



Torah Through a Lens of Justice

American Jewish World Service

Introduction

The Jewish textual tradition offers us many clear directives to be engaged in justice work. **צִדְקָה צִדְקָה תִּרְדּוּ** – Justice! Justice you shall pursue! - is one of the most commonly quoted verses of Torah within the Jewish social action community and clearly represents a core Jewish value. But what about the rest of Torah? How can we approach serious Torah learning from a social justice perspective while staying true to the text?

This text study looks at three texts from Torah. The first, like **צִדְקָה צִדְקָה תִּרְדּוּ** marks a clear path from the text to social action. The second is less clear and offers an opportunity for creativity. The third text seems to subvert the value of social justice and, like many Biblical passages, can leave the reader fraught with questions. Our hope is that this exercise will offer tools for approaching text with integrity while also seeking to embody the core values of human dignity and justice for all.

Text Through a Lens of Justice

In order to read text in a way that holds to the tradition of text learning but also allows for a social justice read, there are four questions that can be helpful to keep in mind when exploring any text. These, asked sequentially, can offer insight and engagement both with Torah and with the world around us.

These questions are:

1. What questions do you have?
2. Who are the players – seen and unseen? What power dynamics are at play?
3. What themes emerge from the text? How do those themes relate to social justice?
4. What is your personal reaction to this text? What associations or responses arise for you?



Text I – Straight-forward

<p style="text-align: center;">דברים פרק ה: יג-יד</p> <p style="text-align: center;">שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל מְלַאכְתְּךָ : וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל מְלַאכָה אֹתָהּ וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וְחֹמְרְךָ וְכָל בְּהֵמָתְךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ כְּמוֹךָ:</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 5:13-14</p> <p>Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your ass, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is inside your gates; that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as you do.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">רמב"ן דברים פרק ה: יג</p> <p style="text-align: center;">והנה טעמו כשינוח עבדך ואמתך כמוך תזכור כי עבד היית וגו'.</p>	<p>Ramban, Deuteronomy 5:13</p> <p>And here the reason that your manservant and maidservant are to rest "as you do" is to remind you that you were a slave.</p>



Torah Through a Lens of Justice

American Jewish World Service

Text 2 – Subtle

<p>בראשית פרק לו: יח-כד</p> <p>וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרָחֹק וּבְטָרֶם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו הֲנֵה בָעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הַלְזָה בָּא: וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת וְאָמַרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָהוּ וְנִרְאָה מִה יִהְיֶה חֲלֹמֹתָיו: וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלָהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִכְנֹו נַפֶּשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן אַל תִּשְׁפְּכוּ דָם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר וְיָד אֶל תִּשְׁלַחוּ בוֹ לְמַעַן הֲצִיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל אָבִיו: וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו וַיִּפְּשִׁטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתֹנֶתוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו: וַיִּקַּחְהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּרָה וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בוֹ מַיִם:</p>	<p>Genesis 37: 18-24</p> <p>And when they saw him from far away, even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and throw him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast has devoured him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams. And Reuben heard it, and he saved him from their hands; and said, Let us not kill a soul. And Reuben said to them, Shed no blood, but throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him from their hands, to deliver him to his father again. And it came to pass, when Joseph came to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, his coat of long sleeves that was on him; And they took him, and threw him into a pit; and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.</p>
<p>רבינו בחיה בראשית פרק לו: כא</p> <p>לא נכנו נפש, קשה היה לראובן עצת האחים, והיתה כוונתו להצילו. ואילו אמר: לא נכנו סתם, היה מראה עצמו בדבריו כי מניעתו זאת לחמלה עליו, וע"כ הוסיף להזכיר "נפש", כלומר שאינו מקפיד עליו רק עליהם, שלא יכו נפש שום אדם. וכן מה שאמר: אל תשפכו דם, ולא אמר "דמו", כלומר גם אנכי ככם שנאתיו, ואין אני מקפיד על דמו כלל כי אם עליכם, שלא תהיו שופכי דם.</p>	<p>Rabbeynu Bachya, Genesis 37:21</p> <p><i>Do not strike a soul</i> – The plan of the brothers was hard for Reuven, and his intention was to save [Joseph]. If he had said, "Don't strike him!" he would have shown himself in his words that he had pity on [Joseph]. Therefore, he added the word "soul" as if to say that his protest is not specifically about this situation, but that they should never strike any person. And so he said, "Do not spill blood" rather than "Do not spill his blood," as if to say, "Like you, I also hate him and I don't care about his blood, but I don't want you to become murderers."</p>



Torah Through a Lens of Justice

American Jewish World Service

Text 3 – Challenging

<p style="text-align: center;">דברים פרק ז:א-ה</p> <p>כי יביאך ה' אלהיך אל הארץ אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה ונשל גוים רבים מפניך החתי והגרגישי והאמרי והכנעני והפרזי והחוי והיבوسی שבעה גוים רבים ועצומים ממך: ונתנם ה' אלהיך לפניך והפיתם החרם תחרים אתם לא תכרת להם ברית ולא תחנם: לא תתחתן בם בתך לא תתן לבנו ובתו לא תקח לבנד: כי יסיר את בנד מאחרי ועבדו אלהים אחרים וחרה אף ה' בכם והשמידך מהר: כי אם כה תעשו להם מזבחתיהם תתצו ומצבתם תשברו ואשיריהם תגדעו ופסיליהם תשרפו באש:</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 7:1-5</p> <p>When the Lord your God shall bring you into the land which you are entering to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you; And when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you; you shall strike them, and completely destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy to them; And you shall not make marriages with them; your daughter you shall not give to his son, nor his daughter shall you take to your son. For they will turn away your son from following me, that they may serve other gods; so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy you speedily. But thus shall you deal with them; you shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their Asherim, and burn their carved idols with fire.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">רש"י דברים פרק ז:ב</p> <p>לא תחנם - לא תתן להם חן. אסור לו לאדם לומר כמה נאה גוי זה. דבר אחר אל תתן להם חנייה בארץ:</p>	<p>Rashi, Deuteronomy 7:2</p> <p><i>Do not have compassion</i> – Do not be gracious toward them. It is forbidden for any person to say how nice that people is. Another interpretation: do not permit them to rest in the land.</p>



American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.