

Beshallah 5775 Tzelem is Launched

Rabbi Aaron Goldstein
31 January 2015



Conclusion by Danny Siegel (*Before The Rain*, p. 3)

*The Good People everywhere
Will teach anyone who wants to know
How to fix all things breaking and broke in this world –
Including hearts and dreams –
And along the way we will learn such things as
Why we are here
And what we are supposed to be doing
With our hands and minds and souls and our time.
That way, we can hope to find out why
We were given a human heart,
And that way,
We can hope to know
The hearts of other human beings
And the heart of the world.*

This Wednesday with a – it must be admitted, wonderfully dissonant in any classical sense – chorus of *shofarot* ringing around Speaker's House in Parliament, Tzelem: the Rabbinic Call for Social and Economic Justice in the UK was launched. I am proud that Rabbi Lea is part of the Steering Team and that the two of us are utterly committed to providing leading voices in the Rabbinic Call. As I mentioned last week, we do so for different reasons and in different ways, much as the wonderfully diverse bunch of Rabbis and Cantors that constitute Tzelem.

"Tzelem is a cross-communal campaigning organisation which provides rabbinic and cantorial voices on matters of social and economic justice in the UK.

It is founded on the Jewish principle that we are all created b'tzelem Elohim - in the image of God. We believe that every person is equally significant before the divine, all human beings are equal, all human beings are unique and most importantly all human beings are of infinite value. Tzelem uses Jewish teachings to integrate Judaism into matters of social and economic justice.

The Jewish People and our Teachings have a proud tradition of fighting for social and economic justice. This is rooted in the Hebrew Prophets' impassioned advocacy of the rights of the marginal and the powerless. Their ancient call to actions stirs us today to speak out on issues of social and economic justice. We seek to continue that tradition by taking action and providing a critique to the problems at the root of our society, our economy and our treatment of the vulnerable (<http://www.tzelem.uk/#!mission-statement/c117n>)."

Why now?

Launched around Holocaust Memorial Day and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, *yizkor* – we remember all the suffering of our people, that of ancient times and of yesterday, which is hard-wired into our Jewish DNA and narrative. We were strangers in Egypt, we were oppressed, afflicted and forced into slave labour. And by a gift from God, some of us, not all of us by any means, survived. We survived so that after time we could acknowledge God's Oneness and the gift we received and sing *Mi Chamocho* to *Adonaïm* the shores of the Sea of Reeds...but our narrative does not conclude there, it continues: So look out for the strangers, those in need, those with no one to shout aloud for them. Remember, you were slaves in Egypt, I am the Eternal One Your God.

Sadly, the need for Tzelem is also apposite, coming amidst fear and fear-mongering following the hideous attacks in Paris. As Rabbis Danny Rich and Charley Baginsky, together with Liberal Judaism's Chairman Lucian Hudson wrote last week:

"While the Paris tragedy and the spike in antisemitic incidents during last summer's Gaza conflict demand that we remain vigilant and support individuals who are feeling vulnerable, reports from Liberal Judaism constituents seem to affirm the truism that "Britain is good for the Jews and the Jews are good for Britain".

The challenge of [negative] reports...is that they do not constitute evidence of an actual increased risk of attack but rather they increase the risk of the Jewish community cutting itself off from the wider community and retreating to fortress synagogues, schools and community centres. It is impossible to contribute to an open, welcoming and inclusive society while locking ourselves away; and we cannot confront prejudice if we see only malevolence in our neighbours. The only meaningful, long-term response to antisemitism is to reach out to those of other faiths and of none, to study and work together, and – through our openness – give the lie to the ignorance and hatred that lurks behind sealed doors (<http://www.liberaljudaism.org/news/1022-the-only-meaningful-response-to-antisemitism-is-openness.html>)."

And Tzelem is absolutely needed today because of the ridiculous statistics that abound every day: The stupid numbers of those unable to gain access to mental health support, the children who live in poverty and their parents who go without meals to provide their children with a meager morsel, the immigrant who is stigmatized by a selfish, ignorant society and the homeless person that could be us but for the grace of God. There is a desperate need for our affluent society to get it right now before it is too late.

It is about saying, 'it is not good enough that we share the aim of making sure that we are comfortable. It is about providing the impetus for all to say: 'we want to make sure that we are comfortable AND that each person in our society, our community, our family and we are comfortable.'" When we order our focus in such a way, we know that we will be comfortable, *because* our family is so and our community is *because* our society is.

Cynicism abounds when someone like me gets up and makes such a statement. In Biblical days, prophets were run out of town for challenging the comfortable to open their ears, eyes and hearts to the poverty that surrounded their beautiful home. I am not a prophet, nor is Rabbi Lea or any of the other Rabbis and Cantors who will speak out on behalf of Tzelem: the Rabbinic Call for Social and Economic Justice in the UK. We are ordinary people who have stepped forward to be *shlichim tzibbur* – representatives of the public. We intend to discharge our duty.

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