

# WHAT IS JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE?

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## INTRODUCTION

This lesson lays the foundation for the entire course by exploring the question: What does “social justice” mean in a Jewish context? There are many problems in the world, and there are many ways of addressing these problems. While all of the work that people do to fix the world has value, not all of it specifically advances social justice.

Because responding to need or suffering in the world is so central to Jewish tradition, today’s Jewish communities use many terms, often interchangeably: *chesed*, *tzedek*, *tikkun olam*, and *tzedakah*. In secular society, too, this work is referred to in different ways: social justice, charity, activism, service, and advocacy—without making sufficient distinctions. This initial lesson explores the variety of language used to describe responses to problems in the world, in an effort to define which among them constitute social justice work.

As this is a course on “Jewish” social justice, this lesson will focus on key Jewish terms. In particular, the terms “*chesed*” and “*tzedek*” will be used to draw the critically important distinction between responding to people’s immediate needs (*chesed*) and identifying, analyzing and addressing the structures and systems in our society that result in these needs (*tzedek*). Because many Jewish communities and individuals are more familiar and comfortable with *chesed*, the first sources in the lesson reflect the importance of that approach. This initial discourse reaffirms the value of work that participants are likely engaged in to improve the world and underscores the fact that *chesed* work will always be important. Ultimately, this lesson seeks to draw participants’ attention to the absolute necessity of *tzedek* and to identify social justice with *tzedek*—that is, with work that addresses and seeks to correct the root causes of inequality and injustice.

Just as this lesson is concerned with what constitutes social justice, it

is also concerned with what makes social justice activism “Jewish” and how Jewish wisdom informs activism. To that end, this lesson also introduces other Jewish terms and concepts that are used to describe social justice work, such as *tikkun olam*. In doing so, it raises the question of how these terms and concepts have evolved and how they may inform perspectives on contemporary social justice issues.

Because this course is not merely theoretical but also seeks to motivate concrete action, this lesson includes several opportunities for personalizing the concepts and moving from theory to practice. Participants are invited to identify the issues that they care most about, to apply the concepts of *tzedek* and *chesed* to these issues, and to journal about their evolving feelings about *chesed* and *tzedek*. Facilitators should pay close attention to the issues that are most important to participants so that these preferences can inform the selection of a guest speaker in Lesson 4.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### **Text 1 - Rabbi Dr. Aryeh Cohen, “Here I Am! A Political Theory of Action”**

How do we move from ignorance to action?

### **Activity 1 - Issue Brainstorming and Reflection**

Around which issues are we most likely to experience *taromet* (righteous indignation)?

### **Activity 2 - Social Justice Terms Chalk-Talk**

Defining terms that relate to social justice

### **Text 2 (Video) - Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, *Chesed, Tzedakah, and Tzedek: What’s the Difference?***

A contemporary look at the differences among *chesed*, *tzedakah*, and *tzedek*

### **Activity 3 - Case Study**

Applying these terms to a real scenario

### **Text 3 - Rambam (Maimonides), *Guide to the Perplexed* 3.53**

A classical look at the differences among *chesed*, *tzedakah*, and *tzedek*

**Text 4 - Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sukkah* 49b**

In defense of *chesed*

**Text 5 - Rashi on *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 25:35**

The importance of addressing root causes

**Text 6 - Nicholas Kristof, “Save the Darfur Puppy”**

The psychology of responding to need

**Text 7 - Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “*Tikkun Olam*”**

What is *tikkun olam*?

**Text 8 - Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, “Judaism Beyond Slogans”**

Understanding the context of Jewish language and concepts when relating to social justice

**Text 9 - *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 15:4-11**

The classic biblical source on responding to poverty and need

**Text 10 - Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “Taking Action”**

Balancing *chesed* and *tzedek*

**Text 11 (Video) - Ruth Messinger, *CCAR One Minute of Wonder: Working Toward Justice***

Connecting *tzedek* to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Activity 4 - Journaling**

Reflecting on personal experiences of and evolving feelings about *chesed* and *tzedek*

**Enduring Understandings**

- In both Jewish texts and contemporary society, there are many different words used to describe responding to problems in the world.
- *Chesed* (loving-kindness) often refers to acts of direct service that address immediate problems or needs.
- *Tzedek* (justice) often refers to acts that address the systems and structures in society

that create problems or needs.

- *Tzedakah* (charity) often refers to the act of giving money in order to address a problem or need, usually poverty.
- *Tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is a phrase that has come to be identified with any action that seeks to fix problems in the world, but has actually been used in more limited ways over the course of Jewish history. Understanding its original usages can guide social justice practice today.
- Some people use Jewish texts and concepts to validate pre-existing political positions and perspectives rather than studying these texts without bias to see what wisdom they shed on social justice issues.
- The advantages of *chesed* are that it brings people into direct relationship and can provide immediate relief.
- The advantage of *tzedek* is that, by addressing root causes, it can prevent future problems and needs, and is thus a more sustainable response.
- Many social justice efforts in the Jewish community have been focused on *chesed*; this course seeks to identify social justice with *tzedek* and encourage participants to adopt an approach that includes more *tzedek*.

## 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  
 25 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  
 30 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  
 35 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.”

...

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

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 1

In exploring the moment of righteous indignation, Cohen offers examples from a range of contemporary issues, including poverty, labor rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigration. A key element of all of these examples is that they involve human suffering that is the result of injustice or immorality, such as unequal wealth distribution or the limiting of civil rights. Of course, there are other causes of human suffering such as illness and loss, which also may provoke an angry response (how could someone die so young?!); however, Cohen is concerned specifically with injustice.

Cohen compares righteous indignation to the concept of *taromet*. In Jewish texts, *taromet* is the righteous rage that a person feels when they have been morally wronged by the

legal system in a way that is not legally actionable. For example, Rambam (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Hiring, 9:3) describes a situation in which a person sends an agent to hire workers who will be paid four *zuz*. When hiring the workers, the agent instead designates a rate of three *zuz*. According to Rambam, even if the work is worth four *zuz*, the workers should be paid three *zuz*, because they agreed to those terms; but they may have *taromet* toward the agent. Cohen equates this type of “righteous rage,” which has no legal remedy, with the “righteous indignation” that people feel when confronting injustice that may not be illegal but nonetheless contradicts their sense of morality.

Cohen calls the second moment—the moment in which a person decides to respond to the injustice they have noticed—“the *hineni* moment.” When characters say “*hineni*” in the Tanakh, the connotation is a readiness to respond actively to being called. As Cohen notes, *hineni* is Moshe’s response to God at the burning bush. It is also Avraham’s response when God calls him to sacrifice Yitzchak (and also when the angel calls to him to stop), and Shmuel’s response when he first hears God calling him (1 *Shmuel* 3:4).

The course opens with this text for several reasons. First, the course is intended to not only educate about the intersection of Judaism and social justice but also to motivate participants and support them in taking concrete action. As such, it is instructive for participants to be mindful of their own processes of moving from obliviousness to awareness to righteous indignation to action. Cohen’s framework helps participants break down this process and reflect on their own activism. They can consider questions such as:

- Which issues or experiences cause you to feel righteous indignation? When you feel righteous indignation, what is your response?
- Have you experienced a moment when you have said (either to yourself or to others), “*Hineni*. Here I am, ready to take action”?
- If/when you decide to take action, what types of action are you likely to take, and why?

Second, while Cohen is describing a process that all social justice activists go through, his use of Jewish texts and concepts (*taromet* and *hineni*) provide a clear example of what Jewish social justice looks and sounds like. While the question of what is Jewish about social justice will be addressed more explicitly in later lessons, it can be useful to call participants’ attention to the impact of Cohen’s language and connections to Judaism. How would this

article resonate with them differently if Cohen provided this framework of righteous indignation igniting action without the connections to *taromet* and *hineni*?

Finally, Cohen's piece anticipates the main theme of this lesson: the difference between *chesed* and *tzedek*, and he implicitly emphasizes *tzedek*. His examples of issues that lead people to experience *taromet*—violations of the rights of workers, LGBTQ people, and immigrants—are systemic justice issues. His examples of different actions that can be taken—email petitions, demonstrations, voting, and civil disobedience—would be characterized as *tzedek* responses, addressing the systemic injustice that causes suffering, rather than *chesed* responses, addressing the immediate needs of those who are suffering. At this point in the lesson, participants will likely not notice this because the difference between *chesed* and *tzedek* has not yet been taught. However, this subtle point could be revisited toward the end of the lesson.



## 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. This personal reflection serves several purposes. First, it makes the learning immediately relevant and personal, and communicates to participants that this course is not merely theoretical, but also practical. Second, it helps participants identify an issue or two on which they would like to take action. Finally, it helps them dig into the terms of *chesed* and *tzedek*, as different issues may relate more or less to each of these conceptual frameworks.

**Activity 1, Non-digital Option**

1. Invite participants as a group to brainstorm social justice issues. The list will likely include items such as: poverty, hunger, homelessness, anti-Semitism, racism, climate change/environmentalism, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigration.
2. Ask participants to spend a few minutes thinking about the issues on the list and then to indicate the two issues that they are most passionate about.
3. Ask participants to respond to the following prompt in their journals:
  - a. Which two issues are you most passionate about?
  - b. What is it about these issues that makes you feel taromet/righteous indignation?
4. Invite participants to share their responses with a partner.
5. Facilitate discussion on the results using the following questions:
  - a. What, if anything, about these results surprises you? Why? If there was consensus:
  - b. Why do you think these issues are most important to people in this group?
  - c. If there wasn't consensus: Why do you think there was such a range of responses among the people in this group? Might gender and/or age play a role in people's responses? If so, what might explain these differences?
  - d. What do these responses mean to us about the possibility of taking collective action?

**Note:** Facilitators should plan to use the data gathered in this activity to inform their planning for Lesson 4, in which a guest speaker presents to the group about local social justice issues and/or an issue about which the group has expressed interest.

## Activity 1, Digital Option Using PollEverywhere

For background information and instructions for using PollEverywhere, see *Guide to Using Digital Options* in the Introduction to the Course.

The screenshot displays the PollEverywhere interface for a poll titled "What social justice issues are present in today's world?". The poll is currently inactive, as indicated by the "Activate" button. The interface includes a top navigation bar with "Polls", "Participants", and "Reports". A right-hand sidebar contains configuration options such as "Visual settings", "Activate", "Show new", "Lock", "Clear results", and "Fullscreen". The main area shows the poll question and a "Top" button. Below the question, it states "No responses received yet. They will appear here...". At the bottom, there are "Next" and "Previous" buttons. The footer includes the Poll Everywhere logo and an "Upgrade to enable" button.

### Before the Session

Using PollEverywhere, [create a new Q & A Poll](#). The Q & A Poll allows participants to first add responses, and then up-vote or down-vote from the list submitted by all the participants.

### During the Session

1. Invite participants as a group to brainstorm social justice issues by submitting responses to PollEverywhere. Be sure that [the poll has been activated](#). The list will likely include items such as: poverty, hunger, homelessness, anti-Semitism, racism, climate change/environmentalism, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigration. Remind participants to submit responses, but *not yet click the up or down arrows that appear on their screen*.
2. Ask participants to spend a few minutes thinking about the issues on the list.
3. Ask participants to respond to the following prompt in their journals:
  - a. Which two issues are you most passionate about?
  - b. What is it about these issues that makes you feel *targeted*/righteous indignation?
4. Invite participants to share their responses with a partner.
5. Now, ask participants to indicate the two issues that they are most passionate about by [upvoting](#) 2 of the issues that are listed in the PollEverywhere responses.
6. Facilitate discussion on the polling results using the following questions:
  - a. What, if anything, about these results surprises you? Why?
  - b. If there was consensus: Why do you think these issues are most important to people in this group?
  - c. If there wasn't consensus: Why do you think there was such a range of responses among the people in this group? Might gender and/or age play a role in people's responses? If so, what might explain these differences?
  - d. What do these responses mean to us about the possibility of taking collective action?

**Note:** Facilitators should plan to use the data gathered in this activity to inform their planning for Lesson 4, in which a guest speaker presents to the group about local social justice issues and/or an issue about which the group has expressed interest.

## ACTIVITY 2

### SOCIAL JUSTICE TERMS CHALK-TALK

#### Introduction

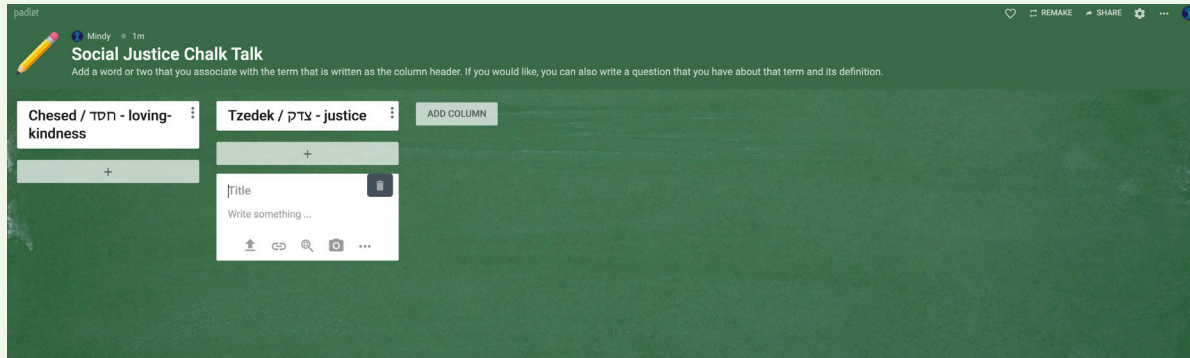
There are many ways to respond to need and suffering in the world, and similarly, there are multiple terms that are used in both Jewish tradition and general society to describe this work. This activity will expose participants to the range of terms that are used and offer definitions for those terms. 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.

#### Activity 2, Non-digital Option

- Explain to participants that both Jewish tradition and general society use many different terms to refer to helping people and addressing need and suffering.
- Post the terms listed below and their definitions around the room.
- Invite participants to walk around the room with a marker and to write on each poster a word or two that they associate with the term that is defined on that poster. If they would like, participants can also write a question that they have about that term and its definition.
- Explain that as the lesson and course progress, many of these terms will be revisited and will help to clarify what social justice means.

## Activity 2, Digital Option Using Padlet

For background information and instructions for using Padlet, see Guide to Using Digital Options in the Introduction to the Course.



### Before the Session

Using Padlet, create a new [Shelf Padlet Wall](#). Padlet will automatically populate colors and backgrounds, but facilitators can easily [modify these settings](#) in the set-up process or by clicking on the gear icon in the top right corner of the screen.

Add the terms below as the names of your columns. The list below—including the Hebrew—can be copied and pasted directly into the Padlet.

### During the Session

- Explain to participants that both Jewish tradition and general society use many different terms to refer to helping people and addressing need and suffering.
- Before giving participants the link to the Padlet, share it on the large screen/projector. Give a *tour* of the Padlet wall, pointing out the column titles, the plus sign for adding to each column, and how to scroll left and right to see all the columns.
  - Choose one of the columns to create a sample post. Model putting the individual's name and the date in the "Title" field and the words or questions in the "Write something" field.

**TIP:** Adding a name is optional. If you want all responses to be anonymous, ask participants not to add their names in any field. Adding the date, however, will enable participants to see the progress of ideas as more posts are added throughout the course.

- Invite participants to *click on the plus sign* in each column to add a word or two that they associate with the term that is written as the column header. If they would like, participants can also write a question that they have about that term and its definition.

Explain that as the lesson and course progress, many of these terms will be revisited and will help to clarify what *social justice* means. Once created, Padlets remain live and active unless they are manually closed for posting. You can return to this Padlet throughout the course to continue to expand on these ideas and reflect on how your thinking has evolved.

**Chesed / חסד - loving-kindness**

**Tzedek / צדק - justice**

**Tzedakah / צדקה - philanthropy**

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

**Kevod HaBriyot / כבוד הבריות - 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.

## ANALYSIS - TEXT 2

Ruttenberg defines *chesed* as “loving-kindness” and characterizes it as the practice of caring for someone else. It is a voluntary, individual act, often (but not always) motivated by a personal connection. Examples of *chesed* include giving food to someone who is hungry or visiting someone who is sick.

In describing *tzedakah*, which derives from the Hebrew root **ק-ד-צ** (*tzedek*), justice, and refers to the obligation to give money to people in need, Ruttenberg addresses two areas of complexity. First, she refers to “Rambam’s ladder” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7) which lays out a hierarchy of ways of giving. The lowest level of *tzedakah* is giving unhappily, while the highest form is giving in such a way as to enable the recipient to be self-sufficient and no longer in need of *tzedakah*. The second issue that Ruttenberg raises is the question of where a person’s donation is directed, particularly if it goes to a nonprofit rather than an individual. If *tzedakah* goes to cover the overhead costs of the organization rather than directly serving people in need, is it truly *tzedakah*? While these two issues are not the main point of the video, they do raise important questions about *tzedakah* that may be explored at other points during the course.

Ruttenberg defines *tzedek* as justice that creates a better world by changing the systems and structures at the root of inequality. *Tzedek* involves asking why social problems exist—why do poverty, hunger, and homelessness exist?—and seeks to address the causes. To illustrate this definition, Ruttenberg offers an analogy of people of different heights trying to watch a baseball game over a fence. In the first image, each person is standing on the same sized crate, which enables the taller ones to see over the fence, but the view of the shorter ones is still blocked. In the second image, the crates are of different sizes, enabling each person to see over the fence or “get what they want.” This is the minimum of justice. In the final image, the fence itself is removed. This is true *tzedek*, or social justice, when the system is changed so that there is no need to worry about having supports that bolster people because instead no one is kept out.

The analogy of the fence also can help participants understand why social justice often meets with fierce opposition, as removing the fence fundamentally changes the relationship between those on the inside and outside as well as the entire nature of the business of baseball. When analyzing the original purpose of the fence, one can imagine that it was constructed to ensure that the baseball stadium would not become overcrowded and that the owners could make money through ticket sales. In removing the fence and giving access to all, the exclusive benefits and privileges of those on the “inside” are diminished. Similarly, in society, when access is granted to all, those who had been privileged by the system may stand to lose some of their advantages. Not only that, but removing the fence may lead to the dismantling of the baseball team. If the owners can no longer charge for tickets, they may not be able to pay the players or the team’s other expenses. Similarly, in society, guaranteeing access to all may interfere with free-market capitalism and change the very nature of the economy. Imagining such a seismic shift can be challenging and overwhelming and often leads some people to oppose radical social change.

Ruttenberg describes *chesed* and *tzedakah* as important practices for responding to the needs of today, and *tzedek* as critically important for preventing these needs from existing in the future. While Ruttenberg is careful to articulate the importance and usefulness of all three practices, she implies that *tzedek* is the most important because it addresses the root causes of injustice, thereby ensuring that the injustice will be eradicated in the future. Viewing the video in relation to the following texts will help participants dig into the relative merits of *tzedek* and *chesed*.

## ACTIVITY 3 CASE STUDY

### Introduction

Now that participants have been introduced to three different ways of responding to need—*chesed*, *tzedakah*, and *tzedek*—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.

There are three options for choosing an issue to explore.

1. Break up into small groups based on which issues participants voted for in the initial activity, grouping people who voted for the same issue.
2. Have the whole group work together on the issue that got the most votes in the initial activity.
3. Use the prepared case study below.

Options 1 and 2 have the advantage of being most directly relevant to participants because they focus on issues that participants are passionate about. However, they require more improvisation in order to create a case study or scenario on the fly. Option 3 has the advantage of already being prepared, but may be less relevant to the interests of the group. Consider starting with Option 3 and using the prepared case study as an example and then inviting participants to try Option 1 or 2 with an issue that arose for their group.

### Activity

1. Explain to participants that they will now apply the approaches of *chesed*, *tzedakah*, and *tzedek* to a specific social justice issue.
2. Choose one of the following options:
  - a. Option 1
    - i. Invite participants to get into groups based on the issue that was most important to them (from the first activity).
    - ii. Ask them to construct a situation of need based on that issue.
    - iii. Ask participants to describe a *chesed* response, a *tzedakah* response, and a *tzedek* response to the situation. You may want to let participants know that it is not always clear whether a specific response is best characterized

- as *chesed*, *tzedakah*, or *tzedek*, and that they should be prepared for some respectful debate on the matter.
- b. Option 2
    - i. Together with participants, construct a situation of need based on the issue that received the most votes in the first activity.
    - ii. Ask participants to describe a *chesed* response, a *tzedakah* response, and a *tzedek* response to the situation. You may want to let participants know that it is not always clear whether a specific response is best characterized as *chesed*, *tzedakah*, or *tzedek*, and that they should be prepared for some respectful debate on the matter.
  - c. Option 3
    - i. Share the situation below about poverty.
    - ii. Ask participants to describe a *chesed* response, a *tzedakah* response, and a *tzedek* response to the situation. You may want to let participants know that it is not always clear whether a specific response is best characterized as *chesed*, *tzedakah*, or *tzedek*, and that they should be prepared for some respectful debate on the matter.
3. Take some time to discuss the different responses that participants generated.
  4. Explain to participants that they are going to look at a range of classical and contemporary Jewish texts that explore these (and other) terms in greater depth, texts that help explain the different responses people can have to need. (As you look at the sources, you may want to bring participants' attention back to their case studies to see how the texts deepen their understanding of the terms and the types of responses they can have to human need.)

### 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 *zedakah*.

### 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 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 giving every one his due, and of showing kindness to every being according as it deserves.

Translation from Friedlander, 1903.

## ANALYSIS - TEXT 3

Rambam (Maimonides) explains that *chesed* usually refers to overflowing kindness that is extended to someone who has no claim on it. In the previous source, the video described *chesed* from the perspective of the one doing *chesed* and focused on its voluntary nature. Rambam takes the perspective of the recipient and emphasizes the corollary, which is that the recipient has no right to claim the kindness. To further illustrate the concept of *chesed*, Rambam offers the example of God’s relationship to the world. The world, and everything in it, did nothing to deserve its existence; thus, God’s creation of the world and all that God provides to the world are pure *chesed*.

In defining *tzedakah*, Rambam focuses on the root of the word, which is *tzedek*. Rambam defines *tzedek* as “righteousness” and uses the language of rights. In contrast to *chesed*, in which the recipient has no claim to the kindness, *tzedek* assumes that each person is entitled to “their due” and is about ensuring that these rights are fulfilled. In this text, Rambam does not explore whether different people are entitled to different things; however, in today’s world, in which human rights are understood to be universal, *tzedek* can mean ensuring that each person’s human rights are realized.

Participants can compare and contrast Rambam’s definition of these terms with the definitions that Ruttenberg offers in the video. What is similar and what is different? What does each add to our understanding of social justice work? One particular point of contrast is the emphasis in the video on the obligations of the giver versus Rambam’s emphasis on the rights of the recipient. Do participants see a practical difference in terms of actions or outcomes based on these different emphases? Why might someone choose the language of rights versus obligations or vice versa?

## 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 *tzedekah* in three respects:**

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

*Tzedekah* [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  
 כגופו בין בממונו צדקה לעניים גמילות חסדים בין לעניים בין לעשירים צדקה לחיים גמילות  
 חסדים בין לחיים בין למתים.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 4

Previous texts in this lesson have defined *tzedek* in contrast to *chesed*, emphasizing the voluntary nature of *chesed* versus the obligatory nature of *tzedek* and the way in which *chesed* responds to immediate needs while *tzedek* addresses structural inequality. This text explicitly compares *chesed* to *tzedekah* and finds *chesed* to be “*yoter*”—more. The Talmud seems to be arguing that *chesed* is more inclusive, although not necessarily “better,” because of three aspects of *chesed*: It can be done through multiple means (not only financial), for different types of people (not only the poor), and even for those who are no longer living.



While this text discusses the advantages of *chesed* over *tzedakah* (not *tzedek*), its arguments in favor of *chesed* can also apply to a comparison between *chesed* and *tzedek*. Although this course equates *tzedek* with social justice and prompts participants to engage in activism that addresses structural inequality rather than only immediate needs, it does not dismiss the value of *chesed*. In some instances (such as natural disasters), *chesed* is the only logical first response, as there are acute, immediate needs. As later texts in this lesson will demonstrate, *chesed* is also a core component for addressing inequality and injustice, because it brings people into relationship, building empathy and understanding.

In addition, participants in this course will likely have engaged in *chesed* prior to the course and will continue to do so, as many Jewish communities traditionally have focused on *chesed* throughout the centuries. This emphasis on *chesed* may relate to the historical reality that for centuries Jews lacked the political power to change societal systems that perpetuated injustice and therefore focused their energies on addressing more immediate needs through *chesed*. As such, this lesson affirms the value of *chesed* and encourages participants to identify more concretely its special qualities so that they can engage more thoughtfully and maximize these advantages more intentionally.

Since this text does discuss *tzedakah* explicitly, it can be an opportunity to further explore the terms of *chesed*, *tzedek*, and *tzedakah* through a conversation about how classical Jewish sources would characterize the *tzedakah* that participants give today. One example to explore is a donation to the American Cancer Society. Much of the *tzedakah* that is given today is given through umbrella organizations like the ACS that engage in research, advocacy, awareness-raising, and direct service, whereas *tzedakah* during the time of the Talmud was much more direct and almost entirely in response to poverty. Because a donation to the ACS does not include relational or interpersonal involvement, the Talmud would probably not characterize it as *chesed*. However, the ACS does provide patient support, so perhaps that donation would count as *tzedakah* that supports *chesed*. Using Rambam's definition of *tzedek* as advocating for someone's rights, a check to the ACS also probably constitutes *tzedek*, particularly if one believes that access to healthcare is a right.

## 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 ימוך אחיך ומטה ידו עמך והחזקת בו גר ותושב וחי עמך:

#### Rashi on *Vayikra* 25:35

- 5 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  
5 והחזקת בו - אל תניחהו שיירד ויפול ויהיה קשה להקימו אלא חזקהו משעת מוטת היד למה זה דומה למשאוי שפעל החמור עודהו על החמור אחד תופס בו ומעמידו נפל לארץ חמשה אין מעמידין אותו.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 5

Rashi's comment is a slight expansion and explanation of the interpretation of this biblical verse in the Sifra, the legal *midrash* on the book of Vayikra. This interpretation supports addressing root causes of poverty and injustice, an approach that aligns with this course's suggested understanding of *tzedek*. The straightforward reading of the verse seems to be that if a person becomes impoverished, the community should help them, regardless of their origins. Rashi interprets the phrase "you should strengthen him" to mean that financial struggles should be anticipated and addressed as soon as possible, as soon as the descent into poverty begins. Rashi likens this to the mechanics of keeping a load secure on the back of a donkey: if it starts to slide off, one attentive person can catch it and re-secure it. But if it falls to the ground, many people will be needed to replace it (proverbially, a stitch in time saves nine).

Rashi frames the argument as one of efficiency and effectiveness, but there is also a dimension of respect and human dignity that informs the approach of *tzedek* or focusing on root causes and structural inequality or injustice. Systems that help recently unemployed people find new jobs go much farther toward preserving their dignity than waiting until they are homeless and then providing them with food and shelter. Facilitators may want to point out that Rambam quotes this verse from *Vayikra* as proof that the highest level of *tzedakah* is enabling someone to become self-sufficient. This text appears in Lesson 9, Text 2.

Finally, Rashi's approach acknowledges and responds to the human inclination to respond to desperate poverty, rather than finding ways to prevent it. For example, almost a year before a famine struck Niger in 2005, international humanitarian agencies warned of the impending danger. But it was not until images of starving people appeared in the media that there was any significant humanitarian response. Had help come earlier, great suffering might have been averted, and at much lower cost. This tendency to be more responsive to desperate suffering is one of many reasons that acts of *chesed* may be more common than *tzedek*, and therefore supports the need to continue emphasizing the importance of *tzedek*.

## 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.
- ...
- 20 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.

40

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](http://NYTimes.com). Viewed March 2019.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 6

While Kristof isn't focused on *chesed* versus *tzedek* per se, his opinion piece can be instructive. While changing large-scale systems and structures—*tzedek*—can potentially help a much larger number of people, Kristof indicates that people would be less interested in supporting this kind of work. In contrast, engaging in direct, personal acts of service or kindness—*chesed*—has a much smaller impact, but Kristof indicates that people would be more interested.

This text can be connected back to Cohen's piece, and participants can reflect on what ignites their *taromet* or righteous indignation. Is it statistics or rational arguments? Or is it photographs or personal stories? And when they are ready to say "*hineni*," are they motivated to take a *tzedek* approach or a *chesed* approach, and why? This piece also can help participants take stock of their own communities' responses to need, which are likely more focused on *chesed* than *tzedek*. If Kristof's piece resonates with their experience, they can think about how to use research about human psychology to inspire social justice work that is more focused on *tzedek*.

## 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.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 7

The first paragraph of this excerpt summarizes four ways that the term “*tikkun olam*” has been used in Jewish text and tradition. Facilitators are encouraged to read the full analysis of the term *tikkun olam* on pages 25-40 of *There Shall Be No Needy* in which Jacobs explains the issue in greater detail. The analysis here provides only a brief summary of her explanations.

In the full text, Jacobs notes that the words *tikkun* and *olam* are themselves difficult to define since each word contains several ideas. The word *tikkun* can mean fix or repair and also establish. *Olam* refers to the physical world as well as to eternity and a sense of permanence. These ambiguities have allowed the phrase *tikkun olam* to be used in different ways in Jewish text and tradition.

The phrase first appears in the *Aleinu* prayer, which was written around the second century CE and now forms the conclusion of every Jewish prayer service. The second section of *Aleinu* focuses on the promise that divine sovereignty will encompass the world and includes the phrase *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*—to establish/fix the world under the kingdom of God. In the context of this prayer, *tikkun olam* is about removing idolatry so that manifestations of the divine can be spread throughout the world.

The second appearance of *tikkun olam* is in the Midrash, rabbinic interpretations of the Torah. In *midrashim* from the fifth century CE, *tikkun olam* is used in a more literal way to describe God’s actions that stabilized the physical world, such as dividing the waters on the second day of Creation.

Jacobs goes into great depth explaining how the phrase *tikkun ha'Olam* is used in the Mishnah, where it appears in ten different places. She describes three instances of how the term is used, including to remove ambiguity about whether a divorce is in effect, to clarify the status of a freed slave, and to establish a way for loans to be offered and repaid. Jacobs notes that what unites these situations is an action that the rabbis take to ensure that a legal detail does not bring down an entire system. She also notes that the rationale of “*mipnei tikkun olam*” is usually used to protect a vulnerable party, such as a divorced woman, a slave, or a poor person in need of a loan.



The fourth appearance of the phrase *tikkun olam* is in Lurianic kabbalah, a 16th-century mystical school led by Rabbi Isaac Luria in Tzefat. According to Lurianic kabbalah, creation involved a process of God's withdrawing part of the Divine Self to make room for the world. God re-entered the world through *sefirot* (aspects of Divine Presence) within vessels, but some vessels couldn't contain the *sefirot* and shattered, resulting in divine light mixing with the *kelipot* (shards) of the vessels. This introduced evil into the world. *Tikkun olam* refers to freeing the divine emanation from the *kelipot*, and it is achieved through acting in accordance with *halakhah* (Jewish law) and performing *mitzvot* (commandments).

Jacobs describes how, in the 1950s, *tikkun olam* re-entered popular usage as a term identified with social justice. It gained currency in the 1970s and '80s, particularly among progressive Jewish communities. At this point, it is used in popular discourse to refer to everything from direct service to political action to philanthropy. It is used by both the right and the left and has lost any particular meaning or identification with a specific vision of social justice.

In the final paragraph of the excerpt, Jacobs attempts to bring together the four aforementioned ways in which *tikkun olam* has been used in classical Jewish texts and to derive from these uses "an approach to Jewish action in the public sphere." Jacobs prioritizes the rabbinic definition (from the Mishnah) of *tikkun olam*, which allows for laws to be changed in order to promote a well-functioning and just society. She recognizes that a limitation of this choice is that it focuses on small changes to individual laws rather than large-scale social change in a global context. She therefore marshals the more global approaches of the other three uses to argue for an understanding of *tikkun olam* that is more expansive.

This text is included in this lesson in order to expand the conversation beyond *chesed*, *tzedek*, and *tzedakah* to include another Jewish formulation for responding to need in the world. Jacobs's analysis of the evolution of the term *tikkun olam* demonstrates how a rich knowledge of Jewish sources can inform deeper thinking about making change in society. Her emphasis on how rabbis manipulated the legal system in order to ensure its stability calls attention to how law interacts with social justice.

## 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  
 15 of the text: “The judge must not be gentle with one and tough on the other, or make 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.

20

. . .

### 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 rabbis and others across the denominational spectrum.

25

. . .

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.

30

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.

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### 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.” . . .

40

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.

45

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

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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.

55

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.

60

### 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?”

65

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.

70

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

*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.

80

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.

120 **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 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.

## ANALYSIS - TEXT 8

This text adds several other terms or concepts to the Jewish social justice lexicon, including "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*"—"justice, justice you shall pursue," which is referred to in Text 10 of this lesson. It also addresses *tikkun olam*, which is defined in Text 7 of this lesson, and *tzelem Elohim* and loving the stranger, which are both explored in Lesson 2 as motivations for engaging in social justice.

Facilitators can use this text to engage participants in a conversation about how using Hebrew words can make social justice activism feel more Jewish, like *taromet* and *hineni* in Text 1 of this lesson. Participants may consider to how accurately they believe the use of these terms needs to align with their original context.

This text also provides an opportunity to consider how interpretations of text relate to pre-existing beliefs. Salkin may be right that authentic use of these terms requires that they reflect the context in which they originally appear or have been interpreted in much of Jewish legal history. However, his closing question, regarding what would happen if people approached the text without a political agenda and allowed the wisdom of the text to guide their stances on political issues, assumes that it is possible to approach a text in such a way. Salkin acknowledges that most texts do not speak directly to the specific realities and policy questions of today. Therefore, in turning to these texts, a degree of interpretation and creative application will always be necessary. And any interpretation is likely affected in subtle ways by one's beliefs, values, and priorities. Facilitators can invite participants to reflect on the interactions between beliefs and textual interpretation.

As this course is full of Jewish texts and their interpretation, Salkin's critique is important to keep in mind. Facilitators may want to step back from time to time and ask participants to recall Salkin's piece and to analyze both whether the textual interpretations they are encountering in the course would meet Salkin's standards and to what extent their responses to and understandings of texts encountered in the course are influenced by their pre-existing political perspectives.

## BACKGROUND - TEXT 9

This biblical text about responding to people in need is the source for many laws about *zedakah*. 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 אֲבִיוֹן כִּי־בָרַךְ יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן־לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:  
ה רַק אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה  
הַיּוֹם:

ו כִּי־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּרַךְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לְךָ וְהִעֲבַטְתָּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאַתָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹט וּמִשְׁלַת בְּגוֹיִם רַבִּים  
וּבְךָ לֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ:

ז כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיוֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ לֹא תֹאמַר אֶת־  
לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ הָאֲבִיוֹן:



ח כִּי־פָתַח תְּפַתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לּוֹ וְהַעֲבַט תַּעֲבִיטְנוּ דֵי מַחְסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסֵר לּוֹ:  
ט הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ פֶּן־יִהְיֶה דְבַר עִם־לִבְּךָ בְּלִיעַל לְאֹמֵר קִרְבָּה שְׁנַת־הַשְּׂבַע שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה וְרָעָה עֵינֶיךָ  
בְּאַחִיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ וְקָרָא עָלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי תִטָּא:  
י נָתַן תִּתֵּן לוֹ וְלֹא־יִרַע לִבְּךָ בְּתַתָּהּ לוֹ כִּי בְגַלְלֵה הַדְּבַר הַזֶּה יִבְרַכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־מַעֲשֶׂה וּבְכָל  
מַשְׁלַח יָדְךָ:  
יא כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיּוֹן מִקְרֹב הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶיךָ לְאֹמֵר פָּתַח תְּפַתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאַחִיךָ לְעֵנֶיךָ  
וּלְאַבְיֹנְךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ:

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 9

*Devarim* 15:4-11 is one of the classic biblical texts about responding to people in need, and it forms the basis of many laws about giving *tzedakah*. It appears in the context of laws about the *shemittah* (sabbatical) year. Every seventh year was designated a *shemittah* year, in which the Land of Israel was to rest and not be cultivated. In addition, all debts were forgiven. These verses include the instruction to be generous in lending money, even when a *shemittah* year is approaching and a person might be inclined not to lend money since the *shemittah* year would cancel the debt. This text specifically refers to loans, but rabbinic texts have used these verses to derive many laws of *tzedakah*. While the text is included here primarily because of Jacobs’s interpretation of it (Text 10), it contains many features worth noticing and discussing.

The instruction in verse 7 not to harden one’s heart or shut one’s hand relates to a person’s attitude and demeanor when asked to give. This verse can be a springboard for conversations about how participants feel when directly confronted with need and with requests for assistance. The idea of softening or hardening one’s heart can be connected back to Kristof’s article related to the psychology of giving.

The language in verse 8 of “sufficient for whatever he needs” can spark rich conversation about what a person’s needs are and relates back to Rambam’s emphasis on rights versus obligations. What does a person “need,” and to what level of sustenance are they entitled?

Finally, the contradiction between the promise in verse 4 that poverty will not exist and the assertion in verse 11 that it will always exist raises questions about the inevitability of poverty. It is this question that Jacobs addresses in the following text.

## 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”

(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,  
 5 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.

10 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  
 15 regard advocates and organizers as out of touch with the urgent work on the ground.

20 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.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 10

Jacobs's analysis of *Devarim* 15:4-11 responds to a contradiction inherent in the text about whether poverty is a social ill that can be solved. Verse 4 seems to promise that poverty can be completely eradicated, whereas verse 11 seems to indicate that poverty will always exist.

Jacobs offers an interpretation of this contradiction, which is the central question of this lesson, that relates directly to the distinction between *chesed* and *tzedek*. She suggests that the optimistic promise of verse 4 imagines that poverty can indeed be eradicated and invites people to take the long view and work, *tzedek*-style, toward long-term systemic change that will prevent poverty from occurring. At the same time, verse 11 calls for a recognition that this change has not yet been achieved and requires people to work, *chesed*-style, to address the immediate needs of poor people in our communities.

Jacobs uses this interpretation of the biblical text to argue that both *chesed* and *tzedek* are essential responses to problems of need and inequality. She notes that people who are more actively engaged in one of these responses sometimes disparage the other. This observation can be an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own attitudes toward *chesed* and *tzedek*, and an invitation to identify the valuable elements in each.

## 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.

## ANALYSIS – TEXT 11

In the video, Messinger pushes the Jewish community to recognize that King advocated not only *chesed*, but also *tzedek*. In fact, in the speech referred to by Messinger, King seems somewhat ambivalent about *chesed*. At first he seems to support *chesed* by drawing an analogy to the parable of the good Samaritan (*Luke* 10:25-37). The good Samaritan assists people who are robbed and beaten on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho by bandaging their wounds, bringing them to an inn, and paying the innkeeper to look after them. The good Samaritan epitomizes *chesed*, and King urges his listeners to be good Samaritans. At the same time, King describes this approach of “flinging a coin to a beggar” as “haphazard and superficial,” implying that *chesed* is not always positive and must be done with empathy and intention. But whether *chesed* is positive or not, King is clear that it is not sufficient. He urges his listeners not only to be good Samaritans, but also to transform and restructure society—the *tzedek* approach—such that good Samaritans are less necessary because people are not suffering or being treated unfairly in the first place.

King’s speech at the Riverside Church, in which he argues strongly for systemic change, is the basis of a project spearheaded by Ruth Messinger to expand day of service in honor of King’s birthday to include learning and advocacy that address structural causes of injustice. The project, “The Talmud of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” treats excerpts of King’s speech as a sacred text and surrounds these excerpts with commentary from classical and contemporary Jewish texts. Facilitators are encouraged to share this resource with participants as an example of social justice learning that emphasizes *tzedek*.

Messinger acknowledges one challenge of the *tzedek* approach through an interpretation of *Devarim* 16:20, “*tzedek tzedek tirdof*—Justice, justice you shall pursue.” She notes that the verb “*tirdof*—to pursue” indicates that achieving justice is not easy; it requires action, persistence, and tenacity. Participants can respond to Messinger’s call to pursue *tzedek*, identifying what might be challenging about the *tzedek* approach and how they can commit to this work despite those challenges.

## ACTIVITY 4 JOURNALING

Invite participants to respond to the following prompts in their journals:

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?
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## SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS

This lesson has explored the term “social justice” mainly by introducing two key Jewish terms, *chesed* and *tzedek*, and various dimensions of each of these approaches in responding to need, oppression, and suffering. It has affirmed the value of *chesed*, which is identified with direct voluntary service, and noted that *chesed* is often the intuitive and relational approach that has been prioritized by many Jewish communities and individuals. At the same time, this lesson has emphasized the importance of *tzedek*, an approach to social justice that examines and seeks to alter the societal structures that privilege some people over others and are the root causes of this need, oppression, and suffering. Participants have been asked to reflect on how each of these approaches resonates with their personal experience and to imagine how they might begin to shift toward more *tzedek*-oriented social justice work.

# CONDUCTING THE LESSON

## **Text 1: Read and Discuss**

Introducing the course by exploring how we move from obliviousness to action

## **Activity 1**

Reflecting on personal interest in social justice

## **Activity 2**

An optional exercise to introduce a range of Jewish social justice terms

## **Text 2 (Video) and Case Study: Watch, Discuss, and Apply**

A short video homes in on three key Jewish social justice terms and explains the differences. A “case study exercise” concretizes the terms, applying them to real issues.

## **Texts 3-6: Read and Analyze**

Three classical sources and one contemporary article that deepen participants’ understanding of the pros and cons of *chesed* and *tzedek*. Facilitators may choose from among these sources.

## **Texts 7-8: Read and Discuss**

Two contemporary texts exploring other Jewish terms that are used to promote social justice

## **Texts 9-11: Read, Analyze, View, and Discuss**

Texts and a video that distinguish between direct service (*chesed*) and political advocacy (*tzedek*) in today’s Jewish community. Facilitators may choose to include some or all of these texts.

## **Journaling**

Reflecting on personal experiences of and reactions to *chesed* and *tzedek*.



## 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.