



## New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies

The Representative Organisation of NSW Jewry

ועד הקהילה היהודית בנסיון.

Suite 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor 146 Darlinghurst Road  
Darlinghurst NSW 2010 Australia  
Telephone (02) 9360 1600  
Facsimile (02) 9331 4712  
E-Mail [mail@nswjbd.com](mailto:mail@nswjbd.com)  
President: David D. Knoll  
CEO: Vic Alhadeff

### "DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HEBREW AND GREEK THINKING"

---

In this paper I want to draw a distinction between two different early notions of justice in our Western heritage.

Hebraism and Hellenism are the main source waters which fed the Western cultural stream, and how we understand the human relationship with God is expressed through out cultural lens.

It is my charge that Hellenism never fully sorted out what types of goodness, or god-like-ness, of the “ought-to-be”, constituted justice. In early Greek thinking, justice necessarily included balance and harmony, whether extrapolated from the attributes of the mystical Themis, or postulated as a “*metaphysical cosmological principle regulating the operation of the forces of nature on the elements of the universe, securing balance and harmony above all.*”<sup>1</sup>

Pythagoras is accredited with developing the idea of justice as equality. The idea that justice was as capable of formal proof as a mathematical equation

---

<sup>1</sup> Julius Stone, Human Law and Human Justice (Maitland, 1968) 11.

challenged the finest Greek thinkers to explain the unpredictability of human nature. There was no room for a single, indivisible divine entity in Pythagorean thinking.

It was then left to Plato to make the notion of justice into an ethical principle for human conduct, and finally to Aristotle to subject the idea of justice to sober, systematic analysis.

The idea of justice as moderation and avoidance of extremism also brought with it a conscious understanding of the idea that in a just, human society, wealth and honours are distributed to the citizens of the community, each to receive what they deserve. As to what each deserved, that was to be decided by one universal rational law, with which things in their nature accorded. This idea of nature was an idea that readmitted the idea of divinity to the Greek debate, but only amorphously.

The Greek philosophers struggled with the idea that rational outcomes might be less, or indeed more, than a natural phenomenon. Sophocles' play: "Antigone" epitomises this struggle. The Sophists began to distinguish law from nature, and especially from human nature.

The following formulation by Antiphon shows the "new" contrast between man-made law and natural law.

*“A man therefore can best conduct himself in harmony with justice, if when in the company of witnesses he upholds the laws of the city; and when alone without witnesses he upholds the edicts of nature. For the edicts of the laws are imposed artificially, but those of nature are compulsory. And the edicts of the laws are arrived at by consent, not by natural growth, whereas those of nature are not a matter of consent.”*

By making man’s nature the measure, not only is justice a value to be discovered by man, and enacted so as to be obeyed, it becomes a value conferred by man, man being the measure of all things.

Plato elevated nature from the sphere of contingent discoverable facts to a criterion against which man-made laws might be measured. From Plato we derive the concept that there is an Idea from which the criteria must flow. And Aristotle’s “Nichomachean Ethics” described the distinction as one between natural and conventional justice. It is through these thinkers that the theory of natural law thus began to wend its way into Western thinking.

The Jewish mind however did not see the quest for justice as one of identifying an Idea. No lofty set of criteria had to be conceived and argued about in philosophical terms.

The Jewish concept of justice was firmly grounded in human conduct. The Torah, given by God to the Jewish people at Sinai, continues to be revealed, but by the means of human interpretation. It is to be used to guide daily life, and must not be seen as a philosophical construct.

At first blush this seems odd. A devout, monotheistic people, see God-given law as a daily reality, while the God-rejecting Hellenists look to an abstract criterion against which human laws are to be measured.

This apparent paradox is best dispelled in that most Jewish of ways, by telling a story often attributed to the late Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Rabbi Yechezkel Landau served as the rabbi of Prague from 1754 to 1793. A group of scholars sought to contest his rabbinic authority and they presented him with a series of questions for him to interpret what the Torah prescribed. These fictitious "cases" were carefully constructed to be as complex and as misleading as possible, so as to ensnare the rabbi in their logical traps and embarrass him with an incorrect ruling.

Rabbi Yechezkel succeeded in resolving all the questions correctly -- all, that is, but one. Immediately his detractors pounced on him, showing how his verdict contradicts a certain principle of Torah law.

Said Rabbi Yechezkel: "I am certain that this case is not actually relevant, and that you have invented it in order to embarrass me!"

"How do I know?" the rabbi continued. "Because I know that G-d's Torah is true. You see, whenever a human being is called upon to decide a matter of Torah law, we are faced with a paradox: how can the human mind possibly determine what is G-d's will? The laws of Torah are the wisdom and will of G-d and the most basic laws of reality, preceding and superseding even the laws of nature. How is it that the finite and error-prone intellect is authorized to decide such Divine absolutes?"

"But the Torah itself instructs that 'the Torah is not in heaven' but has been given to man to study and comprehend; and that whenever a question or issue of Torah law is raised, it is the human being, employing his finite knowledge and judgment, who must render a ruling. In other words, when a person puts aside all considerations of self and totally surrenders his mind to serve the Torah, G-d *guarantees* that the result would be utterly consistent with His will.

"However," concluded Rabbi Yechezkel, "this 'guarantee' only applies to actual events, when a rabbi is called upon to determine what it is that G-d desires to be done under a given set of circumstances; but not if his

personal honour is the only issue at hand. Had you presented me with a relevant question, I know that I would not have erred, since I approached the matter with no interest or motive other than to serve to will of G-d. But since your case was merely a hypothetical question designed to mislead me, my mind was just like every other mind, great and small alike -- imperfect and manipulable."

Far from being an arrogant stand designed to entrench his authority, Rabbi Yechezkel was emphasising that neither law nor justice could be tested in the abstract. The law had to work for the very humankind to whom God gave the law.

So, whereas the Greeks offered the world "law according to justice", the Jews offered the world "justice according to law."

Both justice and law came from God. But Jewish energies were not channelled into metaphysical and cosmological speculation. Law and justice did not need to be reconciled. Just as the Jewish people were and are guided by the principle of *tikkun olam*, so too the act of learned human beings interpreting Torah was harnessed to the idea of perfecting the world.

To perfect a human world, human compassion was an essential ingredient. Thus Hillel teaches that “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary.”

Jewish ethics, then set out the following foundation principle:

*Al sh'loshah d'varim haolam omed:  
Al haTorah, v'al ha-avodah, v'al g'milut chasadim.*

**The world depends on three things:  
on Torah, on worship and on loving deeds.**

**- Pirkei Avot 1:2**

The three pillars are intertwined, one wrapped around the next. The study of Torah leads from the classroom to the streets, the shelters, and the public square.

We are commended to benefit humankind, and here too the Jews differed from the Greeks. Hellenism focussed on rights and obligations for citizens, and those who were not citizens simply served those who were. The Jewish concept of Justice benefits every person. The most oft repeated commandment is to not oppress the stranger in your midst. It appears 36 times in the Torah. (The stranger however also must follow the law.)

We believe that all humans are created in the divine image. We believe that the messianic age is an age of the work of our own hands. It will not come

suddenly and mystically, but slowly, step-by-step, through caring people just like you and me, inexorably making the world a better place.

We believe that justice is an obligation, not an opportunity.

Whoever is able to protest, the Talmud warns us, against the transgressions of the world and does not, is liable for the transgressions of the world. The linkage between peace and justice is embodied in the warning that the sword enters the world because of justice delayed, and justice denied.

Jewish theology teaches us that when God created the universe, God left one part of the creation undone. That small part left undone was the creation of social justice. And then God gave to us that given to nothing else in creation, to each and every one of you, the ability to understand and choose between wrong and right, the blessing and the curse, life and death. God can tell us what we should do and why, but ultimately if God's Word is to live on Earth, it will be because of the choices you make.

At the core of the Jewish faith is the idea of covenant. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is contractual. Far too often in Western parlance there is reference to the Jews as the “chosen people”. That is why Rabbi Brian Fox, for many years the Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel Woollahra, used to explain that the Jews are not so much the chosen people but the choosing people. We are commanded to choose justice. We are not



chosen, because justice has yet to be achieved. It has to be vigorously pursued. We entered voluntarily into a covenant with God to continue the act of creation; to make this world every day a better place than it was before.

It was of course Moses who was the messenger of the covenant.

Moses became the leader of the Jewish people not because he had a passion for Jewish survival. He had that in spades. Moses became the leader of the Jewish people because he understood that the Jew must be committed to justice and dignity for every human being.

We, as Jews, are commanded to keep choosing, between what we do and what we do not do, what we eat or do not eat, how we pray or indeed sometimes do not pray. Each act must be an active choice, targeted to making this world, the world of here and now, a better place for all of us. To abstain from active choice is to abstain from the act of creation.

Making choices is an act of freedom, something the Jewish people prize most highly. But with freedom comes responsibility. And responsibility is both individual and collective; necessarily based on responsibilities covenanted with God.

The Jewish God is not however an exclusive God. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is not designed as the only path to salvation or indeed

the only path to acts of goodness. As a choosing people we invite others to make good choices too.

Judaism is unique among monotheisms because what we say is: “chassidi umot olam yaysh lahem chelek el’olam haba” which means: “you don’t have to be Jewish to get to heaven”.

Therefore choose life, that you and your children after you might live. In allowing us to be partners with God, in completing creation, God ennobled humanity, raised us above mere biological existence, as Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard had once pointed out, and gave to our lives destiny, meaning, and purpose. In other words, the work of social justice is God's work.

The Hebrew term for peace, "shalom," does not mean "Patre," or "pax," the absence of strife. It comes from the root "Neve Shalem," to make whole.

There cannot be peace or justice without that kind of healing and wholeness, that every human being in every society is not only entitled to, but is capable of achieving.

The words of Moses, whom the sages call Moshe Rabbeinu, or “Moses our teacher,” are instructive to all of us. Our Torah is our guidebook. Each year we read the text again, and each year it appears in a new light. Even though

we have heard the stories before, they meet us where we are this year. Just as a parent lovingly guides a child towards the correct path, so too does our Holy text teach us. May we all be able to glean from its words the messages that will help us live our lives as better people and build a more just society. In Hebrew, when we pray for good human behaviour we say: Ken yehi ratzon, may it be your will.

You see the Jewish idea is that there is no nomos and logos; there is not an Idea against which human directives are measured for their justness. There is just one divine obligation upon each of us. It is the obligation to make this world a better place for us having contributed to it.

David D. Knoll

President

NSW Jewish Board of Deputies