical self-reflection.

The midrashim were as open-ended as the chevruta. Having read about midrash as fan fiction, students were free to develop a midrash bringing a biblical text of their choosing into conversation with social justice issues. Free-writes, reflections on structured conversations with friends or relatives outside class, and in-class workshops of preliminary assignments (not “drafts”) normalized the practice of allowing questions to remain open and inquiring deeply into others’ insights.

Most of my students had never attended a seder, or perhaps had attended one as a guest. They were now charged with organizing one that would intentionally depart from tradition. (Their first instinct was to try to replicate “tradition,” albeit in secular form.) Working groups had to consider both the indispensable elements of ritual and themes like food justice in menu planning and universal design in planning décor, and they had to explain their choices. (The sheer logistical burden for students of staging the event late in the semester is something I’d rethink next time around.) Each student was charged with creating something to present at the seder—a poem, a short personal essay, an original piece of art—connected both to the Exodus story and to a social justice theme. I organized the overall arc of the service: the ritual elements and the placement of

each student’s contribution. Students were invited to bring one guest: they included (among others) a congregational rabbi, a best friend, two Palestinian American students who had visited the class, and a student’s Christian mentor.

I began the semester concerned that students, anxious to engage today’s social justice issues, would approach the “Judaism 101” and historical segments of the course with impatience. I need not have worried. The talmudic model of imagination, valuation of dissent, and willingness to knock biblical figures off their pedestals aligned well with students’ inclinations. Learning about the Covenant meant confronting the disturbing myth of the Binding of Isaac—and discovering that the rabbis had expressed disquiet about Sarah’s exclusion from the story. Alicia Jo Rabins’s musical meditation^{vi} on the same theme confirmed that we, too, are permitted—indeed, obligated—to grapple with troubling histories, even if they involve foundational figures: we further social justice by reexamining powerful narratives from the perspective of the marginalized. (The Hagar story added another level of complexity: students quickly recognized the need to understand both Sarah and Hagar through an intersectional lens.) Moving forward in time, role-playing games enabled students to see how the Jewish labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was intertwined with secularization and immigration, two themes that helped create a bridge between the strangeness of earlier eras and more familiar territory.

What we didn’t do may have been as important as what we did. We didn’t have grades, at least not until the end of class when I had to report them to the registrar. Underscoring the fact that worry about grades can interfere with creativity and risk-taking, I let the students know that (a) individual assignments wouldn’t be graded, and (b) twice during the semester, I’d let them know “the grade I’d give you if I had to give you a final grade right now.” That grade was based on engagement, both in class and in written assignments. “Engagement” included not only attendance, participation, and thoughtful completion of assignments but also response to feedback

on class discussions, assignments, and student-teacher conferences. Like chevruta, this grading practice caused unease followed by a feeling of empowerment—and it resulted in far better work, I suspect, than students would have produced if they'd been trying to anticipate my expectations or align their work with a grading rubric.

By the end of the semester, students had internalized practices that are essential for social justice work: critical self-reflection; accountability; active listening and engagement; appreciation for insights gained through life experience and positionality; the ability to tolerate ambiguity; and a willingness to take risks. And they understood why it matters that Judaism has a set of tools that aligns so well with these social justice practices. All of the students had joined the class with a commitment to social justice, but many had been frustrated by frameworks that seemed to them too prescriptive, too unconcerned about the diversity of experience, or too resistant to disruptive questions. (I reminded them, at many points in the semester, that one can also find rigidity in Jewish experience: this course was a slice, not the entirety, of Jewish learning.) Despite our inability to get out of the classroom, students expressed appreciation at how prepared they felt to engage social justice—because they had gained so much practice in conversation.

And we all know how Jews love to talk.

Recommended Reading:

Danya Ruttenberg, "Life is a Sacred Text," <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com>.

i <https://svara.org/>

ii <https://www.judaismunbound.com/unyeshiva>

iii <https://www.judaismunbound.com/>

iv <https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-faq/>

v <https://catherinedenial.org/>

vi <https://www.girlsintroublemusic.com/songs/river-so-wide/>

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