



Pursuing Global Justice  
Through Grassroots Change

## Leading for Change: Jewish Global Responsibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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May 21, 2009

Of all the hundreds of speeches I've had the opportunity to give, today's is especially meaningful. My mother, Marjorie Wyler, was, for many years, the director of public relations, radio and television at the seminary, but that is its own story. Me, I literally grew up here.

"Take your daughter to work day" didn't exist in the 1940s and 50s. But my mother was ahead of her time. In these halls, as a pre-teen, I was quizzed on what I was learning by Chancellor Finkelstein and Professor Seymour Siegel, and I spent time with the women who conducted interfaith and community outreach, produced eternal light programs, wrote speeches and made this institution run.

What did I do? I helped edit press releases, I absorbed Jewish learning, and I got to meet Chief Justice Earl Warren when he was the seminary honoree. Pretty heady stuff for a young girl who was interested in social justice and in how to change the world. I actually had the opportunity to know Rabbi Heschel. I can only compare this to a young child interested in music being able to take violin lessons from Yitzak Pearlman.

When I came to Chancellor Eisen's magnificent installation ceremony, heard the first sounds of the drum processional and listened to the speakers, I began to cry. I thought about how moved my mother would have been by these powerful reminders that JTS is a center for Jewish learning and thought; that it is aware of its place in Harlem, in the U.S. and in the world; that it has often assumed, as one of its responsibilities, demonstrating to the world that Judaism speaks powerfully to our highest obligation to make a difference.

Speaking at a JTS graduation is not only a great honor for me, it is also quite intimidating. Any Jewish wisdom that I culled from my family and my surroundings [including this institution], anything I have learned from the wonderful Jewish educators and rabbis who are part of the AJWS staff and extended family, any text they have urged me to include in my speeches, are all known to all of you -- in at least two languages -- with more analytic commentary than I can ever hope to absorb.

So, just as I would not bring a corned beef sandwich to Mendy's, I will not try to awe you with commentary. Instead, I will share what I've learned from my work in New York and as president of American Jewish World Service, from working in our own urban communities and from traveling to many of the world's poorest countries.

I will challenge you to think about why you -- the newest of the new generation of Jewish leaders -- have an obligation to those you will work with to teach them what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century; to help them understand why work for greater equity, for social justice and for global citizenship are part of our bargain with God.

You graduate today, and some of you will go on to higher education, some to chaplaincies, congregations and pulpits, others to community organizations and seminaries. You will be teaching text and context, speaking words of faith and belief, making sacred music and building new Jewish community. You will be in positions where you can work together with your communities to build a spiritual, activist, justice-oriented Judaism that will command the attention of Jews and of others, and that will set an example for the world.

We are children of the exodus. This must be the framework for how we understand ourselves and how we act in the world. We must believe in the capacity of all people to move through their narrow passages toward their own visions of freedom as *we* were enabled to do. And we must understand that we have a responsibility to help make this happen, that this is our work.

Today's world is broken -- it is a world of extreme poverty and obscene wealth, of a growing and dangerous inequality. Today the 500 richest people in the world earn more than the 416 million poorest. And this world is further threatened by our current global recession.

Yes, there are people in our own communities who have suffered severe losses and have few financial resources left, and we must help them put their lives back together. There are many more people in our communities who have seen their investment portfolios shrink, but that has not translated into significant changes in their day-to-day lives. For many of the world's poorest, however, shrinkage in their portfolio means going from one meal a day to none. It is important that we urge our community, that we urge ourselves, not to abandon our responsibility to these people.

Money is a commodity of critical importance. When we have less of it individually or organizationally it hurts; it limits our options and it can, too easily, damage our sense of self. But in these hard times we must push ourselves to remember that money is not everything. It is a tool, and it does not or should not define who we are. Our values and our integrity do define who we are, and they cannot be allowed to disintegrate because our financial wherewithal has shrunk.

This is, rather, a time to remember what is most important to us; a time to be aware of those who have so little that their survival hangs in the balance; a time to challenge ourselves to use the resources we do have -- of money, yes, but also of energy, time, leadership and organizing skill -- to make a difference.

Think for a minute of your grandparents or great-grandparents. I am certain the vast majority of them could not have imagined the level of affluence and influence the American Jewish community has today. If they were here, wouldn't they ask us what we were doing with this significant wealth and power? Similarly, we must ask ourselves, "What do we want to tell our children and grandchildren when they ask how we used our resources to make a difference in hard times?"

The worst consequences of the economic crisis are not felt in the boardrooms or seen in our bank accounts. They are seen in the eyes of the children dying of hunger in Democratic Republic of Congo, and the children neglected in our own communities, the children here or there unable to get health care because a parent has lost a job or no transport is available or a hospital is without staff or medicine.

The children of the United States and the children of the world need our commitment. In our own country -- still, by far, the richest country in the world, where nevertheless more than 12 million children lived in poverty last year -- the assumption is that 17 million will have fallen below that line by the end of this year. And the pervasive problems of rising food costs, loss of jobs, disappearance of affordable

housing, poor schooling and lack of access to health care must be addressed if we are not to lose more of this generation to inequity and injustice.

Globally, children of every race and nationality have the same problems, but they are of an almost unimaginably larger magnitude. There are 27,000 children a day -- yes 27,000 children a day -- who lose their lives to poverty and illness. One sixth of the world is still caught in the trap of an abject poverty which is both a cause and an effect of hunger and disease. People live on less than \$1 a day, have no economic opportunity, go to bed hungry every night, become severely ill, suffer physical isolation, environmental degradation and gender-based violence, and die young.

There is no easy way to say this and no easy way to hear it. But what is required of all of us, as Jews, as current and future Jewish leaders, is that we do hear it. That we hear it, and that we not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by it.

That is perhaps the most important message: we cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed.

We are of a faith that reminds us daily of our responsibility, of our need to act, of our need to help save some or any one of these children. We are taught that to save one life is to save the world.

We must do this because we are Jews and because we are creatures of God, a part of global humanity. We must address the needs of all people because we are the boundary crossers, told to help the other and the stranger, directed not to stand idly by. We must do this because we have a voice while others may not. We must do this, as one wise 10-year-old in a day school classroom said to me a few years ago, "We must do it because we can!"

He was right. For the first time, the world has the knowledge, the resources and the capacity to move people out of poverty, to effect change in every corner of the globe. We can act individually, paying attention to what we eat, where we buy our coffee and our clothes, how we limit our impact on the environment.

We can act collectively, at the governmental level, to ensure that the industrialized nations provide full forgiveness on debt owed by developing countries -- surely a Jewish thing to do. We can dismantle trade agreements that allow developed world countries and multi-national corporations to become wealthier at the expense of the world's poor. And for the price of two months of war in Iraq each year, we could put all children in school, eliminate avoidable infant death, wipe out malaria and cut global poverty in half by 2015.

And make no mistake about it, significant progress has already been made. Approved debt relief has allowed at least 4 million more Ugandan children to go to school and built tens of thousands of new classrooms in Tanzania. In the last five years, tens of millions of children have been immunized.

We can continue and expand these efforts. And because we can, we must. Previously, as a people, we were held together by our common enemies -- by anti-semitism, by others' hostility to Israel and by our remembrance of the holocaust. In the future we must also be held together by our commitment to our common values -- by our recognition of our obligation not just to teach Torah but to live it, by our commitment to pursue justice.

What is required, first, is that we embrace those with whom we do not share a faith or a neighborhood, a country, a language, or a political structure. We must bend our minds and our voices, our energies and our material resources to help those most in need, both at home and abroad. They are surely *b'tzelem elohim* -- people made in the image of god.

Then we must, each of us, find a way to work for greater justice, local and global, picking the organizations and the areas of work that mean the most to us, deciding how we can help, then pushing ourselves to do more and determining how to involve others in our efforts.

Those of you who graduate today are the leaders and organizers of our 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish community. Make no mistake, I know it has not been easy to get to this point. I know there have been many challenges in seminary, and I know that job futures and movement futures are not as clear as any of us might wish.

Still, you are each soon to occupy a special place in our communities. You will have the power to teach, to model, to mobilize, to advocate, to organize and to convince others that the challenges are real but that together we can tackle them successfully. We need you to do this work.

I used to say that we need new prophets. But I realized that because the prophets were so often reviled and treated as outcasts, they did not bring about nearly enough change in their lifetimes. We don't have that luxury. Three hundred children have died since I began speaking to you a few minutes ago. So I've revised my call. We don't need prophets. We need leaders, people who can combine prophetic and powerful words with decisive action, people who can show the way by ideas and example.

In the brilliant letter he wrote from a St. Augustine, Florida jail, Dr. Eugene Borowitz -- an activist who made a difference, a theologian fully deserving of all the honors he has received including that being bestowed today -- wrote of his involvement in the civil rights protest that landed him behind bars: "We came because we know that, second only to silence, the greatest danger to man is loss of faith in man's capacity to act." I wish you, I wish all of us, that we may own that idea, that we may commit ourselves to not only speaking but acting for justice.

Note that downstairs, on the walls of the *beit midrash*, is the powerful observation of Rabbi Akiba: "Study is great for it leads to action". You are at the end of your time of formal learning here at JTS; now it is time for action.

Let's be clear: taking action on behalf of social justice and exerting such leadership will not always be easy. There will be those in your communities who will not care for your message. You will sometimes be unpopular. You will have to struggle to stay true to your own compass while navigating choppy political waters. You will need friends and allies, but they exist.

Some of them will be the friends you take with you from your time here, those on either side of you who are committed to this work. Others will be in your new homes and places of work, people who have been organizing themselves, people who know what they want to do, people who have been waiting for a leader to help them make a difference. Together you will be able to do more than any one of you can alone.

This is a time when we need to determine what we stand for, who we really are. We must be able to help people of all ages answer the question: "Why be Jewish?" To resonate, the answer must be more than tribal identity.

You must encourage people to acknowledge that our world is broken and that being Jewish in the world today means working to fix it. Help them embrace what Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain calls "the ethic of responsibility": own the problems, stay mindful to the realities that some would prefer to ignore and begin to act for change. Commit to an active Judaism that in helping to heal the world will fulfill its own best purposes and so strengthen itself.

Our future as Jews depends on our capacity to do this work, to build a community of people who think and act globally, who stand against injustice and for greater equality, who share a vision that a just society is the birthright of all our children.

So move outside your comfort zones -- literally and figuratively. Think innovatively. Inspire those you'll lead to take the freedom we won as a people and use it to enhance the freedom of others. Make us a Jewish community built on moral principle, dedicated to the pursuit of justice.

Keep in mind words recently shared with me by Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda, the founder of one of AJWS's grassroots partner organizations, "We must be not just petitioners but stakeholders. We must assume the leadership positions from which we can motivate others to make a difference for all."

To me, this Zimbabwean matriarch was bringing each and every one of us to task. It is **we** who must not stand idly by, who must be stakeholders in our communities, and help others to be stakeholders as well. In a time of intense demand, where competition for peoples' attention and resources is so great, the future of the world -- and to us, of Judaism -- depends on leaders, like you, who are equipped to take us there.

And that is what I wish for all of you and for all of us. Act with integrity, allow time for learning and reflection, and invest in children -- our own and all of those in the world who so desperately need our help. The child in a homeless shelter in New York, or the child holding an empty bowl in the slums of New Delhi might one day cure Parkinson's disease or stop global warming.

Be bold in your work, determined in your vision, committed to a higher moral standard. Share with each other the work you are doing and the work you will do. Keep making change, keep challenging yourselves and strive to live your faith and your values.

And don't do it alone. Realize that the pursuit of justice in the world requires collaboration. Act in partnership to do the work that most ennobles us as a people, enriches our own lives and allows us to encounter the world for the benefit of humanity.

Our text teaches that the answers are not in heaven and not beyond the sea. In the 21st century, it is within our reach to change the world. We are ready for you to lead us.

Shalom and *b'hatz la'cha!*