

INTRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER HEBREW

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My work in various media over the last thirty-five years has been an exploration of the idea of social justice, and so it is profoundly gratifying to have been invited to address a meeting of students who are in the vanguard—what echoes of an earlier day that word sets going—of the movement. Thirty years ago, as this is written, in the dramatic year 1968, I became editor of *Environment* magazine, one of the new publications of the time. We were Marxists; I was a graduate student in biology, a member of the Students for a Democratic Society; and we thought the government and the economy could be managed better to serve human needs more equally and more justly, within environmental constraints.

In the intervening years I have learned some things from practice, and some from study. It seems to me now that justice is not an abstract principle—justice happens in a moment, in a time and a place when people are at home in their surroundings, free and able to realize themselves within the larger community.

Government and laws, we are repeatedly reminded during this symposium, while sometimes means for accomplishing social justice, as thirty years ago we hoped they would be, are also and as often obstacles. Government is most commonly an obstacle when it takes abstract principles to extremes; as Father Salis put it, a principle taken to its logical conclusion can be totalitarian. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's law-enforcement program, however welcome in some respects, becomes a problem in itself because of his blindness; environmental law, the protection of wilderness, even civil rights can be problems when taken to logical extremes.

This symposium reminds us that justice is not an abstract principle, but something that happens, something that people choose to do. It must be nurtured and cultivated wherever we find ourselves; it requires constant application of the energy and devotion that we saw so admirably on display during this symposium.

My audience, I hope, will pardon my rehearsing some memories of earlier such moments. Recent events left me custodian of my birth-family's records, in which I found my parents' citizenship papers. There, in the spaces marked "race" is written, "Hebrew." This odd fact prompts a number of thoughts. No one would call me a "Hebrew" now; in the racial categories of today I am an aging white man in a position of comparative privilege.

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Although I long ago ceased to be a Hebrew, I did spend many years as a Jew, which is a somewhat different matter. In the New York City in which I grew up, "Jew" was a broad, generic designation; one was conscious of more refined categories and had a more local and communal sense of race. My family were Eastern European proletarians of the Left: "JewCommie" was the term conveniently painted on a wall in foot-high letters where I could study it on my way to school each morning. Accurate enough, taking it in a purely descriptive sense. We lived beside the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' cooperative housing project in the Bronx, established there by the Communist-led union that my mother had helped to organize, at some risk to her life, in the 1920s. We had our own newspapers in English and Yiddish, our own culture and ideology, and were often at odds, potentially at war, with the Zionist community in Brooklyn of which my aunt Anna was a leading member.

I am reminded of a moment fifty years ago, in another epochal year, 1948, the year in which under strong American prompting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and the State of Israel came into being. That year, my family marched in the annual May Day parade down Fifth Avenue to Union Square.

In my seven-year-old's memory it was a sunny, cool, windy day. The war was over, the fathers had come home, hope was in the very sunlight of the day. We marched in little groups, each carrying our own banners. There was the blue and white of the triumphant Zionists, the Communist red, the Irish green, the Irish orange; there were brown, black and yellow banners.

The warring ideas and abstract principles for which we were ready to fight, and for which many of those present that day have since died, did not all turn out well. Some, in retrospect, seem gravely wrong. What mattered in the long run, I think, was the parade itself, the all-encompassing march for social justice.

Justice is not an idea but something that happens easily and naturally when it is not opposed. Justice is so rare and difficult to accomplish only because everywhere and at all times it has enemies: the first of which is a cynical ambition that uses the strong forces of community, the passions of nationality, race, religion and sexuality, to bind some and exclude others; to create a little totalitarian state which some coterie can command. There is another enemy of justice that is even more common, and less aware of itself: the self-regarding complacency of the privileged, who ignore history and forget the means by which privilege is always accomplished.

The students who organized this symposium have pushed and carried Vermont Law School into their great parade; for this and much else I thank them once again, these young people whose multi-colored banners snap so bravely in the cool sunlight, despite the winds that would blow them down.