



Readings for *Shabbat Tzedek* and other Social Justice Themed Worship

Opening Prayers and Readings

In the Jewish tradition, the separation between prayer and action is slight. We're mindful of the admonition in Isaiah where God says, "I don't want your fast and your sacrifice. I want you to deal your bread to the hungry, tear apart the chains of the oppressed." And Leviticus 19 tells us that to be holy in the way God is holy means to set aside a corner of our fields for the poor and homeless, to pay the laborer a timely and fair wage, and to remove stumbling blocks. These are religious activities just as much as prayer is. They are all woven together.

After participating in the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of this century's great religious figures and a close colleague of Martin Luther King, said, "It felt like my feet were praying." Prayer is not just the communication we have with God; it is also the work we do to make God's values real to the world. I think God listens to both kinds of prayer with equal joy.

-Rabbi David Saperstein

A rabbi and a soap-maker once went for a walk together. The soap-maker said to the rabbi: "What good is Judaism? After thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth, justice, and peace, after all the study of Torah, and all the fine ideals of the Prophets, look at all the trouble and misery in the world! If Judaism is so wonderful and true, why should all this be so?"

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was filthy with soot and grime. "Look at that child," said the rabbi. "You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, that child is still filthy. I wonder if soap is of any use at all."

The soap-maker protested and said, "But, Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used!" "Exactly!" cried the rabbi. "So it is with Judaism. It isn't effective unless it is applied in daily life and used!"

-Jewish Folktale

The great Rabbi Israel Salanter was missing from his synagogue on the Eve of Atonement, the Kol Nidre, the holiest night of the Jewish calendar. The elders of the synagogue went out searching for him and they found him. There are two versions: one, he was taking care of a wounded calf, the other, he was helping some sick child. And they said to him, "Rabbi, why aren't you in the synagogue?" He said, "Do you see what I'm doing?" "But, Rabbi, it's your duty to be in the synagogue praying." He said, "I am praying. Every act of kindness is a prayer—a prayer that walks, moves, breathes and lives."

-Rabbi William B. Silverman from *Moments of Transcendance: Inspirational Readings for Yom Kippur*, edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p15. www.JewishGrowth.org

The following is an excerpt from "Why We Went," a joint statement of the 17 Rabbis and lay leaders who were arrested in St. Augustine, Florida in protests against racial discrimination on June 19th, 1964:

We came to St. Augustine mainly because we could not stay away. We could not say no to Martin Luther King, whom we always respected and admired and whose loyal friends we hope we shall be in the days to come. We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means – a rare modern privilege – which has been the glory of the non-violent struggle for civil rights.

We came because we could not stand quietly by our brother's blood. We had done that too many times before. We have been vocal in our exhortation of others but the idleness of our hands too often revealed an inner silence; silence at a time when silence has become the unpardonable sin of our time. We came in the hope that the God of us all would accept our small involvement as partial atonement for the many things we wish we had done before and often. . .

We believe in man's ability to fulfill God's commands with God's help. We make no messianic estimate of man's power and certainly not of what we did here. But it has reaffirmed our faith in the significance of the deed. So we must confess in all humility that we did this as much in fulfillment of our faith and in response to inner need as in service to our Negro brothers. We came to stand with our brothers and in the process have learned more about ourselves and our God. In obeying Him, we become ourselves; in following His will we fulfill ourselves. . .

We do not underestimate what yet remains to be done, in the north as well as the south. In the battle against racism, we have participated here in only a skirmish. But the total effect of all such demonstrations has created a Revolution; and the conscience of the nation has been aroused as never before. The Civil Rights Bill will become law and much more progress will be attained because this national conscience has been touched in this and other places in the struggle.

Every person has been given free will. If I wish to turn to the good way and be righteous, I have the power to do so; and if I wish to turn to the evil way and be wicked, I am free to do that. Every person is capable of being righteous like Moses or wicked like Jeroboam, learned or ignorant, merciful or cruel, mean or generous. Nobody forces me, or decides for me, or pulls me in one direction or the other; but I myself, by my own volition, choose the path I wish.

-Based on Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:1 f.

"For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on marching with The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

If you always assume that
the person sitting next to you
is the moshi'ah
just waiting for some simple human kindness –
You will soon come to weigh your words
and watch your hands
and attend to your responsibilities –
And, if he so chooses
not to reveal himself in your time –
It will not matter.

-A Rebbi's Proverb (from the Yiddish)

We Cannot Merely Pray

We cannot merely pray to God to end war;
For the world was made in such a way
That we must find our own path of peace
Within ourselves and with our neighbor.

*We cannot merely pray to God to root out prejudice;
For we already have eyes
With which to see the good in all people
If we would only use them rightly.*

We cannot merely pray to God to end starvation;
For we already have the resources
With which to feed the entire world
If we would only use them wisely.

*We cannot merely pray to God to end despair;
For we already have the power
To clear away slums and give hope
If we would only use our power justly.*

We cannot merely pray to God to end disease;
For we already have great minds
With which to search out cures and healings
If we would only use them constructively.

*Therefore we pray instead
For strength, determination, and will power.
To do instead of merely pray
To become instead of merely to wish;
That our world may be safe,
And that our lives may be blessed.*

-Jack Riemer (Adapted)

Kabbalat Shabbat / Birkot Ha-Shachar

This is our truth: the One God calls forth being from nothingness, and makes all things one.
Blessed is the Holy One of Israel, in whose Oneness we are one.

But we are not yet one in fact: our human race is broken into fragments, and we wait to be redeemed into a lasting unity.
Blessed is the time to come, when all will at last be one.

While hatred rules the earth, redemption will not come.
Let the day be near when love will rule this world.

Until people return from their exile from each other, redemption will not come.
Let all exile be ended: our exile from one another, the exile of God's presence from our lives.

Until we restore the lawless to their true selves and rekindle in them the spark of God, redemption will not come.
Let us also search out the flaws in our own souls, and struggle to remove them.

While we care only for ourselves, redemption will not come.
Let our hearts be moved by the misery of others and dare what must be dared.

-The Task Force on Soviet Jewry of the URJ, 1979

One must repeat from time to time: The world was created for my sake. Never say: What do I care about this or that? Do your part to add something new, to bring forth something that is needed, and to leave the world a little better because you were here briefly.

-Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

Before Mi Chamocha

True, we are often too weak to stop injustices; but the least we can do is protest against them.

True, we are too poor to eliminate hunger; but in feeding one child, we protest against hunger.

True, we are too timid and powerless to take on all the guards of all the political prisons in the world; but in offering our solidarity to one prisoner, we denounce all the tormentors.

True, we are powerless against death; but as long as we help one man, one woman, one child live one hour longer in safety and dignity, we affirm a human's right to live.

-Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*

The first conference on religion and race took place in Egypt. The main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses said, "Thus saith the God of Israel, 'Let My people go.'" And Pharaoh answered, "Who is the Lord that I should heed His word? I will not let them go."

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began, but it is far from being complete.

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Mine was the opportunity to travel to Mississippi in 1964 at the peak of the civil rights struggle and to witness the human spirit striving to be free; I saw a police state — I saw signs — the battered faces beaten by white policemen. I saw the charred pieces of a cross — I saw the rubble of a church burned to the ground. I was filled with anger ... but I found something else too. I saw people longing to leave Egypt. We attended a freedom sing ... according to the usual custom, the group formed a circle and sang "We Shall Overcome." One of the verses I had never heard before: "God is on our side — deep in my heart, I do believe God is on our side...." The same God who was with us when we marched out of Egypt was with them in Mississippi and is with us now.

-Rabbi Jack Stern, Jr., *Westchester Reform Temple Siddur*

Wherever we live, it is probably Egypt. There is, there really is, a better place, a promised land. And there is, there really is, a promised time. And there is no way to get from here to there, from now to then, except by joining together and marching—and sometimes stumbling—through the wilderness, watching, this time, not for signs and wonders, but for an opportunity to act.

-Adapted from Michael Walzer, *Exodus Revolution*

Rabbi Judah said: At the sea, each tribe said to each other, "You go into the sea first!" As they stood there bickering, Nachshon ben Aminadav jumped into the water. Meanwhile, Moses was praying. God said to Moses, "My friend is drowning—and you pray!"

"What can I do?" Moses asked.

God responded, as it says in the Torah, "Speak to the people of Israel and tell them to go! Raise your staff...

-*Talmud Sotah 36b*

Before the Sh'ma

For Judaism gave mankind its first civil rights program. It was expressed in the Sh'ma, the watchword of the Jewish faith: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." As God is one, mankind is one, for each is created equally in the image of God.

-Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath, President Union for Reform Judaism, 1943-1973

During the Amidah

"Reform Jews are committed to social justice. Even as Reform Jews embrace ritual, prayer, and ceremony more than ever, we continue to see social justice as the jewel in the Reform Jewish crown. 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. A Reform synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms."

-Rabbi Eric Yoffie, speech to the URJ Executive Committee, February 1998

In a world where the weak were tormented by oppressors, our Torah taught us to love the poor and the stranger.

A heritage of justice has come down to us.

Where the sword was sovereign, we were commanded to seek peace and pursue it.

A heritage of peace has come down to us.

All this now is ours. Ours the teaching, ours the task, to make the heritage live.

For it is our life, and the length of our days!

-Gates of Prayer p. 230

I am a Jew because
the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because
the faith of Israel requires all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because
in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because
at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because
the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because
Israel's promise is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because
for Israel, the world is not completed; we are completing it.

I am a Jew because
for Israel, humanity is not created; we are creating it.

I am a Jew because
Israel places humanity and its unity
above the nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because, above humanity, image of the divine Unity,
Israel places the unity which is divine.

- Edmond Fleg, *Mishkan Tefilah*, p.203

Closing Prayers and Readings

(If an interfaith service):

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that you may live deep within your heart.
May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.
May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And to turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.
Amen.

- Franciscan Benediction

Don't merely expect to find or to believe that life is worthwhile; make it worthwhile. Don't merely see life whole; make it whole.

Not knowing which should come first, to improve one's self or to improve the world, we end up doing neither.

Actually, the only way to improve the world is by improving one's self, and the only way to improve one's self is by improving the world.

-Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan

Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to devise a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we know:

That Man is here for the sake of other Men...Above all, for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy.

Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.

-Albert Einstein, from *Moments of Transcendance: Inspirational Readings for Yom Kippur*, edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p 202. www.JewishGrowth.org