A Guide to Synagogue Social Action

Evelyn Laser Shlensky
Rabbi Marc D. Israel, Editor
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This guide is the successor to the Commission on Social Action’s Social Action Manual: A Practical Guide for Organizing and Programming Social Action in the Synagogue, edited by Rabbi David Saperstein and published in 1983. Indeed, several sections of the guide are taken almost verbatim from it. And thus we owe a debt of gratitude to all those who contributed to that manual.

Like its predecessor, this guide is also the product of numerous hands. And like its predecessor, this guide would not have been possible without the vision and support of Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center (RAC). He provided important comments and suggestions, contributing in countless ways throughout the process. In addition, Leonard Fein, then-director of the Commission on Social Action (CSA), Rabbi Daniel Polish, current director of the CSA, Mark Pelavin, associate director of the RAC, and Judge David Davidson, chair of the CSA, all provided helpful insights along the way.

Al Vorspan, director emeritus of the CSA, Jeff Mandell, past legislative director and communications coordinator at the RAC, and Rabbi Eve Rudin Weiner, director of NFTY, all contributed sections to this guide. The Eisendrath Legislative Assistant class of 2000-01 – Danielle Hirsch, Rachel Labush, Sari Laufer, Evan Moffic, Rachel Orkand, Michael Silver, and Ariana Silverman – compiled the information and annotated the “Resources” section of the guide, and summer intern Ben Shapiro provided immeasurable logistical help as we moved to the final stages of publication. Lauren Schumer, current legislative director of the RAC, whose command of English grammar and careful eye made her a wonderful line editor, saved us from countless spelling, grammatical and syntactical errors. (That being said, we take sole responsibility for any errors that remain.)

Those of you who have used the 1983 Social Action Manual will note many changes in this guide. Perhaps most notable is its appearance. While the technology of the 21st Century certainly makes better looking and easier to read documents much simpler than twenty years ago, this guide benefited tremendously from the creative design, skillful work, and tireless effort of our graphic designer, Phil Torsani.

Finally, this guide is a reflection of the wonderful practices of synagogues and social action committees across the continent, whose work each day to improve their communities and the lives of those who live in them inspires us. Most of what we know about synagogue social action is derived from the practical experience of these dedicated institutions and individuals. While it is often difficult to track down the origin of a particular program or concept to an exact congregation, the congregations of the UAHC and their members deserve the credit for most of the ideas contained within this guide. It is for all those who seek to emulate their work that this guide is intended.
# LIRDOF TZDEK: A Guide to Synagogue Social Action

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE RELIGIOUS PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SYNAGOGUE AS A SETTING FOR THE PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFORM JUDAISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY, A DISTINCTIVE COMMITMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE UNIVERSALISM/PARTICULARISM QUERY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Concept of “The Stranger” and Its Implications for Universalism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our History and Its Lessons</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining Particular and Universal Concerns in Your Social Action Program</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUILDING A SYNAGOGUE SOCIAL ACTION STRUCTURE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A STARTING POINT: ESTABLISHING A STRONG COMMITTEE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures for Organizing a Committee</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Meeting of the Committee</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A NEW MODEL: THE SOCIAL ACTION NON-COMMITTEE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTEGRATING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO THE WHOLE LIFE OF THE SYNAGOGUE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPRESSING TIKKUN OLAM THROUGHOUT SYNAGOGUE LIFE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabbat Observances</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday Observances</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifecycle Events</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer/Liturgy</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITAL ROLES OF SYNAGOGUE PROFESSIONALS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rabbi</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cantor</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Educator</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Administrator</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Workers</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVENUES OF PARTICIPATION FOR SYNAGOGUE MEMBERS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIRDOF TZEDEK

SYNAGOGUE SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMMING 28
QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS 28
TYPES OF SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMS: A CASE STUDY 28
Education 29
Gemilut Chasadim 29
Advocacy 29
TWENTY TECHNIQUES FOR ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS 31
SELECTING PROGRAMS TO FURTHER YOUR OBJECTIVES 33
UAHC/CCAR Resolutions as Resources for Advocacy 34
Compelling Local Needs and Issues 34

SMALL AND MID-SIZE CONGREGATIONS AND SOCIAL ACTION 35
Port Jewish Center (Port Washington, NY) 35
Temple Emek Shalom (Ashland, OR) 36
Central Reform Congregation (St. Louis, MO) 36

ADVOCACY: FINDING A JEWISH VOICE FOR CHANGE 38
THE ROLE OF ADVOCACY IN JUDAISM 38
AFFECTING PUBLIC POLICY: REGISTERING JEWISH VALUES 39
Developing Relationships with Elected Officials 39
Helpful Tips for Meeting with Elected Officials 39
Inviting Elected Officials to Speak at the Synagogue 41
Cultivating Relations with Legislative Staff 41
Writing to Elected Officials 42
Letter Writing Tips 42
Establishing a Message Center 44
Process for Opening a Message Center During an Oneg Shabbat 44
Identifying Key People in the Congregation 46
Effective Advocacy – A Real Story 48
Using the Media 49
WHAT THE CONGREGATION AND RABBI CAN AND CAN'T DO 52
SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF THE SYNAGOGUE 54

CONNECTING TO THE WORLD: WORKING IN COALITIONS 55
MAJOR PREMISES OF COALITION BUILDING 55
COALITION TRAINING: THE KEYS TO SUCCESS 56
REQUIREMENTS FOR MAINTAINING A COALITION 56
WORKING WITH OTHER SYNAGOGUES AND JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS 57
# A Guide to Synagogue Social Action

## Working with the Reform Movement

**The Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism**
- Purpose and Function
- How It Can Facilitate Your Work
- The Newsletter: *Tzedek v’Shalom*
- Programs at the UAHC Biennial and UAHC Regional Biennials
- Awards

**The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism**
- Purpose and Function
- How It Can Facilitate Your Work
- Eisendrath Legislative Assistants
- RAC Programs
- RAC Resources

**Your UAHC Region**
- The Regional Social Action Chair
- Regional Directors
- Regional Programs and Training
- "Holy Way" Seminars

**NFTY Groups**

## Thoughts for Sustaining Yourself as You Pursue Social Justice

## Appendix A: Congregational Social Action Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitzvah Day</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially Responsible Investing</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Programs to Involve the Congregation</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Action Pledge Cards</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikkun Olam Calendar</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Bring About</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs that Use Unusually Effective Techniques</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask A Little, Get A Lot</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Holiday Hunger Drive and MAZON</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5K Walk/Run</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs Organized by Subject</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS Support Work</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Semitism</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/Jewish Relations</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Issues</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church-State Issues</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Justice/Employment</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- Working with the Reform Movement
- The Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism
- Purpose and Function
- How It Can Facilitate Your Work
- The Newsletter: *Tzedek v’Shalom*
- Programs at the UAHC Biennial and UAHC Regional Biennials
- Awards
- The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
- Purpose and Function
- How It Can Facilitate Your Work
- Eisendrath Legislative Assistants
- RAC Programs
- RAC Resources
- Your UAHC Region
- The Regional Social Action Chair
- Regional Directors
- Regional Programs and Training
- "Holy Way" Seminars
- NFTY Groups
- Thoughts for Sustaining Yourself as You Pursue Social Justice
- Appendix A: Congregational Social Action Programs
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Educational Assistance/Tutoring/Literacy Programs 79
Gay and Lesbian Rights 79
Health Care 80
Homeless Support and Housing 81
Hunger 82
Immigrants 82
Interfaith 83
Senior Citizens 83

Appendix B: RESOURCES 85

REACHING THE REFORM MOVEMENT 85
NATIONAL JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS 85
OTHER MULTI-ISSUE JEWISH AGENCIES 86
OTHER ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES 88
INTRODUCTION

THE RELIGIOUS PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
By Evely Laser Shlensky and Leonard Fein

Judaism offers a path to righteousness: with many signposts along the way, its teachings point toward conduct that will transform the world into a more Godly place. To attempt to shape our ordinary, wondrous, and sometimes degraded world into a place closer to the one we think God has in mind reflects our deepest religious aspirations. This social action guide is intended to assist synagogues and their members in turning aspirations into effective actions to repair the world.

But why the synagogue as a locus for social justice? In a sense, the ladder of Jacob’s dream is an apt metaphor for the synagogue: an interactive vehicle with all sorts of coming and going, connecting heavenly values with earthly needs. In our synagogues, those connections are made through prayer, study, and the pursuit of social justice, each leading to the other and then back again.

We know that for Judaism to be whole, to be holy, it requires each of its pillars: Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chasadim. Yet, our lives and our institutions become compartmentalized. After all, we live in a bureaucratized society; we work through committees, we keep hourly calendars, our meetings rely on agendas that frequently are not only itemized but also organized by the minute.

This fragmentation has been a particular problem for those of us devoted to the prong of Judaism that emphasizes the work of social justice. Why? Because much of the work of social justice looks like political advocacy, social services, or community organizing. One might miss the fact that social action is also religious action – an essential prong of Judaism – and that misperception can allow synagogue social activists to be marginalized.

With this guide we hope both to address the work of tikkun olam, and to offer ways of integrating that work into the total fabric of synagogue life. We begin the process of integration by turning to teachings of the late Rabbi Alexander Schindler (z”l), former President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, as he reflected on connections between ritual and ethical imperatives of Judaism:

‘Our central mission?’ What is that—tefillah, prayer? But the Talmud declared it forbidden to pray in a room without windows, for when we pray, we are to hear the world’s weeping; when we pray, we are to see the poor huddled at the Temple’s gates.

What then is our central mission? – limud, study? But Rabbi Akiba declared study to be the mission of Judaism only if it leads to action. We are to teach our children Torah, not just to know Torah, nor even to teach Torah, but above all to be Torah. Even as they energize us, prayer and study sensitize us to our role in the world.
As Rabbi David Saperstein said in his address at the 1999 UAHC Biennial:

The heart of our Reform Jewish understanding is that we do not have to choose between these commitments, that we are not confronted, not at all, with a set of either-or choices. The core of our insight is that serious Jewish study inevitably leads to the soup kitchen; that serious prayer, among other vital things, is a way of preparing to do battle with injustice; that social justice without being grounded in text, without a sense of God’s presence, is ephemeral and unsustainable. The heart of the argument is that there is no such thing as social action Judaism, that the thread of social justice is so authentically and intricately woven into the many-colored fabric we call Judaism that if you seek to pull that thread out, the entire fabric unravels, that the Judaism that results is distorted, is neutered, is rendered aimless.

Jewish history also is our text. For all its richness, it is a painful chronicle of human suffering – suffering not as the ancient experience of our long-ago ancestors, but of each new generation. For it is we who were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt; we, now, not only they, then. It is we who were expelled from Spain and wandered as strangers in strange lands, we who therefore know in our bones what it is to be a stranger. Thirty-six times in the Torah we are reminded that we were strangers in Egypt; alas, our history has provided even more reminders.

We often teach: “Judaism permits us to be rich; it forbids us to be comfortable.” Jewish texts and Jewish memory relentlessly insist that the Other has an enduring claim on our attention, our regard, even our love. That claim is entirely independent of our own situation of the moment, be we bathed in luxury or afflicted; it stems from the central theme of the Jewish narrative.

Consider: Once there lived a man named Abraham. Now this Abraham, when he learned that God was preparing to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, this same pious Abraham, chose to intervene. And the words of his intervention thunder through history, shape our collective memory:

Will You really sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? Perhaps there are fifty innocent within the city, will You really sweep it away? Will You not bear with the place because of the fifty innocent that are in its midst? Heaven forbid for You to do a thing like this, to deal death to the innocent along with the guilty, that it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty. Heaven forbid for You! The Judge of all the earth – will He not do what is just?

Genesis 18: 23-25, as translated by Everett Fox in The Schocken Bible Volume I: The Five Books of Moses

The first Jew offers us the first example of the first station on the way to justice – the readiness to speak truth to power. At our best, we have been doing that ever since, whether in arenas intellectual or political, by challenging prevailing wisdom, challenging prevailing habits, and calling ourselves and others to account. This is no contemporary fad; it is who we are.
Who, then, are we?

We are a people that believes that all human beings are made in the divine image of God, and as such are endowed with infinite value. The rabbis of the Mishnah asked: Why begin the story with one couple, with Adam and Eve? (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

Their answer teaches us: to demonstrate that no one and no people has priority; seniority; we are all descendants of the same ancestors. In the same vein, the rabbis taught: Adam was made from dust gathered from the four corners of the earth. (Jadak Shimoni 1:13) Hence we advocate for human rights, everywhere; hence we advocate for liberty, and equality, for all humanity.

We are a people that believes “The earth is the Eternal’s and the fullness thereof,” (Psalm 24:1) and from that simple sentence we understand that what we “have” is ours in trust, and that we must be faithful stewards of God’s world.

A Guide to Synagogue Social Action

INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (Conservative) taught: “To be a Jew is not simply to be, but to stand for.”

Rabbi Leo Baeck (Reform) wrote: “We are Jews for the sake of humanity.”

Professor Isadore Twersky (Orthodox) observed: “One cannot claim to be a God-intoxicated Jew without a passion for social justice.”

A contemporary Jewish political sensibility derives from several key principles. While there are many different formulations, the following was written by Michael Gottsegen, a Senior Research Fellow at CLAL:

First in priority is the principle of the respect that is due the human being who is created b’tzelem elohim, in the divine image, and, as such, is of inestimable worth. From this also follow the ancillary principles of justice and equity. In the political realm, this first principle gives us the criteria of procedural and substantive due process. Thus, of any proposed policy, it can be asked whether it is compatible with the equal dignity of all who stand to be affected by it.

Second in priority is the principle of the respect that is due to the entire non-human realm or creation because it is ma’aseh b’reishit, or “the work of the beginning” (the work of God) and as such possesses intrinsic dignity. From this principle, a Jewish ecological sensibility arises. In the political realm, this principle leads us to ask whether a given policy does gratuitous damage to that part of nature which would be drafted into service on behalf of human ends.

Third in priority is the principle of brit, or of covenant, which signifies the covenantal basis of human society and the norms of covenantal mutuality and covenantal reciprocity which should inform social and political life...The practical political upshot of this principle asks of any policy proposal whether it is compatible with the principle of social solidarity and oriented toward the common good.

Fourth in priority is the principle of rachamim, or mercy, which lays upon the individual and society the obligation to care for the weak and vulnerable. In the political realm, this principle leads to the following question of any policy proposal: Does it trample upon, or does it uphold, the weak and vulnerable?

So, then, we set out to place our religious principles in the service of society, as is our sacred obligation. There could be no more fitting locus for the pursuit of justice, mercy, and peace than the synagogue.
We are a people that believes that history moves from slavery towards freedom, that there is a goal to human affairs, and that the good life is a life lived in furtherance of that goal. The goal? To help complete the work of creation; to mend the world; to hasten the advent of a Messianic age.

THE SYNAGOGUE AS A SETTING FOR THE PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Our synagogues are houses of study, of prayer, and of assembly. We establish synagogues not as oases, but as sites for Jewish activity, places where we gather to learn, to express our religious aspirations, to perpetuate Judaism, and to be in community with other Jews. The fully realized Jewish life that synagogues seek to foster requires opportunities for congregants to study, to pray, and to pursue social justice.

One can, of course, do these things outside the walls of the synagogue. But it is in the synagogue, where 2000 years of Jewish history have been linked with the present and future; where the sense of Jewish “community” has been and continues to be forged; where study, prayer, and social action take on a special kavanah, expressing the community’s holy intention.

These days, synagogues plainly have a preeminent role with regard to the Jewish future. Jewish parents, young adults, and children look to the synagogue for guidance and for inspiration; they perceive the synagogue as the central institution of Jewish life. It is especially important as a place – and as a community – that provides a living expression of Judaism’s most critical values. If the synagogue neglects the pursuit of justice as a compelling priority for the activities it sponsors and encourages, Jews will conclude that the pursuit of justice is a peripheral rather than a central commitment of our people. If the Judaism our synagogues offer does not speak to the moral dilemmas of our people’s lives or the great moral issues of the world in which they dwell, then it will fail to capture the loyalty and imagination of significant numbers of Jews, especially over time.

And yet, from time to time, we are challenged to explain ourselves, to justify the synagogue as a locus for the work of social justice. Synagogue social activists may be asked: “What does social action have to do with the synagogue?”

Many people who engage in social action through their synagogues have had to deal with versions of this question. While the question may express the questioner’s objection to the action that is being contemplated or undertaken, it may also reflect the poorly understood linkage between justice and Judaism. Whatever prompts the question, it deserves a serious response.

Following the lead of Leviticus 19, which presents both ritual and ethical acts as necessary to the formation of a holy community, a number of contemporary thinkers have sought to integrate Jewish religious life and the social justice pursuit it requires. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin explained the linkage in spiritual terms:
Spirituality is about social action. In Judaism there is no dichotomy between the inner and the outer, between action and contemplation. Homelessness, the plight of children, and the loss of compassion and values in our society are spiritual issues. We connect spirituality with social action when ‘God’ becomes more than a cheerleader on the sidelines of our ethical striving. When we legitimately use ‘God’ in a sentence that describes our action, then social action becomes a spiritual path. I am working in this soup kitchen because feeding the hungry is a mitzvah ordained by God. I am involved in a Black-Jewish dialogue because God created one person at the dawn of creation, and therefore all people are endowed with immeasurable dignity. I am working against violence and pornography in the media because those things violate the image of God.

Reform Judaism, Fall 1995

Besides making more explicit the religious dimensions of what we do in the pursuit of social justice, there are ways of proceeding to develop a social action program that will help bring the congregation into a supportive role. Many are discussed in the section that deals with implementing effective social action programs. At this point, suffice it to say that successful social action programs are established over time. Trust and understanding take time. Early programs should focus on issues that unite the congregation. More difficult, perhaps controversial programs, can follow when the congregation has begun to understand the importance Judaism places on helping to shape a world that is just, merciful and peaceful.

REFORM JUDAISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY, A DISTINCTIVE COMMITMENT

The Reform Movement has created a religious culture in which social justice is a particularly integral component. Social justice in Judaism dates back to the Bible. Reform Judaism, growing as it did out of the "Age of Reason" with its religious stress on ethics, elevated still further the position of social justice in Jewish life. But how and when did that concern become a major institutional thrust of modern Reform Judaism in North America? Here, in broad strokes, is the modern history:

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Reform rabbinate increasingly spoke out on social issues. In the years following the upheavals of World War II, the Reform Movement experienced explosive growth and deep soul-searching as to its mission and program. A lay leader from Portland, Oregon, Roscoe Nelson, demanded to know why social justice seemed to be left to the rabbis and was not part of the active program of the UAHC. The recently elected UAHC President, Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath – a leader personally committed to the vision of a prophetic Judaism – responded to the challenge by organizing a joint UAHC-CCAR Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism (CSA) in 1951.
The CSA's first director was Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman; in 1953, Albert Vorspan, a visionary and eloquent young staffer from the National Jewish Community Relations Council (the Jewish community's umbrella organization, now called the Jewish Council for Public Affairs), joined the CSA staff.

The joint Commission was established to apply Jewish ethics to modern social and economic issues in North America and the world. In practice, that meant persuading congregations to establish social action committees and publishing program materials addressing crucial "issues of conscience" and pamphlets on urgent issues such as the Genocide Convention, civil rights, immigration policy, capital punishment, church-state separation, and the security of the state of Israel. Within a decade, most Reform synagogues had developed some form of a social action committee. These were developed not only in response to the urging of the CSA, but also because of the national controversy over civil rights and, in the 1960s, over Vietnam. Responding to the leadership of the CSA, both the UAHC and the CCAR adopted resolutions in support of federal civil rights legislation and against the war in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most bitter controversy accompanied a decision by the UAHC in 1959 to accept a gift from Mr. Kivie Kaplan of Boston (an honorary vice-chair of the UAHC and the president of the NAACP) in order to establish a Religious Action Center in Washington, DC. Many felt we had to bring our prophetic ideals to the place where America's decisions are made. Others argued that no one could, or should, claim to represent all Reform Jews to America's political leaders. Because of the intense controversy, implementation of the plan was postponed so delegates to the UAHC Biennial Convention in Washington, DC in 1961 could fully debate and resolve the issue. By an overwhelming margin, after a dramatic and emotional debate, the General Assembly voted to establish the Center. When the Center opened, its dedication was highlighted by a ceremony in the White House Rose Garden, at which President John F. Kennedy received an historic Torah from Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath. When then-Secretary of Labor (later Supreme Court Justice) Arthur J. Goldberg chided the President for not wearing a hat, the President smiled and replied, "Arthur, I'm a Reform Jew!" It should be noted that it was Justice Goldberg, then a member of the CSA, who is credited with the original suggestion to establish a Center in the capital of the United States. And it was Senator Howard Metzenbaum (later chair of the CSA) and his family who were the first signatories in the 1961 dedication book.

The Religious Action Center's founding director was Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch. He served until becoming the director of the World Union of Progressive Judaism in 1973. CSA director Al Vorspan served concurrently as director of the RAC from 1973–74, until he became vice-president of the UAHC. Since 1974, the RAC's director has been Rabbi David Saperstein, under whose leadership it has become the premier Jewish social justice voice in the U.S. capital. There, coalitions of decency have been marshaled for church-state separation, economic justice, nuclear disarmament, environmental integrity, aid to Israel, help for Soviet Jewry, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, and a host of other issues that have
seized the conscience of the Reform Jewish community. The RAC staff has trained thousands of young men and women for careers of rabbinical service and for work in the political arena, education, law, and social service.

The first special tenant in the Religious Action Center’s home was the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), the broad-based coalition that spearheaded the passage of landmark civil rights laws in the 1960s. Indeed, several of the major civil rights laws were drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center by such now historic figures as Joe Rauh (prominent civil rights attorney and member of the CSA), Clarence Mitchell (legendary lobbyist of the NAACP), and Arnold Aronson (an outstanding Jewish leader, who with Roy Wilkins and A. Philip Randolph, founded the LCCR).

Historically, ardent support for social action has emanated from the highest leadership of the Reform Movement. For Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath (president, UAHC, 1943-1973), commitment to social justice was a central feature of his tenure. Rabbi Alexander Schindler (president, UAHC, 1973-1996) championed its importance, calling it “applied Judaism.” He also elevated, Albert Vorspan (who was, and remained, director of the CSA) to be vice-president of the UAHC, giving social action an even higher profile within the Movement.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie (director of the CSA before he became president of the UAHC in 1996), described social justice as “the Reform Jewish crown jewel.” In an address to the UAHC Board of Trustees Executive Committee on February 2, 1998, he outlined a core of distinctively Reform religious principles, saying:

Yes, now more than ever we embrace ritual and prayer and ceremony; but like the prophets, we never forget that God is concerned about the everyday and that the blights of society take precedence over the mysteries of heaven. In these self-indulgent times, too many turn inward; but we know that there can be no Reform Judaism without moral indignation; and we know, too, that a Reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) has been no less fervent in its demand for social justice. Every platform, from the original 1885 Pittsburgh statement forward, places the mitzvah of tikkun olam at the heart of Reform Judaism. Many of the CCAR’s presidents and other prominent figures were leaders at the front lines of the great social struggles of 20th Century American life: Rabbis Steven S. Wise, Jacob Weinstein, Arthur Lelyveld, Roland Gittlesohn, and Ballour Brickner are names writ large on the social history of America and hundreds of other played and continue to play leadership roles on vital local and national issues.

Indeed, historically, the CCAR Committee on Justice and Peace was one of the most assertive and influential committees of the CCAR. Over the course of the 20th Century, it supported progressive economic justice causes such as trade
unions, the 8-hour day, child labor legislation, anti-trust legislation, social security and civil rights – and it did so while these were still radical ideas in the society as a whole and in the congregations as well. Rabbi Joseph Glaser, the CCAR’s long-time executive vice-president and a distinguished activist, saw the pursuit of social justice as central to a Jewish religious life, a tradition carried on by his successor, Rabbi Paul Menitoff. The Reform rabbinate then – and now – represent one of the most progressive and passionate voices of civic reform and economic justice in the continent.

While national social action leadership has been and remains essential, the devotion to and work towards tikkun olam by synagogues is no less important. Their understanding of the inextricable link between social justice and Judaism is demonstrated by the pervasiveness and inventiveness of synagogue social action and social service programs; the readiness of Reform rabbis, cantors, and educators to feature social action from the pulpit and lace it through synagogue educational programs; the many notable projects of Reform youth; and, the vital activism of the Women of Reform Judaism are but a few of the holy sparks.

The Reform Movement at all levels has given high priority to its mission of advancing social justice. It has put its budget and resources where its values and words are. It has risked much by taking stands on highly charged and polarized issues such as nuclear disarmament, gay and lesbian rights, affirmative action, and Middle East peace issues. But in doing so, the Reform Movement, its synagogues, and social action committees, have acted in their institutional capacities with full respect given to those individual members, rabbi leaders who may disagree with the Movement’s positions. Beyond the risk factor, bringing these matters to the fore has energized Reform membership, has heightened the sense that our congregations are directly relevant to our lives, has provided resources to rabbis and social activists in all congregations, has gained the respect of other faith groups, and has inspired informed debate and, often, cooperation among Jewish groups across the divides of denomination and politics.

THE UNIVERSALISM/PARTICULARISM QUERY

Social action programs that address particular Jewish concerns and needs (e.g., serving the Jewish elderly and advocating for Jews in other lands) are, at once, valuable to the populations they serve and greeted appreciatively by the congregation and its leadership. Programs that focus Jewish energies primarily on the needs of non-Jews (e.g., services to the destitute, international human rights, and tutoring) sometimes draw questions from the congregation.

An eloquent response to such questions was offered by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis:

Those who counsel Jews to distance themselves from the anguish of other peoples are ignorant of the Biblical, prophetic, rabbinic, and
Jewish philosophic traditions that mandate an active empathy towards the submerged communities of non-Jews. Those advisers do not appreciate the radical choice of the rabbinic tradition that selected the story of Hagar’s banishment and God’s protection of Ishmael, no favorite son of Israel, on the first day of the Jewish New Year. They have no ears for the rabbi’s reading of the Book of Jonah on the Day of Atonement in defense of Nineveh the enemies of the Jews. They do not understand the example of Abraham in defense of the non-Jewish citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Is active concern for the dispossessed a mark of Jewish assimilation? Is Jewish humanitarianism an ideal derivative from the Enlightenment philosophers? Jewish universalism derives its conviction from the Jewish prophet, ‘the first universal man in history’ (Heschel) who addresses all men and nations – Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites and Moabites, Israel and Judah. (Amos 1:3–2:16).


The Concept of “The Stranger” and Its Implications for Universalism

The most frequently repeated mitzvah in the Torah relates to the stranger, the resident alien. Our people is instructed no less than 36 times that we are to attend particularly to those who were not born into the tribe, but who reside in our land. We are to treat them as the home-born, even to love them. This concern is linked to our own memory of being oppressed strangers in a strange land; in our case, the land of Egypt. The ger, the stranger, thus joins the protected classes, along with others among us who are particularly vulnerable, especially widows and orphans.

Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen reasoned that with ancient Israel’s inclusion of the stranger among the protected classes, true religion began. Other ancient religions only had cared for their own. But the Israelites took the quantum leap toward a universalistic compassion.

Our History and Its Lessons

The concern for the “other” derives not from sacred texts alone, but also from the lessons of our history. Our experience has taught us that the attitude of a host population has often made the difference between our ability to thrive and our desperation. Furthermore, protecting the stranger, we have learned, is also a matter of self preservation; we have seen, all too often, that once hatred bares its ugly head against one group, all minorities are likely to suffer its consequences. Our challenge is to apply these historical lessons to contemporary situations, situations that call for us to demonstrate our own menschlichkeit, our willingness to live for values and people beyond the pale of self.

A Guide to Synagogue Social Action

Deuteronomy 10:19

INTRODUCTION

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19
Combining Particular and Universal Concerns in Your Social Action Program

Social action programs that thrive and enjoy widespread support within the congregation frequently are those that combine particular Jewish concerns with issues that affect the larger community. A congregation that knows it is serving the Jewish elderly and the needy both within its own membership and in the broader Jewish community is likely to demonstrate generosity of spirit when it is asked to respond to hunger and housing and health needs that embitter the lives of everyone in the community, but particularly the impoverished. By involving itself with universal and particular needs, the congregation is apt also to draw on the diverse interests of its membership, some wishing to serve primarily the Jewish community, others drawn to service beyond the community. Both interests are commendable, for the needs of both populations are undeniable.
BUILDING A SYNAGOGUE SOCIAL ACTION STRUCTURE

A STARTING POINT: ESTABLISHING A STRONG COMMITTEE

The following recommendations are aimed at synagogues that are just beginning a social action committee. While existing committees may pick up helpful hints, it is likely that they will have already worked through many of these issues.

Currently, there are two schools of thought on how to make social action an integral part of a congregation and not just the province of a few active individuals and the rabbi. The traditional school, and, by far, the most common in Reform congregations, is to establish a specific committee whose role is both to educate the congregation about Jewish responsibility for the pursuit of social justice and, at the same time, to develop mechanisms within the congregation to express that responsibility. (For information on the other school of thought, turn to "A New Model: The Social Action Non-Committee.")

That committee is called by various names in different congregations: Social Action, Religious Action, Tikku Olam, Social Justice, Community Concerns or Ethics. The committee is generally a committee of the synagogue board, in some cases with a social action trustee or social action vice-president on the board, sometimes with a budgetary allocation from the board. These two provisions – a seat on the board and a budget line – are significant statements that the board regards the work of social justice as an important function of the congregation, just as it does education and religious observance.

Procedures for Organizing a Committee

1. Appoint a strong chair to lead the committee. Ideally, the chair would be someone who is highly respected in the congregation and community, well informed and deeply interested in issues of social justice, capable of drawing others into the work, and able to provide effective leadership to a diverse committee. While in most cases, the chair will bring only some of these qualities, passion, hard work, and willingness to empower others often compensates for lack of experience. Select carefully, however, for the success of the program will depend in large part upon the caliber of the chairperson.

There are at least two routes for designation of a chairperson of the social action committee. One procedure is for the president of the congregation, in consultation with the rabbi, to appoint a chairperson(s) of the social action committee (or similarly named committee). Another procedure is to rely on a nominating committee to select the chairperson.

2. The chairperson, in consultation with the president and the rabbi, should then appoint or invite at least 10 people (think of it as a "mitzvah minyan"), a few less if the congregation is quite small, a significantly higher number if possible, to become part of the committee. These numbers will allow for the repre-
sentation of diverse interests in order to reach into many corners of congregational life. Some large congregations have found it best to set up special task forces or subcommittees, each of which is responsible for working on a specific issue or project. In such cases, the social action committee is charged with coordinating the activities of the sub-groups.

To recruit for committee membership by simply offering a blanket invitation to join may be less effective than identifying strategic individuals and contacting them to explain the goals of the committee which they, in particular, could help advance. Such an individualized approach could be accompanied by a wider letter of invitation to members of the congregation. The synagogue bulletin, while a valuable vehicle for informing the congregation of the committee’s work, has generally proven less effective in recruiting participants. It may also be helpful to ask the targeted individuals for additional names.

3. Towards the goal of integrating social justice into the entire fabric of synagogue life, where affiliates exist, official representatives should be selected for membership in the social action committee by the sisterhood (Women of Reform Judaism), men’s group, youth group, seniors’ group and other relevant constituencies (e.g., preschool parents, chavurot, and education committee). If those affiliated groups have their own social action component, (e.g. a critical issues chairperson for the sisterhood or social action chair for the temple youth group), the chair for that program would be a good choice. To touch all aspects of synagogue life, every synagogue committee should be encouraged to designate a representative to the social action committee.

4. A close relationship should be maintained between the committee and the synagogue board, as a supportive board can facilitate the program and, conversely, a board which has not been brought into the process can become an obstacle to the committee. Some board members should be invited to serve on the committee and, as mentioned above, it is useful for the chair of the committee to be appointed to the board. Some synagogues have a social action vice-president. One technique for enlisting the interest and support of the board is to arrange for board members to participate at least once a year in a project of the committee.

5. Regular meetings with synagogue professionals, for those synagogues so blessed, are quite beneficial and a good way to integrate social action into the heart of the congregation. Try to arrange, at least semi-annually, a meeting with the rabbi, cantor, educator, administrator, youth worker and any other relevant staff members to discuss how they can help strengthen the social justice programming throughout the synagogue.

6. The precise structure of the social action committee is a matter for each group to determine in light of its own circumstances. Suffice it to say that most people have limited time for volunteer activities and want to spend that time in ways that are useful and fulfilling. If the committee chair can plan meetings that lead to action in a timely way, people are likely to feel their time is well