Tikkun Olam: To Repair the World

BY JEREMY JONES

> Justice, Justice shall you pursue that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God has given you. (Deut.16:20)

In the early 1980s one of the major issues on the international human rights agenda was that of the treatment of Jews and others within the USSR. For the Jewish community, this was arguably the priority issue of the time and the Australian Jewish community is recognised as having played a key role in advocating for the rights of Jews within the Soviet Union to either be permitted freedom of emigration or to be allowed freedom to practice their religion, free of persecution.

Our public activities included petitions, writing articles for newspapers, appealing to our government to intervene and, whenever and wherever appropriate, demonstrating and protesting when various Soviet representatives visited these shores. With the Embassy of the Soviet Union being located in Canberra, there were many occasions on which I drove from Sydney to spend my Sundays holding a placard or joining in songs of freedom in an effort to keep the issue before the Australian public and our politicians.

On the last of these occasions, my newly-purchased secondhand car stopped running as I cruised into Canberra, with the gear box seizing just as I reached the Canberra Rex Hotel, the venue for this conference. Needless to say, I missed that demonstration but, as the *Australian Jewish News* put it, I had a protest of my own to look after on the next day.

For so many Jewish people, regardless of their knowledge of the Jewish religion or commitment to many of the ritual aspects, there was a clear and vivid motivation in the Soviet Jewry movement of an awareness of a moral responsibility to act as 'our brothers' keepers'. Right up until the crumbling of the Soviet Union, we had no way of knowing whether our efforts were doing much more than allowing us to feel we were at least doing something for our brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain. We now know not only were our efforts important in contributing to the eventual end of the Soviet dictatorship but that many Jews have taken the decision to leave and re-join the Jewish family centred in Israel while others have been involved in a remarkable re-building of Jewish life after almost eighty years of oppression.

In September this year I attended the opening of the first synagogue constructed anywhere in the former Soviet Union since the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917. The synagogue was built by and for the Jewish community of Moscow and was opened by the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, the Mayor of Moscow, a special representative of President Clinton, leading figures in international Jewish organisations and Israeli leaders, including Natan Sharansky.

In an event which would have been unimaginable a decade ago, a former long-serving prisoner of the Soviets, Natan Sharansky, returned to Moscow as a Cabinet Minister of the sovereign Jewish State to open a synagogue in front of an international Jewish and non-Jewish gathering. To add to the symbolism of the occasion, the synagogue is located between an Orthodox church and a mosque, in a park area which is dedicated to the memory of the victims of Fascism in the Second World War.

Anatoly Sharansky, as a prisoner in the Gulag, lived the struggle for human rights. At a session of the Russian Jewish Congress, which took place concurrently with the synagogue dedication, Minister Sharansky told us the story of how, when placed in prison, he had not been put in solitary confinement but was imprisoned together with someone his jailers believed would cause him even more distress - a committed Christian.

Natan Sharansky told us that his guards were surprised that when the only book permitted to his co-prisoner, a Bible, was taken away for a punishment, the two men went on a hunger strike together, and they did the same when his own lone book, a book of Psalms, was taken away. The two men demonstrated the understanding that an enemy of freedom was an enemy of all freedoms and that people of faith can and should give each other mutual encouragement.

One of the many outstanding religious figures to address the conference gave what we call in Hebrew a *d'var torah*, a commentary on the words of the Bible. The rabbi said that, as we gathered on this occasion, it was worthwhile for us to reflect on what message it was that normative Jewish teaching would derive from the portion of the five books of Moses which was read in the synagogue that week.

The rabbi dealt with the theme of what it is that God wants from humanity. He explained that, as we think of God as our father we should therefore think of ourselves - of all humanity - as children of God. He asked what it is that parents most want from their children and said that he believed all parents would agree, on reflection, that it is that we act with love towards our siblings.

He spoke of how, when children demonstrate their love for each other, whatever they do which might irritate, offend or upset their parents is easily forgiven. However, if they do not demonstrate warmth and affection to each other, not only do the parents feel themselves to be failures, but they find it almost impossible to enjoy the successes and achievements of their children. He argued that all our Commandments - and in Judaism we are given 613 of them - are premised in the view that as children we should love and respect our God and that part of the demonstration of this love is reflected in the way we treat each other.

On 9 November the Jewish world, and many non-Jews, commemorate Krystallnacht, the night in 1938 when the Nazis preceded the murder of millions of human beings with violent attacks on property and people. The *Shoah* - the Holocaust - marked a period when humanity sank to its nadir. Jewish people and others regarded as less than human were deprived of their rights, not only to participate fully within society, but even to live. The process of stripping a human being of his or her humanity proved to be remarkably simple, once the population was divided into identifiable segments, with the weaker group being depicted as existential enemies of the dominant population. There is an abundance of evidence that many Jews who are involved in social justice activities, particularly in opposition to racism in all its forms, have drawn lessons from the Holocaust and have vowed that such a world must not be allowed to return.

Much of Judaism is about memory. So much of our understanding of our own identity is drawn from knowledge of what it is like to be a slave in Egypt, of what it is to be a member of a small, dispersed and too often

despised group which had to learn how to maintain self-respect and dignity in adversity.

While the Holocaust is etched deeply into the memory of Jews in the current period, we recall centuries without a homeland, without political rights, without any control over our own external destiny, on many occasions throughout each year. We ask ourselves not only what happened to us and how it happened, but also what lessons we can gain from our experiences. To do this, we study.

The Jewish people have always placed a high value on literacy and learning. Scholarship has always been thought of as the most worthy of pursuits. But what is often not considered is why Jewish people study.

There is a famous Jewish story about two rabbis who lived in Poland last century. We learn that one of the rabbis, upon completion of a major tractate which represented a lifetime of study and scholarship, went to visit his colleague. The proud and excited scholar said to his colleague, 'Where is your life's work? Why haven't you written your discourses yet?' The second rabbi led the scholar to his study and took out a tattered and well-worn notebook. He opened it and read entries such as:

1 Cheshvan, a widow came to me because she doesn't have money to feed her children. I was able to get her some food;

3 Cheshvan, an orphan came to me in need of a job. Taken care of;

6 Cheshvan, a poor family was worried about the coming winter. They received clothing and blankets.

And so it continued, each entry recorded whether he had been able to meet the needs of those who turned to him. 'This,' the rabbi said, pointing to his notebook, 'is my life's work.'

The purpose of this story is not to take away from the humanity or goodness of the first rabbi, whose scholarship and contribution to learning is undoubted. What it does tell us, however, is that the purpose of learning is to guide our behaviour. The question for each of us is how we can achieve the appropriate balance, accruing enough knowledge to allow us to act in the best way possible while not neglecting action for the sake of learning.

Rosalyn Yallow, Nobel Prize Laureate for Medicine in 1977, stated recently that Jewish tradition 'places emphasis on learning - learning for the sake of understanding and perfecting the world'. Whatever the activ-

ity in which a Jewish person is involved, there is Jewish teaching and learning which guides one in the direction of social justice.

Marcos Aguinis, who was Secretary of Culture of Argentina from 1983 to 1987 and is a novelist and essayist, notes that: 'Biblical prophets lashed out at corrupt kings and priests. As a consequence, we gained the courage to recognise and take responsibility for our shortcomings - as Jewish people, as individuals and as part of humanity.'

When I look at the way others often misunderstand Judaism, I am repeatedly struck by the false impression that we see learning as an end in itself. Further, perhaps because of the way in which we use the word 'law' to refer to many acts which we believe do honour to God, there is an image of Jews as people who would put ritual laws above what could be considered general moral principles. However, as Dr Hyam Maccoby has argued so cogently, in each and every case where ritual obligations and moral requirements come into conflict, moral obligations have priority. Our Prophets are always inveighing against those who put ritual before moral requirements, as we see in places such as Proverbs 15:8, Isaiah 1:11-15 and Amos 5:21-24.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the US Supreme Court said she had learnt from Jewish history that Jewish tradition has always prized the scholarship of judges and lawyers but there was always a clear purpose to laws, and this has been reflected by Jewish jurists and judges who had used law 'as protectors of the oppressed, the poor, the loner'.

In trying to understand our place in the world, as Jews, we have religious source material not only on issues such as the rule of law and the inherent dignity of all human beings, but also on issues such as the environment - where we are taught that we have a trust relationship over the earth - and on the paramount obligation for all of us to pursue *darchei shalom*, the 'ways of peace', i.e. to be involved in the work of social justice.

We see human beings as the children of God who have a responsibility towards each other. We do not, as a religion, seek to impose our view on others, but rather to live in a way which does honour to the Lord. In the words of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Elie Wiesel:

> A Jew must be sensitive to the pain of all human beings. A Jew cannot remain indifferent to human suffering, whether in former Yugoslavia, in Somalia or in our own cities and towns. The mission of the Jewish people has never been to make the world more Jewish, but to make it more human.

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While the expression *tikkun olam* - to repair the world - is loaded with Messianic inferences, Judaism does not allow us the luxury of wishing for a Messiah to bring us a better world. It is incumbent upon each of us to work towards a more civil and better society marked by doing towards each person as we would have them do towards us and learning to celebrate together our relationship with each other and with God.