

# WHAT IS JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE?

## BACKGROUND – TEXT 1

This text explores the process of “how people move from the couch to recognizing an injustice to doing something about it.” Cohen identifies two moments in this process. The first is the moment of righteous indignation when a person’s understanding of justice is confronted by an immoral situation. The second moment is when a person decides to take action in order to respond to the injustice they have noticed.

### TEXT 1 - RABBI DR. ARYEH COHEN, “HERE I AM! A POLITICAL THEORY OF ACTION”

Contemporary American professor of Rabbinic Literature at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

... My interest is in articulating a theory, or a narrative, of how people move from the couch to recognizing an injustice to doing something about it. There are two distinct moments. The first I’ll call the moment of Righteous Indignation. There is a great word for this in the Rabbinic tradition: *taromet*. The word *taromet* shares a  
 5 root with the word for thunder: *ra’am*. *Taromet* is the reaction which is sanctioned by a court when a person has been harmed in a way that is not legally actionable, and yet she has been morally wronged. *Taromet* or righteous rage does not carry with it any legal remedy, aside from communal vindication in one’s outrage. In a culture in which there is a shared morality, this is not an insignificant matter, and might  
 10 even lead to the offending party making restitution in some manner. However, that restitution is not enforceable by a court. Therefore: righteous indignation.

The contemporary occurrence of *taromet* is the moment when you recognize that your understanding of justice has run up against an immoral situation. When  
 15 workers are legally paid a salary so low that they cannot afford to feed and shelter themselves. When workers are treated in such a way as to impact their dignity. When straight people can marry but gay folks cannot. When undocumented immigrants and their children are exploited for their work but are disenfranchised politically, and ultimately criminalized. In whatever issue, *taromet*, righteous  
 20 indignation, occurs when you are forced to compare your understanding of justice

with the reality of a situation, and you find that the reality does not stand up to scrutiny. You are then moved to indignation or even rage. Legitimately.

At that moment you are faced with the next question. What am I willing to do about this? The answer to this question can be anything from “nothing” through clicking on an email to joining a demonstration, to voting, to participating in an act of civil disobedience. Deciding to take that action is the “Here I am” moment. “Here I am!” is Moses’ answer to God’s call from the burning bush. The Biblical Hebrew *hineni* is a contraction of two words. The first, *hineh*, is a word that signals presence or presentation. (Often it is used to signal a scene change in Biblical narrative.) The second is *ani*, or I, me. The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, has suggested that the statement *hineni* signals an opening of oneself to the Other. “Here I am to respond to your suffering.” The *hineni* or “here I am” moment is the moment at which you realize that the jarring dissonance between the reality of an injustice and the demands of justice comprise an obligation for you to act. The *hineni* moment is the move from “wow, this sucks, somebody should do something” to “I am one of the people who have to do something.”

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Cohen, A. “Here I Am! A Political Theory of Action.” Originally published in Ask BIG Questions [blog], 2 April 2014.

## ACTIVITY 1 ISSUE BRAINSTORMING AND REFLECTION

### Introduction

As Cohen described, there is a range of different issues that can lead people to experience taromet (righteous indignation) and resolve to take action. This activity invites participants to identify which issues elicit the greatest righteous indignation from them and which they are most passionate about.

## ACTIVITY 2 SOCIAL JUSTICE TERMS CHALK-TALK

### Introduction

There are many ways to respond to need and suffering in the world, and similarly, there are multiple terms that are used in both Jewish tradition and general society to describe this work. This activity will expose participants to the range of terms that are used and offer definitions for those terms. Through reflection on the terms and definitions, participants will dig into the range of responses to need and suffering and begin to differentiate among them.

***Chesed* / חסד - loving-kindness**

***Tzedek* / צדק - justice**

***Tzedakah* / צדקה - philanthropy**

***Tikkun Olam* / תיקון עולם - repairing the world**

***Kevod HaBriyot* / כבוד הברייות - human dignity**

**Social Justice** - the equal and fair distribution of resources and opportunities, in which outside factors that categorize people are irrelevant. In Hebrew “social justice” translates to “*tzedek chevra*ti.”

**Social Action** - individual or group behavior that involves interaction with other individuals or groups, especially organized action toward social reform

**Community Service** - work that is done without pay to help people in a community

**Community Organizing** - the coordination of cooperative efforts and campaigning carried out by local residents to promote the interests of their community; usually coordinated by a leader or group of leaders trained in organizing tactics and techniques

**Activism** - the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals

**Charity** - generous actions or donations of goods and/or money to aid those in need

**Human Rights** - fundamental rights, especially those believed to belong to an individual and in whose exercise a government should not interfere

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 2

This video distinguishes among *chesed*, *tzedakah*, and *tzedek*, three Jewish practices that all involve helping people in need and “changing the world for good.” The video gives examples of each of these practices.

### TEXT 2

#### VIDEO: RABBI DANYA RUTTENBERG, CHESED, TZEDAKAH, AND TZEDEK: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

(b. 1975) American rabbi, editor, and author and rabbi-in-residence at Avodah: Sparking Jewish Leaders, Igniting Social Change

Available online at [bimbam.com](http://bimbam.com). Viewed 28 August 2018.

## ACTIVITY 3 CASE STUDY

### Introduction

Now that participants have been introduced to three different ways of responding to need—*chesed*, *zedakah*, and *zedek*—they have an opportunity to apply these responses to real issues. This activity will help participants clarify the differences among these approaches and also dig deeper into some real social justice issues.

### Situation

You've been employed for more than a year and, overall, you're happy with your job, your coworkers, and the office environment. Lately, you've been staying late a lot, as you're in the middle of a massive project, and the deadline is approaching quickly. You find yourself in the office late several nights a week. As it happens, you have come to know the cleaning woman, who is there after-hours. Usually, you smile and say hello (she's an immigrant and doesn't speak your language), but don't think much about her or her life. After a few weeks of these encounters, however, you notice that she wears the same t-shirt under her uniform every day. As the winter turns blustery, you find yourself thinking about the cleaning lady while you wait for your bus in the cold. You're pretty sure that her t-shirt couldn't possibly be warm enough. On a particular Tuesday you walk down the corridor to the restroom and notice the cleaning woman pulling a half-eaten sandwich out of the garbage. The next day you speak to the janitorial supervisor and discover that several members of the cleaning staff aren't making ends meet.

Created by and reprinted with permission from Makom, the Israel Education Lab of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Available online at [Tzedek, Tzedakah, Chessed](#). Viewed on June 2018.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 3

In this text, Rambam provides a framework for distinguishing between *chesed* and *tzedakah*.

### TEXT 3 - RABBI MOSHE BEN MAIMON (RAMBAM), *GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED* 3.53

(1135-1204) Philosopher and law codifier in Spain and Egypt. Also known as Maimonides.

In our Commentary on the Sayings of the Fathers (chap. 5:7) we have explained the expression *hesed* as denoting an excess [in some moral quality]. It is especially used of extraordinary kindness. Loving-kindness is practised in two ways: first, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatever upon us; secondly, we are kind  
 5 to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than is due to them. In the inspired writings the term *hesed* occurs mostly in the sense of showing kindness to those who have no claim to it whatever. For this reason the term *hesed* is employed to express the good bestowed upon us by God:  
 . . . The term *zedakah* is derived from *zedek*, “righteousness”; it denotes the act of  
 10 giving every one his due, and of showing kindness to every being according as it deserves.

Translation from Friedlander, 1903.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 4

This text compares *chesed* to *tzedekah* and finds *chesed* to be superior in three respects.



## TEXT 4 - BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TRACTATE *SUKKAH* 49B

Compilation of teachings of 3rd-6th century scholars in Babylonia (Amora'im); final redaction in the 6th-7th centuries

**Our Sages taught: Acts of *chesed* are superior to *tzedakah* in three respects:**

*Tzedakah* [can be performed only] with one's money, [while] acts of *chesed* [can be performed both] with one's person and one's money.

5 *Tzedakah* [is given] to the poor, [while] acts of *chesed* [can be performed both] for the poor and for the rich.

*Tzedakah* [is given] to the living, [while] acts of *chesed* [can be performed both] for the living and for the dead.

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ספּה דף מט עמוד ב  
תנו רבנן בשלשה דברים גדולה גמילות חסדים יותר מן הצדקה צדקה בממונו גמילות חסדים בין  
בגופו בין בממונו צדקה לעניים גמילות חסדים בין לעניים בין לעשירים צדקה לחיים גמילות  
חסדים בין לחיים בין למתים.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 5

This text emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty as a way of preventing more acute suffering.

## TEXT 5 - RABBI SHLOMO YITZCHAKI (RASHI) ON *VAYIKRA* (LEVITICUS) 25:35

(1040-1105) Commentator on the Torah and Talmud in France.

*Vayikra* 25:35

And if your kinsman becomes poor and falters with you, you should strengthen him; whether he is a stranger or a settler he should live with you.

ויקרא כה: לה  
 וכי ימוה אַחִיָּהּ וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּהּ וְהִחֲזִיקָתָּ בּוֹ גֵר וְתוֹשָׁב וְחִי עִמָּהּ:

Rashi on *Vayikra* 25:35

You should grab hold of him: Do not allow him to go down and fall, for then it will be hard to pick him up. Instead, grab hold of him the moment he falters. To what is this comparable? To a load on a donkey – all the while it is on the donkey, one [person] can grab it and set it aright, [but once] it has fallen to the ground, even five [people] cannot set it aright.

רב שלמה יצחקי (רש"י), ויקרא כה: לה  
 והחזיקת בו - אל תניחהו שיירד ויפול ויהיה קשה להקימו אלא חזקהו משעת מוטת היד למה  
 זה דומה למשאוי שעל החמור עודהו על החמור אחד תופס בו ומעמידו נפל לארץ חמשה אין  
 מעמידין אותו.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 6

This text explores anecdotes and research that show that responding to human need is motivated more by emotion than by rationality.

### TEXT 6 - NICHOLAS KRISTOF, "SAVE THE DARFUR PUPPY"

(b. 1959) Columnist for *The New York Times*

Finally, we're beginning to understand what it would take to galvanize President Bush, other leaders and the American public to respond to the genocide in Sudan: a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

5 That's the implication of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people—good, conscientious people—aren't moved by genocide or famines.

Time and again, we've seen that the human conscience just isn't pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

10 In one experiment, psychologists asked ordinary citizens to contribute \$5 to alleviate hunger abroad. In one version, the money would go to a particular girl, Rokia, a 7-year-old in Mali; in another, to 21 million hungry Africans; in a third, to Rokia—but she was presented as a victim of a larger tapestry of global hunger.

15 Not surprisingly, people were less likely to give to anonymous millions than to Rokia. But they were also less willing to give in the third scenario, in which Rokia's suffering was presented as part of a broader pattern.

...

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Advocates for the poor often note that 30,000 children die daily of the consequences of poverty—presuming that this number will shock people into action. But the opposite is true: the more victims, the less compassion.

25 In one experiment, people in one group could donate to a \$300,000 fund for medical treatments that would save the life of one child—or, in another group, the lives of eight children. People donated more than twice as much money to help save one child as to help save eight.

30 Likewise, remember how people were asked to save Rokia from starvation? A follow-up allowed students to donate to Rokia or to a hungry boy named Moussa. Both Rokia and Moussa attracted donations in the same proportions. Then another group was asked to donate to Rokia and Moussa together. But donors felt less good about supporting two children, and contributions dropped off.

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One experiment underscored the limits of rationality. People prepared to donate to the needy were first asked either to talk about babies (to prime the emotions) or to perform math calculations (to prime their rational side). Those who did math donated less.

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So maybe what we need isn't better laws but more troubled consciences—pricked, perhaps, by a Darfur puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

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If President Bush and the global public alike are unmoved by the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of fellow humans, maybe our last, best hope is that we can be galvanized by a puppy in distress.

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Kristof, N. "Save the Darfur Puppy." 10 May 2007. Available at [NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com). Viewed March 2019.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 7

This text unpacks the term "*tikkun olam*," which literally means, "repairing the world" and is the Jewish term that is popularly employed to refer to addressing need in the world.

### TEXT 7 - RABBI JILL JACOBS, "*TIKKUN OLAM*"

(b. 1975) Executive director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

Rather than reject this term altogether, I suggest a reimagining of *tikkun olam* that combines the four understandings of the term we have seen in traditional text: (1) the *Aleinu's* concept of *tikkun* as the destruction of any impurities that impede the full manifestation of the divine presence; (2) the literalist midrashic understanding of *tikkun olam* as the establishment of a sustainable social order; (3) the rabbinic willingness to invoke *tikkun ha'olam* as a justification for changing laws likely to create chaos; and (4) the Lurianic belief that individual actions can affect the fate of the world as a whole.

10 ...

For the purpose of crafting an approach to Jewish action in the public sphere, I lean toward resurrecting the rabbinic definition but modifying this approach by means of comparison to the other three strands. Ultimately, only the rabbinic definition permits—and perhaps even mandates—changing law in order to create a more functional and even equitable society. By itself, the rabbinic approach to *tikkun olam* risks reducing the work of *tikkun* to seeking small changes in specific laws. The more global approaches of the midrashic, Lurianic and *Aleinu* models challenge us to see our obligation for *tikkun olam* as in the larger context of moving toward a more sustainable and divine world.

Jacobs, J. 2009. “Tikkun Olam.” In *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*, by J. Jacobs, 38, 40. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 8

In the previous text, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a Conservative rabbi, introduces the term *tikkun olam* as it relates to social justice and investigates the way the term has been used in the Jewish legal tradition in order to identify how it may guide contemporary thinking on social justice issues. In this next text, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, a Reform contemporary of Jacobs, bemoans the fact that most Jews who share Jacobs’s liberal politics are much less careful with their use of Jewish language, invoking terms in a sloppy way, removing them from their original meanings and contexts in Jewish text and tradition, and using them to support policy conclusions that align with their liberal values. Salkin claims in the title of his essay that “Liberal Jews do a disservice to themselves and their faith in citing Jewish texts as justification for their preferred policies.”

## TEXT 8 - RABBI JEFFREY SALKIN, JUDAISM BEYOND SLOGANS

(b. 1954) Reform senior rabbi at Temple Solel in Hollywood, Florida

...

How... have many liberal Jews managed to make biblical texts support the political policies of their choice? The answer is that key parts of these texts have been shrunk down to a set of memorable slogans and repurposed as progressive

5 maxims. The four most common examples are: “Justice, justice, shall you pursue,” “Made in God’s image,” “Love the stranger,” and “Repair the world.”

‘Justice, Justice, Shall You Pursue’?

Who but the champions of injustice could possibly disagree with this as a general  
10 dictum? The verse itself, however, comes from a biblical chapter, Deuteronomy 16:20, that offers a blueprint for creating a court system, specifically for establishing “magistrates and officials for your tribes.” It specifies that judges must show absolute impartiality in their judgment. Rashi, the 11th-century commentator, says of the text: “The judge must not be gentle with one and tough on the other, or make  
15 one stand and permit the other to sit.”

This context makes “Justice, justice, shall you pursue” a strange slogan for modern liberalism. Equality before the law is in no way an exclusively liberal goal. It is, in fact, a guiding principle of the American legal system.

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Made in God’s Image?

The understanding that we are all “made in God’s image” (*B’tzelem Elokim*) is one of the most commonly promoted ideas in contemporary Judaism. It is employed by  
25 rabbis and others across the denominational spectrum.

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The possible meanings of “made in God’s image” are tantalizing and pregnant with possibility. This is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing in that it allows for deeper spiritual exploration, but it is a curse in that it’s infinitely ripe for misuse.

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On the face of it, we don't quite know what the phrase means. Perhaps it means that everyone can, and must, imitate God's actions or that all human beings are entitled to dignity. But it is invoked so often that it has become a cliché. It is now a textual fallback position for when we are out of arguments either for or against a particular action, political or otherwise.

### Love the Stranger?

. . .

Who was the biblical stranger (*ger*)? Quite simply, a non-Israelite who lived within a Jewish polity, i.e., the land of Israel. Jews had to provide for the welfare of the stranger, often an impoverished laborer or artisan, "because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." . . .

Let us assume the righteousness, and even the sanctity, of this idea. Let us also remember that, in the postbiblical world, the sages applied the notion of loving the stranger (*ahavat ha-ger*) not to resident aliens within a Jewish polity—which was the biblical emphasis—but to converts to Judaism.

But let us also acknowledge that, as it stands, "loving the stranger" fails to offer the concrete policy prescriptions that we might want from it. That hasn't stopped some from using the quote as a basis for immigration policy.

. . .

"Loving the stranger" says nothing about the proper disposition toward those who are neither residents in a Jewish polity nor converts to Judaism.

It might be about immigrants. But it is very difficult to translate a biblical or rabbinic idiom into concrete contemporary policy. Moreover: Two people might be positively disposed toward those who wish to become Americans while simultaneously disagreeing about what constitutes sensible policy on U.S. immigration at a given moment. The biblical text offers us very little guidance here, other than raising a lofty ethical standard.

### Repair the World?

*Tikkun olam*, or "Repairing the world," is one of the most popular Hebrew phrases in America. Its use is so common that one joke imagines a visitor to Israel asking:

“How do you say *tikkun olam* in Hebrew?”

70 There is much to respect and admire in Jewish groups that are engaged in *tikkun olam*. That has become the preferred term for social-action and social-justice committees. But, somewhere along the line, the meaning of *tikkun olam* was transformed. It now seems to mean just about anything—which is to say, it means almost nothing.

A comment in the current Reform siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, notes:

75 *Tikkun olam*...originally (2–3 century) referred to rabbinic legislation to remedy social ills or legal injustices. In the Aleinu [a prayer in praise of God], composed about the same time, it represents acts by God to replace this imperfect world with the legal and moral perfection of divine rule. Sixteenth-century kabbalistic thought applied the term to human action, shifting the responsibility for perfecting the world onto us.

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This describes a lofty, even cosmic, goal. But note the evolving principal actors at work. First there are the sages and judges, who tinkered with various pieces of rabbinic and Torah legislation to make matters more equitable. Then, in the Aleinu, there's discussion of what God must do to restore the moral order. Finally, 85 there's the kabbalistic sense of *tikkun olam*. As the 16th-century mystic Isaac Luria describes it, the universe was shattered through a cosmic accident. Shards of the divine presence were scattered through all of creation. Thus whenever Jews do mitzvot, it is as if they are restoring the world—and God—to a state of primal unity.

90 Quite separate from this rich history, it has only been since the 1950s that *tikkun olam* has assumed its social-justice connotations. It is now used as justification for supporting projects and causes that are of primary concern to those whose politics lean center-left. It leaves those whose politics are center-right wondering whether there is still room for them at the *tikkun olam* table.

95 . . .

In 1966, Commentary published a symposium on “The Condition of Jewish Belief.” In it, Jacob Neusner captured the nature of the challenge we still face:



100 “Judaism may provide political insight. It is to be discovered through a search for the political implications of its theology, surely not through a hunt for texts proving whatever we have already decided we want to do. We have not been sufficiently serious about either a study of Jewish tradition, or reflection upon Jewish realities today, to say just what political insight Judaism has now to offer.”

105 I am, by nature and disposition, a political centrist. That is to say, I lean mostly liberal on American domestic issues and am slightly more conservative on foreign-policy and security issues. Like Wolpe and Neusner, I wish that Jews on or near the political left would be more intellectually honest. As that Commentary symposium was published a half-century ago, it’s past time for us to admit that too often our  
110 political and social stances come first and are then followed by interpretations of Jewish texts that serve as post facto justification.

Today, American Jews find themselves in sociological, economic, and political environments that are wholly unlike those of the Jewish past. While we can draw  
115 on the past for inspiration, there are very few policy recommendations to be found there.

What would happen if we reversed the preferred order of the day? If we first approached the Jewish texts themselves, wandered into the rabbinic tradition and  
120 later commentaries, and then discerned what our social and political stances might be?

Salkin, J. “Judaism Beyond Slogans.” January 2018. Available at [Commentarymagazine.com](http://Commentarymagazine.com). Viewed March 2019.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 9

This biblical text about responding to people in need is the source for many laws about *tzedakah*. It serves as a backdrop to Text 10.

TEXT 9 - *DEVARIM* (DEUTERONOMY) 15:4-11

4 There shall be no needy among you—since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion—

5 if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this instruction that I enjoin upon you this day.

6 For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised you: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

7 If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman.

8 Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.

9 Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will incur guilt.

10 Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.

11 For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

ד אָפּס פּי לא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן כִּי־בָרַךְ יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן־לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:  
ה רק אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה  
הַיּוֹם:

ו כִּי־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּרַךְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־לְךָ וְהִעֲבַטְתָּ גּוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאֶתָּה לֹא תֵעָבֵט וּמִשְׁלַת בְּגוֹיִם רַבִּים  
וּבְךָ לֹא יִמְשָׁלוּ:

ז כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן מֵאֶחָד אַחִיךָ בְּאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תֵאֲמַץ אֶת־  
לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ מֵאֲחִיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן:

ח כִּי־פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לוֹ וְהִעֲבַט תֵּעָבִיטְנוּ דֵי מַחֲסָרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ:

ט הַשֹּׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן־יִהְיֶה דְבַר עִם־לְבָבְךָ בְּלִיעַל לֵאמֹר קָרְבָה שְׁנַת־הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה וְרָעָה עֵינֶיךָ  
בְּאֲחִיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ וְקָרָא עָלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא:

י נָתַן תִּתֵּן לוֹ וְלֹא־יִרַע לְבָבְךָ בְּתַתֵּךְ לוֹ כִּי בְּגִלְלַת הַדְּבַר הַזֶּה יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכָל  
מִשְׁלַח יָדְךָ:

יא כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיּוֹן מִקְרֹב הָאֶרֶץ עַל־כֵּן אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה לֵאמֹר פָּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאֲחִיךָ לַעֲנֶיךָ  
וּלְאֲבִינְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ־ךָ:

## BACKGROUND – TEXT 10

This text analyzes the apparent contradiction between verses 4 and 11 in Text 9 and suggests that they represent the approaches of *chesed* and *tzedek*.

### TEXT 10 – RABBI JILL JACOBS, “TAKING ACTION”

(b. 1975) Executive director of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights

. . . We can read the passage as simultaneously offering two prescriptions for addressing poverty. The text dares us to believe in the possibility of eradicating poverty and to work toward long-term solutions. At the same time, this text demands that we give our attention to the hungry person standing in front of us, right here and now. We cannot provide immediate services with no intention of addressing the big problems that cause the need for those services. And we cannot pursue those big idealistic changes while ignoring the suffering that exists today.

People who choose to engage in social action sometimes begin to see the type of action they are doing as inherently better than the other kinds. This debate can even lead to snobbery among those invested in one mode or another. For example, those devoted to advocacy and organizing for long-term change sometimes dismiss the provision of services as band-aids that only divert attention from systemic issues. Those who work day in and day out to serve meals and staff shelters sometimes regard advocates and organizers as out of touch with the urgent work on the ground.

Instead of falling into the trap of arguing that one response to poverty is always best, I will suggest that a comprehensive approach to ending poverty includes a number of different strategies.

Jacobs, J. (2011). Excerpted from *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), pp. 162-3.

## BACKGROUND – TEXT 11

The following video emphasizes the importance of a *tzedek* approach to social justice. Messenger calls the Jewish community to task for honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., through “days of service” that emphasize direct service (*chesed*), while neglecting to do the work that creates a more just society (*tzedek*). The text that follows is an excerpt from the speech referenced in video.

### TEXT 11

#### VIDEO: RUTH MESSINGER, [WORKING TOWARD JUSTICE](#)

(b. 1940) Former political leader in New York City; social justice activist, speaker, and writer

Available online at [CCAR One Minute of Wonder](#). Viewed 31 August 2018.

### DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., BEYOND VIETNAM: A TIME TO BREAK SILENCE

(1929-1968) American Baptist minister and Civil Rights leader

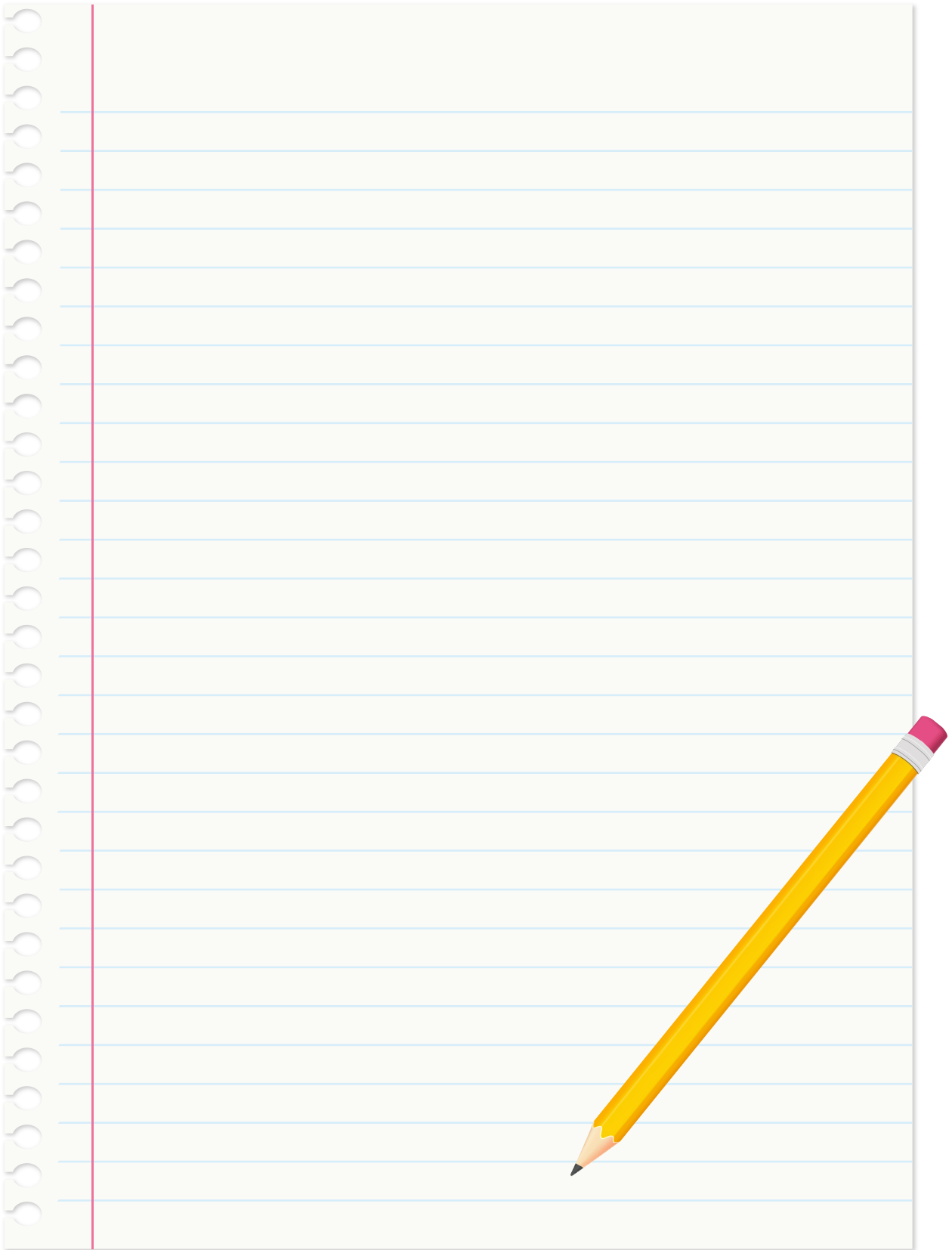
A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men  
 5 and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth... and say, “This is not just.”

King, M.L., Jr. “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” Riverside Church, New York City, 4 April 1967. Audio recording available online at [American Rhetoric](#). Viewed 31 August 2018.

## ACTIVITY 4 JOURNALING

Reflections on your learning and action:

1. What experiences have you had doing *chesed*? How have you felt about these experiences?
2. What experiences have you had doing *tzedek*? How have you felt about these experiences?
3. What would you need in order to be able to engage in social justice work that is more *tzedek*-oriented?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jacobs, J. 2009. "Chapter 2: Essential Terms: Tikkun Olam, Tzedek and Prophetic Judaism." In *There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*, 24-48. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Jacobs, J. 2011. "Part Three: Taking Action." In *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community*, 161-236. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Messinger, R. 2019. "The Talmud of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." <https://www.jccmanhattan.org/attach/The-Talmud-of-MLK-2019.pdf>

Schwarz, S. "Tzedek and Chesed: Re-Thinking the Relationship Between Advocacy and Service." 7 November 2010. <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/tzedek-and-chesed-re-thinking-the-relationship-between-advocacy-and-service/>

"Tzedek, Tzedakah, Chessed." Created by Makom, the Israel Education Lab of the Jewish Agency for Israel. [http://makomisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pages\\_from\\_TEN\\_part\\_1\\_web-28.pdf](http://makomisrael.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pages_from_TEN_part_1_web-28.pdf)

"Rabbi Jill Jacobs on Tikkun Olam." 6 May 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zw2TCEAfwjI>

*Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*. Eds. Rabbi Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Margie Klein. 2008. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

## KEY NAMES

**Cohen, Rabbi Dr. Aryeh.** Author of the book *Justice in the City: An Argument from the Sources of Rabbinic Judaism*; professor, social justice activist, rabbi, and lecturer. Rabbi Cohen teaches Rabbinic Literature (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash) and social justice at the Ziegler School for Rabbinic Studies of the American Jewish University, where he was ordained as a rabbi in 2010. He is the rabbi-in-residence for Bend the Arc: A Jewish Partnership for Justice in Southern California.

**Jacobs, Rabbi Jill.** Executive director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, which mobilizes 1,800 rabbis and cantors and tens of thousands of American Jews to protect human rights in North America and Israel. She is the author of *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-on Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* (Jewish Lights, 2011) and *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (Jewish Lights, 2009). Rabbi Jacobs holds rabbinic ordination and an MA in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary, an MS in Urban Affairs from Hunter College, and a BA from Columbia University.

**King, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther.** Baptist minister and social activist who led the Civil Rights Movement in the United States from the mid-1950s until his death by assassination in 1968.

**Kristof, Nicholas.** Columnist for *The New York Times* since 2001. Kristof has won two Pulitzer Prizes for his coverage of Tiananmen Square and the genocide in Darfur, along with many humanitarian awards such as the Anne Frank Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He graduated from Harvard University, studied law at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and was a longtime foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*.

**Messinger, Ruth.** Global ambassador of American Jewish World Service after serving as its CEO. Messinger is also the social justice fellow at the Finkelstein Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the social justice activist-in-residence at the Joseph Stern Center for Social Responsibility of the Marlene Meyerson Jewish Community Center of Manhattan. In these and related capacities she has done extensive speaking on and writing about social justice issues. She served as the consultant in the production of this course.



**Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam).** (1135-1204) Born in Spain, Rambam lived most of his life in Egypt, where he served as a physician and leader of the Jewish community. He is one of the pre-eminent Jewish philosophers and codifiers of all time. His *Mishneh Torah* became one of the central works of halakhic literature, and his *Guide for the Perplexed (Moreh Nevukhim)* is one of the most important Jewish philosophical treatises ever written.

**Ruttenberg, Rabbi Danya.** Serves as Avodah's rabbi-in-residence. She is the author of National Jewish Book Award finalist *Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting*, as well as the Sami Rohr Prize-nominated *Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*. She is also editor of *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism and Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*. Rabbi Ruttenberg received rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles.

**Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi).** (1040-1105) Born in Troyes, France, he was one of the outstanding commentators of all time, whose commentaries on the Torah and Talmud have served as the basis for all future commentaries. He served as a *dayyan* (rabbinical judge) and directed his own academy. He also worked as a vintner.

**Salkin, Rabbi Jeffrey.** He has served as the senior rabbi of Temple Solel in Hollywood, Florida, since August 2015. Previously served congregations in New Jersey, Georgia, and New York. Rabbi Salkin has written several books on Jewish spirituality and ethics and frequently publishes articles and essays in Jewish and mainstream media. Rabbi Salkin was ordained at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1981. He has served on the boards of many national and local Jewish organizations and is an activist for Israel and Zionism.

# KEY TERMS

**Advocacy.** An activity by an individual or group intended to influence political, economic, and/or social systems and institutions

**Chesed - Loving-kindness.** A voluntary act of caring for someone else. In the context of social justice, *chesed* is usually exemplified by direct service addressing immediate needs.

**Service.** Work that is done without pay to help other people

**Social justice.** The equal and fair distribution of resources and opportunities, in which outside factors that categorize people are irrelevant. In Hebrew, social justice translates to “*tzedek chevrat*.”

**Tikkun olam.** Literally, “repairing the world.” It has a rich history in rabbinic literature and has become a popular term referring to a range of activities to make the world a better place.

**Tzedakah.** In biblical Hebrew *tzedakah* means justice or righteousness. In later Jewish thought, the term has come to refer especially to contributions of one’s wealth to others, or “charity.”

**Tzedek - Justice.** In the context of social justice, *tzedek* is usually exemplified by advocacy, community organizing, or political activism seeking to address root causes and structural inequality.

# WHAT IS JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE?

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## SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS

- U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell on slavery and reparations
- Ta Nehisi Coates, *Testimony* on HR 40
- Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

## BACKGROUND TO SUPPLEMENTAL TEXTS 1 AND 2

On 19 June 2019, Ta Nehisi Coates testified before the House of Representatives in support of HR 40, a bill that would establish a federal commission to study the legacy of slavery in the United States and its ongoing impact. The commission would also develop proposals to address and repair this legacy, including reparations. In his testimony, Coates responds to a statement by then Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, who argued the day before that the issue of reparations for descendants of slaves was unnecessary and impractical.

### SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT 1

#### U.S. SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL ON SLAVERY AND REPARATIONS (18 JUNE 2019)

(b. 1942) American politician, senator from Kentucky

Watch McConnell's comments [here](#).

I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea. We've tried to deal with our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We elected an African American president. I think we're always a work  
5 in progress in this country but no one currently alive was responsible for that and I don't think we should be trying to figure out how to compensate for it. First of all, it'd be pretty hard to figure out who to compensate. We've had waves of immigrants as well come to the country and experience dramatic discrimination of one kind or another, so no, I don't think reparations are a good idea.

## SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT 2

### TA NEHISI COATES, *TESTIMONY ON HR 40*

(b. 1975) American author and journalist

Watch Coates' testimony [here](#).

Yesterday, when asked about reparations, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell offered a familiar reply: America should not be held liable for something that happened 150 years ago, since none of us currently alive are responsible. This rebuttal proffers a strange theory of governance, that American accounts are  
5 somehow bound by the lifetime of its generations. But well into this century, the United States was still paying out pensions to the heirs of Civil War soldiers. We honor treaties that date back some 200 years, despite no one being alive who signed those treaties. Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are solely and individually responsible for. But we are American citizens, and thus bound to a  
10 collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach. It would seem ridiculous to dispute invocations of the Founders, or the Greatest Generation, on the basis of a lack of membership in either group. We recognize our lineage as a generational trust, as inheritance, and the real dilemma posed by reparations is just that: a dilemma of inheritance. It is impossible to imagine America without the  
15 inheritance of slavery.

As historian Ed Baptist has written, enslavement “shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics” of America, so that by 1836 more than \$600 million, almost  
20 half of the economic activity in the United States, derived directly or indirectly from the cotton produced by the million-odd slaves. By the time the enslaved were emancipated, they comprised the largest single asset in America. Three billion in 1860 dollars, more than all the other assets in the country combined.

The method of cultivating this asset was neither gentle cajoling nor persuasion,  
25 but torture, rape, and child trafficking. Enslavement reigned for 250 years on these shores. When it ended, this country could have extended its hallowed principles—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to all, regardless of color. But America

had other principles in mind. And so for a century after the Civil War, black people were subjected to a relentless campaign of terror, a campaign that extended well  
30 into the lifetime of Majority Leader McConnell.

It is tempting to divorce this modern campaign of terror, of plunder, from enslavement, but the logic of enslavement, of white supremacy, respects no such borders and the guard of bondage was lustful and begat many heirs. Coup d'états  
35 and convict leasing. Vagrancy laws and debt peonage. Redlining and racist G.I. bills. Poll taxes and state-sponsored terrorism. We grant that Mr. McConnell was not alive for Appomattox. But he was alive for the electrocution of George Stinney. He was alive for the blinding of Isaac Woodard. He was alive to witness kleptocracy in his native Alabama and a regime premised on electoral theft. Majority Leader McConnell cited civil-rights legislation yesterday, as well he should, because he was alive to  
40 witness the harassment, jailing, and betrayal of those responsible for that legislation by a government sworn to protect them. He was alive for the redlining of Chicago and the looting of black homeowners of some \$4 billion. Victims of that plunder are very much alive today. I am sure they'd love a word with the majority leader. What they know, what this committee must know, is that while emancipation dead-  
45 bolted the door against the bandits of America, Jim Crow wedged the windows wide open. And that is the thing about Senator McConnell's "something": It was 150 years ago. And it was right now.

The typical black family in this country has one-tenth the wealth of the typical  
50 white family. Black women die in childbirth at four times the rate of white women. And there is, of course, the shame of this land of the free boasting the largest prison population on the planet, of which the descendants of the enslaved make up the largest share. The matter of reparations is one of making amends and direct redress, but it is also a question of citizenship. In H.R. 40, this body has a chance  
55 to both make good on its 2009 apology for enslavement, and reject fair-weather patriotism, to say that this nation is both its credits and debits. That if Thomas Jefferson matters, so does Sally Hemings. That if D-Day matters, so does Black Wall Street. That if Valley Forge matters, so does Fort Pillow. Because the question really is not whether we'll be tied to the somethings of our past, but whether we are  
60 courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them. Thank you.

Available at: [Theatlantic.com](https://Theatlantic.com). Viewed September 2021.

## BACKGROUND TO SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT 3

This text is an excerpt from *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, a book by Isabel Wilkerson that suggests that the concept of “caste,” or a system of hereditary social stratification, is an appropriate framework for understanding how race functions in American society.

### SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT 3

#### ISABEL WILKERSON, *CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS*

(b. 1961) American journalist and author and the first Black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism.

We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, *“I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves.”* And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joints, but they are ours to deal with now.

And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, (NYC: Random House, 2020), Ch 2, p. 20. *Original emphasis.*