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The Impact of Judaism on Social Reform

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The Impact of Judaism on Social Reform

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Judaism marked the beginning of a revolutionary idea that laid the groundwork for social reform: humans have the ability and therefore the responsibility to stop injustices in the world. The Jews were the first to decide that it was their responsibility as the Chosen People to fight against inequality in the world. This mentality revolutionized social reform and brought it into existence as a way for human beings to positively shape their world. The ideas laid by the Jews continued to impact people for centuries and are especially relevant in the modern world.



Meghan Conner

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Introduction

Judaism marked the beginning of a revolutionary idea that laid the groundwork for social reform: humans have the ability and therefore the responsibility to stop injustices in the world. The Jews were the first to decide that it was their responsibility as the Chosen People to fight against inequality in the world. This mentality revolutionized social reform and brought it into existence as a way for human beings to positively shape their world. The ideas laid by the Jews continued to impact people for centuries and are especially relevant in the modern world.

1. What Judaism Says About Social Protest

Prior to the formation of Judaism, ideologies placed emphasis on the existence of forces beyond humanity's control that shaped the world, and despite the fact that there were things that needed to change, it was thought that nothing could be done to go against the natural order. "The consequence of keeping God and nature distinct is momentous, for it means that the 'ought' cannot be assimilated to the 'is'-- God's will transcends (and can differ from) immanent actuality," Dr. Huston Smith says in explanation of the groundbreaking philosophy of the Jewish people (285). They observed injustices in their world, just as others had; however the Jews

recognized that these injustices were not God's will, but rather something they should strive to change. History no longer existed as unrelated events, but as something to critique and learn from. Previous religions kept the focus on the present, not wanting to disturb things due to the fear that God would retaliate. The people accepted that things would remain as they always had because of the simple idea that they had always been that way. There was no drive to improve the social order because it was ingrained in the nature of things, and therefore unable to be altered by human action. With this mentality, it's not surprising that social action was never taken before the Jewish people stepped onto the scene.

The Jews came into existence as a people after the Exodus, the great exit from the Pharaoh's rule and the return to the Holy Land, Israel. They came to understand that they were the Chosen People not because they were superior to others, but because their unique God had chosen them. They also understood that they were not chosen to receive preferential treatment, but to take on the suffering of others. It can be argued that this was an arrogant idea, but the fact remains that from the very beginning, the Jewish people were dedicated to the well-being of others, especially those less fortunate than them. "When things are not as they should be, change in some form is in order" (Smith 286-287). This idea formed centuries ago when Judaism was in its beginning stages, and yet it is still reflected in Judaism today. "As a small minority of the American population, Jews have historically supported laws, policies, and programs that guarantee the rights of individuals and minorities against those of the majority" (Dorff 57). This is a result of the deeply ingrained idea that the oppressed minorities should be protected.

The Jews as a people refused to see anything special or significant about themselves, and instead accepted that they were Chosen only by God's free right of election. When they broke free from the Pharaoh's rule, something they considered impossible, they attributed it to the

greatness of God. They sought meaning in this circumstance and instead of seeing their break from oppression as a mere routine event, they understood that God had chosen them and tasked them with vicarious suffering, or suffering for the sake of others. Judaism is unique in that it places great importance on the role that the people have played or will eventually play in history. The focus is on the individual, or group of individuals, to look to the past and not repeat the same mistakes. Humans are capable of shaping the future; therefore they should do whatever is in their power to improve the world for future generations. The focus on the individual as a significant means of social reform was brought on by the early prophets.

The prophets of Judaism set the pattern for reforming the political landscape centuries ago. For the first time in history, someone without official position, the prophet Elijah, took the side of an innocent man and denounced a king in the story of Naboth and King Ahab. The King accepted what Elijah was saying without question because he spoke under the authority of God. This was revolutionary because for the first time, a person with no status challenged a king and called him out on his unjust actions. The common conviction in the tales of prophets denouncing kings for their unfair acts was that “every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity, is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even kings must respect” (Smith 292). Historically, prophets spoke for God in defense of the common people in order to right wrongs that had occurred in society. The prophets also worked on a larger scale than simply challenging kings; they challenged the morality of their nation at times when the poor were treated as cattle while the wealthy flourished. Israel was a small nation physically caught between Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and Syria, and therefore it was always at risk of being invaded. These tensions between nations were seen by the Jews as “God’s warning to clean up their national life: establish justice throughout the land, or be destroyed” (Smith 291). The Jews were able to make

this interpretation because of their desire to search for meaning in all aspects of life. The foundations of Judaism lay on the demand for justice and the ability of any person to call out injustice wherever it may occur in society. It was these ideas that shaped modern social reform.

2. My Views and Understanding of Social Justice in Today's World

Social reform has developed significantly in meaning since the establishment of Judaism. Social activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh practiced non-violence as a means of combating injustices against minorities. "As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform," King is quoted with saying of Gandhi's non-violent philosophy (Patel 274). As a leader of the Civil Rights Movement, King relied heavily on his faith in order to unite people under the common goal of equal rights for African Americans. Social reform was possible because of King's dedication to love and nonviolence as uniting factors. Just as the common people in the times of early Israel saw the injustices faced by the poor, the Americans of the sixties saw the injustices faced by African Americans and banded together to bring about the necessary social reform. As Patel sees it, "love and nonviolence were fundamentally Christian values for King, but he learned to see them in new ways under the light of Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhism and Gandhi's Hinduism" (275). While King's ideas were influenced by these two men, it was Judaism's initial rebellion against social injustices centuries earlier that laid the groundwork for King's movement. Without the Jewish idea of calling out discrimination, the Civil Rights Movement may have never existed.

Racism may have been accepted as the “natural order,” just as the injustices forced upon minorities had been accepted prior to Jewish intervention.

The impact of the Jewish faith on Christianity goes without saying, and in the area of social justice, the connection between Jewish ideas and Christian practices is clear. “These texts of the prophets are not distant voices that we read with reverence in our liturgy,” Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote, “They are daily realities, whose cruelty and vehemence we live each day” (189-190). Romero urged the Church’s followers to be critical of their surroundings and decide for themselves what the people need. “A church that does not join the poor, in order to speak out from the side of the poor against the injustices committed against them, is not the true church of Jesus Christ” (189). It is clear where the focus on the welfare of the poor comes from, showing the lasting effects of the Jews’ beliefs. Poverty remains an overwhelming problem in the modern world. The types of reform necessary to combat poverty begin with recognizing the problem, or social awareness, and then uniting under the common goal to end the oppression of the lower class.

Poverty is not the only issue in the modern world that requires social action. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis discusses the ecological issues plaguing the world today as a result of humans, such as pollution and climate change. “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (3). The Encyclical focuses on the different environmental issues, how humans are responsible for them, why they matter to the continued existence and overall health of the planet, and what people can do to stop destroying the Earth. The Jewish idea of looking to the past in order to protect the future is prominent in the Pope’s efforts to reduce humans’ impact on the environment. “Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building

a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded” (12). In the second chapter of the Encyclical, he looks at principles from the Judeo-Christian tradition that emphasize the importance of protecting the environment. In other words, he looks at the framework of Judaism as it relates to the social reforms necessary to protect the Earth and its resources.

Conclusion

When responsibility for social reform is placed on the individual, it encourages action to change injustices in society, including poverty, discrimination, and environmental destruction. What began as prophets speaking out against injustices forced upon individuals by tyrants in power eventually grew into the Jewish people questioning their society and working to reform the areas of inequality. Judaism laid the groundwork for all other social change, which is why even today, there are movements for reform across the world.

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