

FROM CHARITY TO FAITH-BASED RESISTANCE

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*Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.*

(Isaiah 1:17)

Sacredness of Life

For a biblical mind, this world is not ours. We didn't create it. There is a Creator to whom we owe anything that we have: our properties, our money, our knowledge, and even our lives. In the words of my favorite theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel: "I have not brought my being into being. Nor was I thrown into being. My being is obeying the saying 'Let there be!' ... To be is to obey the commandment of creation."¹ We exist not as a result of our will to exist. In the beginning there is not neutral being and then values. We were born in value. We are endowed with meaning. Philosophically it means that the "ought" precedes the "is". Therefore living is about obedience and commitment to the order of the Creator.

One of the foundational commitment a biblical person must accept from the Creator is the sanctity of human life. Man and woman are made "in the image of God". Each person is exceedingly precious and intrinsically sacred. This sacredness is dogmatic and need not be self-evident, for what is self-evident is precarious to imperfect human reasoning. Voltaire the great humanist remarked: "It is a serious question among them whether the Africans are descended from monkeys or whether the monkeys come from them. Our wise men have said that man was created in the image of God. Now here is a lovely image of the Divine Maker: a flat and black nose with little or hardly any intelligence." (Les Lettres d'Amabed (1769), Septième Lettre d'Amabed)

Even if human reason cannot grasp it, the biblical minds are stubborn to defend that all human lives are equally sacred and should be equally respected and protected. This is one of several beliefs we are dogmatist about:

¹ Heschel, A. J. 1965. *Who is Man?*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- We believe the value of each individual is greater than the value of the entire society composed of those individuals.
- We believe that life, each life, is worth living no matter what the struggle, just as the biosphere in which we live is worth saving no matter what the cost.
- We believe that the world has one Creator, and that He is good, and that His intents in creating this place were good.
- We, as parents, believe in our kids. We believe that each one of them is a precious jewel with enormous gifts to grant the world.

Things may not always look as what we believe, sometimes even look quite the opposite. But we believe, so we dismiss evidence to the contrary of outlier data yet to be explained. People can argue with us, bring a thousand proofs that our beliefs above are wrong, absurd, and harmful. They just waste their time because we are true believers of those. We are fanatic. We belief first and prove afterwards. Even when the reality before our eyes flies in the face of what we believe, we continue as doggedly as before, until we get the facts to conform to what we believe.²

Courageous Resistance³

Resistance is the spirit of all biblical prophets. Unlike Greek philosophers who busied themselves in the realm of the sublime, the prophets were scandalized in an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, the prophets continuously shook society's comfort zone by reminding them to care for widows and orphans, to be disgusted by the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. They were infuriated by things that even now are daily occurrences considered normal all over the world. What if there are businessmen who cheat in their business? So what if a refugee family with two little children must live unsheltered on the street because the detention house is in overcapacity? "We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions." And they rebuked harshly and relentlessly.

What is the fountain from which such courageous resistance bursts forth? It is their deep sensitivity to evil. Their ear is attuned to a cry, imperceptible to others, beneath the apparent air of loveliness of their cities. While the world is at ease and asleep, they hear the blast from heaven, for nothing that has bearing upon good and evil is small or trite in the eyes of God. Compared to the prophets, our standards are modest, our sense of injustice timid; our moral indignation short-lived. Although our eyes witness the same callousness and cruelty of men, we may choose to stay in indifference. "Our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience". Few are guilty, all are responsible.

² The list above and this paragraph are derived and rewritten from "Are All Believers Insane?" by Tzvi Freeman. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2539704/jewish/Are-All-Believers-Insane.htm

³ This part is much derived from *The Prophets* (2001) by A. J. Heschel, chapter 1. New York: Harper Perennial.

Church and Politics

To believe in the sacredness of life is one thing, to translate it into real actions is another. As far as I observe, most Christian churches in my country express this dogma through various charitable works. They provide social services to the poor and the marginalized – food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, etc. Charity is nice, necessary, and morally desirable. The Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer once argued: If it is in your power to prevent suffering and death from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so. There are lives you can save just by donating 5 percent of your income to aid agencies, and if donating that sum doesn't make you sacrifice anything nearly as important as those lives, you are wrong not to do so.⁴

But is charity enough? If you have this established policy where refugees are not distinguished from perpetrators of immigration crimes, and both should stay at the same jail-like detention center with no sufficient facilities for women and children, is it enough to deliver food daily there and hope they will survive it decently? If you have a government who allocates too tight a budget for refugees and asylum seekers, will you fundraise to pay for all their expenses? Yet I see too many Christian churches in my country exclusively use this approach and shy away from any commitment to effect change at the institutional, systemic level. And because most of our Unitarian church members come from those churches, I see the same reluctance – or ignorance.

It may be out of their secular beliefs or minority mentality that many members of my church say: “Let's do something to improve social conditions, but watch out lest we mess with political powers. God does command us to love our fellow human beings like ourselves, but He doesn't order us to go too far. Religion and politics must be kept separated. Stay away from anything political, for politics is dirty. Revenge is in God's hands. Organized resistance is not our portion.” I can't disagree more with this point of view.

As a Unitarian who upholds conscience and commits life to a pursue of all-encompassing Truth, I agree wholeheartedly with Gandhi's stance. “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face, one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”⁵

I hold the belief that a religious person should go beyond charity and strive so that Lovingkindness and Social Justice are established into supporting legal, political, social, and educational systems. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important.”

⁴ Singer, P. 2009. *The Life You Can Save*. New York: Random House.

⁵ Gandhi, M. K. 2001. *An Autobiography*. London: Penguin Classics.

Resistance as Spiritual Discipline

There is one more point I'd like to briefly bring up. However important social activism is as a part of our religious commitment, it is not the religion itself. Resistance can become very materialistic, leaving no space for the spirit. Social activists may become very busy trying to change the things outside themselves – replacing the president, refining the policies, changing others' minds – without realizing that evil may be inside, too. The classical philosophers agree “that of all creation, the unstable creature man most needed transformation Man is helpless to change things for the better, to improve on nature, so long as he himself remains unchanged”⁶. The classic novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell is a good satire about how rebellion against evil oppression may just replace it with worse one, as long as selfish desires remain unchecked.

I view social activism more as a spiritual discipline. It is hard. It demands sacrifice to the point of you may lose your life because of it. But it ennobles you. Its goal is to surpass oneself and to live more in accordance with God's will. “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

From my experience and observation, I know that it's easy to lose spiritual awareness amidst the war of interests. Facing hatred triggers reciprocal hatred in us. Facing demonic enemies elicit same demonic urges. We may struggle for power but then get corrupted by the power when we eventually attain it. I've seen many social activists who forget to keep their integrity, to restrain their lusts, to nurture their wisdom and lovingkindness, to keep their words and attitude humble. That's not what I believe resistance should be. Social justice should not be separated from kindness and righteousness. Worship and prayers should be practiced along our activism, because they are not incompatible to each other.

Quoting Heschel again: “Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.”⁷

In the final analysis, God must become greater and we become less.**

⁶ Hicks, D. V. 1999. *Norms and Nobility*. Maryland: The University Press of America.

⁷ Heschel, A. J. 1996. “On Prayer” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.