



8 Nights, 8 Jewish Values:

Reflections for Chanukah on the Jewish obligation to build a better world

BY SARAH HURWITZ



I've spent my career largely in public service, most recently as head speechwriter for First Lady Michelle Obama. And having grown up with little Jewish background, for most of my life, if you had asked me what Judaism meant to me, I would have said something like, “working for social justice is how I do Judaism.” But working for social justice is also how one does Christianity, Islam, secular humanism, and many other belief systems.

After doing some Jewish learning as an adult—an experience so transformative that I decided to write a book about it—I now understand that while Judaism doesn't have a monopoly on social justice, there is a particular Jewish approach to social justice, one that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) embodies every day with its work around the world. And as we approach the eight nights of Chanukah, I'd like to highlight eight Jewish social justice values:

TIKKUN OLAM: *Tikkun olam* has become a catchphrase for social justice in contemporary Jewish life—and for good reason. Our emphasis on repairing the world speaks to something centrally Jewish: our belief in human responsibility. Jewish worship isn't just about contemplation or petition, it's about action. We don't just sit around believing in God, or asking God for things and having faith that it will all work out for the best. We are empowered and expected to act.

TZEDAKAH: We proudly point out that *tzedakah* means “justice,” not “charity,” but why does that distinction matter? Charity is given out of the kindness of our hearts, when we feel moved to do so. *Tzedakah* is considered mandatory under Jewish law. We're supposed to give it whether we feel like it or not. It's like ensuring fair procedures in a courtroom—we shouldn't just do so when we're feeling particularly generous, but all the time, because otherwise the system doesn't work. Ditto for *tzedakah*. In Jewish thinking, society simply doesn't work when we neglect those in need.

CHESED: Translated as “loving-kindness,” *chesed* isn't just an emotion—it's a kind of action we take to help those who are physically or emotionally in need. And it generally involves more than simply writing a check or sending flowers. It's often about showing up for people when they're suffering and offering what chaplains refer to as “the ministry of presence.” When others are at their most vulnerable—when they're sick, in mourning, or otherwise struggling—Judaism doesn't tell us, “Awkwardly avoid them because they make you uncomfortable, and maybe just send an email.” We're told, “Show up for them, and do whatever you can to make them feel loved.”

THE INFINITE WORTH OF EACH HUMAN LIFE: One who destroys a life, Jewish tradition tells us, is considered to have destroyed the entire world; one who saves a life has saved the entire world. A person is not a statistic, or a unit of GDP, but a boundlessly precious being who has an entire universe of potential. This may seem obvious, but how many of us have walked right by a homeless person on the street who asked for our help? If that person had been a celebrity, would we have stopped? If we had seen a laptop lying on the street, would we have stopped?

EQUALITY: Ancient Rabbis understood the Torah's assertion that all humans descended from Adam to mean that we are all created equal. No one can ever say “My ancestor is greater than yours,” because we all have the same ancestor. This isn't a scientific statement, it's a moral one: We are all part of the same human family, and none of us is more or less important than anyone else.

UNIQUENESS: While human beings often manufacture identical products, according to Jewish tradition, God created each human being to be entirely unique. Whether or not you buy the theology here, you can appreciate the sentiment: There has never been anyone else like us and there never will be, and we each have a unique contribution to make to the world.

BEING THOUGHTFUL ABOUT THE WORDS WE SPEAK: There is a great deal of Jewish commentary on speech—about gossip, shaming, lying, and more—and a verse from the biblical book of Proverbs warns, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” This may seem hyperbolic, until you consider this quote from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “The Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda.”

CARING FOR THE STRANGER: Like *tikkun olam*, we take for granted that “loving the stranger” is a core Jewish value—but its origins are quite radical. In the Torah, God repeatedly tells the Israelites to care for the stranger “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” But God seems to be getting way ahead of Godself, addressing a problem the Israelites did not face. The Israelites were a powerless group of former slaves under constant attack from rival peoples—they *were* the strangers of the ancient world. But the Torah seems to anticipate a time when the Israelites would be well-established enough to have a say in how the strangers among them would be treated. And again and again, it tells us: No matter how powerful or secure you may one day become, your fundamental moral orientation must always be in the direction of the outsider, for in some essential and eternal way, the plight of the stranger was, and always will be, your own.

The word Chanukah means “rededication,” and as we celebrate this festival of lights, may we rededicate ourselves to these Jewish values—both in our own lives and by supporting AJWS’s social justice work across the globe.

A note on the author

After years as a political speechwriter—serving as head speechwriter for First Lady Michelle Obama, a senior speechwriter for President Barack Obama, and chief speechwriter for Hillary Clinton on her 2008 presidential campaign—Sarah Hurwitz decided to apply her communication skills to writing a book...about Judaism. And no one is more surprised than she is. Hurwitz was the quintessential lapsed Jew—until, at age 36, on a whim, she attended an introduction to Judaism class and was blown away by what she found: beautiful holidays and rituals, high ethical standards, conceptions of God beyond the judgy bearded man in the sky—none of which she had learned in Hebrew school or during the two synagogue services she grudgingly attended each year. That class led to a years-long deep dive into Jewish study, and in her entertaining and accessible book, Hurwitz shares what she learned and shows us why Judaism matters and how it can transform our lives: [*Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life—in Judaism \(After Finally Choosing to Look There\)*](#).

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION *This essay is part of American Jewish World Service’s series of social justice resources for the Jewish holidays. Written by prominent leaders, this series draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. To subscribe to our social justice resources, please visit www.ajws.org/signup.*

