

Social Justice and Jewish Values
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There is a line in the text of the *Birkat Hamazon*, the Blessing After Meals, that has always bothered me. It reads, "I was a young man, now I am old and I have never seen a righteous person forsaken and his children begging for food." I recently sat with a group of students and together we asked, "How could we possibly include this line in our prayers!?" We are painfully aware that injustice exists in the world and within blocks of our university, people go hungry. The discussion was intense. One student was outraged and suggested that we should drop this line from the prayer. Another thought that maybe it meant that the key to economic success was developing righteous character and action. Still, this did not solve our problem: we all had met good people who were poor through no fault of their own. We finally agreed that the line must be in the prayer specifically to get our attention and focus our energy on social justice. As Jews, we could not be by-standers. Part of being thankful for having food ourselves was being concerned about people who were hungry.

In the Jewish tradition, learning is about living. The values taught in our texts provide the basis for our long history of commitment to social action and social justice. The Talmud tells the story of a debate between two major rabbinic academies, the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. They struggled to resolve the following question: If a person had to choose between studying Torah and performing good deeds, what should he or she do? After years of argument, they concluded that if a person could only choose one thing, they should study Torah. Their logic was as follows: If you only performed good deeds, you would be a good person, but you might never understand the richness and complexity of our tradition. On the other hand, everyone agreed that it was *impossible* to study Torah and not be motivated to perform good deeds and pursue justice. The rabbis found it inconceivable that study would not lead to action.

Through Tzedek Hillel, we teach the centrality of social justice in the Jewish tradition and work to integrate those values into every aspect of the Hillel program. Students learn that community responsibility and service is more than "a good idea." A responsibility to care for the hungry and homeless and create a society that strives for wholeness is a vision articulated in the Torah, stressed by the Prophets, refined and implemented by the rabbis throughout Jewish history. Through Tzedek Hillel, we hope to expand the breadth and depth of activism and Jewish learning on the Tufts campus, strengthening and nurturing a new generation of knowledgeable, committed Jews.