

Introduction by Ruth Messinger, Curriculum Consultant

Social justice is a particular type of response to the suffering, indignity, and inequity in our lives and in the larger world. It is **different** from a service response. It draws from text, from history, and from vision to remind us that people don't need to live this way—that we can make our economy, our society, and our global community better for ever larger numbers of us if we work together to change our laws and our culture. Social justice work goes beyond addressing short-term, immediate needs and identifies structural causes of injustice that people can and, we believe, must work to change.

The idea of social justice is rooted in Jewish teachings that convey unambiguously that we are obliged to care for the other and pursue justice, that we have a responsibility to address injustice and inequality in the communities and the society in which we live. It is further rooted in a belief in the essential dignity of all human beings and strives to realize that vision locally and all over the world. Over long periods of time social justice writers and activists have argued that for us to do this work well we must hold our governments and their leaders accountable and be prepared to pursue systems change.

WHY THIS COURSE, WHY NOW

A course like this would be important for Jews at any time. That is because it emphasizes our commitment to pursue justice, to go beyond individual care giving and service *mitzvot*, to challenge the way things are. It comports directly to the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that, "In a free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty but all are responsible."

And **no** time is more important than now, with new political alignments, shifting attitudes, and changing policies across the globe. In virtually every country, we see new questions being raised about what is happening. Regardless of political affiliation, people are newly troubled, looking for some perspective on how we got here and how we might make change; they want to know what more they can do, which Jewish teachings shed light on the situation, and what tools exist with which to respond.

This course can deepen and transform a group's understanding of who they are, how they relate to others, what roles they want to play in the community or country or world in which they live. It can galvanize interested community members to engage in advocacy, to craft impactful campaigns that will address suffering and indignity, both local and global. It can help participants root those responses in Jewish text and Jewish history and Jewish values. And it can help individuals already engaged in social justice actions understand their work Jewishly and help them engage other Jews in joining their efforts.

HOW THIS COURSE IS DESIGNED

First and foremost, this course will follow the general structure of Melton courses, with a wealth of materials taken from ancient and contemporary sources and an explicit guide for any facilitator. Each lesson will include more material than is possible to address in the time allotted, inviting facilitators to choose among texts and activities as appropriate.

The course will seek to not just define but grapple directly with what social justice **is** and **is not**; with how it aligns with, complements, and goes beyond the powerful service activities that many communities are already engaged in. It will address not just the **what** question, but the **why**, the **where**, the **who**, the **when**, and the **how**.

Course participants will be able to explore their own relationship to the history of Jewish social justice movements and to mine the resources of Torah and tradition for insights into how we can build a just society. They will look at some of our most fundamental texts, the teachings of our sages, and the observations of our contemporary rabbis and educators.

Participants will examine the reasons these texts and luminaries give for pursuing justice, and will consider disagreements that exist about whether, why, and how we should do this work. Attention will be given to the question of which work is best done individually and which work might be undertaken by the class, the congregation, or the organization. Attention also will be given to the tensions between local and global work, and between work for Jews and work for others.

Groups studying this curriculum will be encouraged to use some of their time to read case studies, to see how others have worked together to explore issues of particular interest to them and be encouraged to do the same.

Overall, we intend that, in studying Jewish sources, Jewish history, and Jewish work, participants will acquire a deep understanding not only of what Jews think about and have done in the pursuit of justice in the past, but of what Jews can do now, individually and collectively, to help heal the world in which they live.

Special Features

We imagine that at least some participants will be asking themselves and each other what more they might do in a particular thematic area. Accordingly, we have structured into the curriculum a central opportunity for any group taking the course to reflect on the situation in their local geographic area, or the country as a whole, and to identify specific social justice challenges they want to address.

This is the first Melton curriculum that offers the option of expanded use of technology, identifying various novel means for facilitators and students to use digital tools as part of their work together. We think these tools create new ways for program participants to express their particular interests, develop a group perspective, and make their learning and thinking more visible to one another. Each of these tools is explained, indicating what technology is needed, how they can be used, and what their value is in the context of the course—although we recognize that not every site and not every group will be able to or will want to utilize these tools.

Also, we encourage participants throughout the class to do individual journal writing or “logging” to indicate if the class content is responsive not only to their theoretical but to their practical or pragmatic interests in acting for justice in their communities. We hope and have planned that participants will take some time to consider how they might want to act on what they are learning and believe that the journaling exercises at the end of each lesson can help participants move from study to action.