

## **We will do, and we will understand**

You may remember how cold it was this Wednesday – there was ice on the roads where I live, in North Manchester. I was outside for most of the morning, in the bitter air, and I'd forgotten my gloves. So, why did I choose to stand in the cold outside Manchester United football ground with a Muslim chaplain, a Methodist reverend, a Catholic, a student rep from Manchester University, a representative from a local church and community, and various others? A group of community leaders and campaigners, organised by GM Citizens, have called on Manchester United, and other football clubs, to pay the real living wage. Whilst Manchester United is the richest club in the league there are employees who are receiving just £7 per hour and struggling to live in dignity. I heard a story as we were waiting to meet a representative of the football club, from a local resident whose daughter was doing a college placement at the football club. Recently one Sunday, as part of her placement, she had helped in the kitchen for 12 hours – 12 noon to midnight – with no pay.

With Alexis Sanchez having just been signed to the club the disparity between the highest salary in the league and the lowest paid workers at the club is stark. Indeed, it will take just 82 minutes into Sanchez's potential Old Trafford debut against Huddersfield today to earn the annual salary of a low-paid stadium worker (around £14,500 per year) – 82 minutes. Explained in another way - a minimum wage worker needs to work 27 years to match United's new player's weekly £400,000 salary, which is just shy of the Chilean's 29 years of age.

We handed our letter to the club, which asked that they meet with us to talk about becoming accredited with the living wage foundation and to pay the real living wage of £8.75 per hour rather than the government's minimum wage (confusingly now also known as the living wage) of just £7.50 per hour for workers over 25 years of age. We are hoping the club will respond and meet with us and follow other clubs like West Ham and Everton.

Yes, there is an injustice at play but we all know the brokenness of our world and how many injustices there are. Why this one? Perhaps because I am a proud Mancunian and from a family of religious Manchester United fans. Although I'm not exactly football mad our football clubs contribute to our identities as Mancunians. The theatre of dreams, as it is called, is something to be proud of, something that is an international brand and icon. Maybe this sense of connection drove me to be there this Wednesday. It also could be because I believe in the power of communities coming together and I know the power that they can yield.

George Monbiot, a British Writer and activist, wrote an article in the Guardian last year, which argued that it was through re-vitalising communities that we can regenerate our culture and make politics relevant again.<sup>1</sup> You all know the joke – an imam, a priest and a rabbi walk into the bar and then have a great conversation because they have so much in common! We connect with others around issues that affect us all. Issues such as low-pay, mental health, homelessness, affect us all regardless of race, gender or sex. As my teachers added to the famous saying by Hillel, the first century sage – 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But

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<sup>1</sup> G Monbiot, *This is how people can truly take back control: from the bottom up*, The Guardian, 8 February 2017.

if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?’ And, the addition states, ‘if not with others, how?’<sup>2</sup>

And yet, whilst all true, I’m not sure any of these reasons fully explain why I stood in the shadows of Sir Bobby Charlton’s statue this week. Yes, I care about injustice, yes, I am Mancunian and am married to a football fanatic and a mother to one, and yes, I recognise the power of communities working together – but it is more than this. It is because I am Jewish. It is because I have no choice but to act.

As I was walking to the ground on Wednesday I spoke with Reverend Ian Rutherford who is a City Centre Minister for the Methodist Church and I began to talk about the American Reform Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel, as you’ll know, was an activist. He marched and fought alongside Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement. When describing his experience marching at Selma that day he stated, ‘I felt my legs were praying’. For Heschel politics and theology were always intertwined. For instance, he wrote, ‘To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous’. Social protest for him, his daughter wrote, was a religious experience. My presence on Wednesday was a form of prayer, as valid and real, as the prayer we carry out here today.

And what is most extraordinary is that our Torah, our most ancient of texts, drives us, always, to work towards a better world, to call out injustice (Isaiah whom we read today was such a prophet), to attempt to reach the promised land. And Judaism recognises that the task is not God’s alone. Our prayer is not only on our lips but with our feet. We are compelled, demanded to act. The Ten Commandments demonstrate that the law we were handed down is one that drives us to action - to impact upon the way we live our lives – not to separate us from it.

Earlier in the portion Yitro, which we read today, we see the Israelites receiving the Torah from God, through Moses, at Mount Sinai. They say, upon receiving the Torah, ‘All that the Eternal God has spoken we will do’.<sup>3</sup> In the re-telling of this moment of revelation we hear again the Israelites repeating this promise and in the final re-telling the Israelites respond, ‘All that the Eternal One has spoken – *na-aseh v’nishma* – we will do and understand.’<sup>4</sup> The emphasis is on action – not belief or reason - but action – we will do, then we will understand. As Heschel states, ‘A Jew is asked to take a leap of action, rather than a leap of thought.’

Part of our Jewish make-up, our DNA, is to act. It is our duty. We read the Aleynu prayer each service – the word aleynu means – it is on us – it is our duty. In a synagogue in New York, at the relevant point in the service, using the projector screen they have for the congregants, it simply projects the word Aleynu in big letters – it is on us. We know we have a duty – it is up to us to carry it out. We are partners in this work and unless we pray with our feet we will never reach the promised land.

If you are interested in becoming involved in the living wage campaign, or other social action issues, come and talk to me at Kiddush. I’m going to end with the words of Heschel and a story he used to recite.

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<sup>2</sup> Pirke Avot 1:14 and addition by Adrienne Rich as taught by Rabbi Sheila Shulman (z”l).

<sup>3</sup> Shemot 19:8.

<sup>4</sup> Shemot 24:7, and see 24:3.

Heschel tells the story of how, as a seven-year-old, he first read the text of the *akeidah* [the binding of Isaac]. He recalls that, as he read the tale of Isaac's near death at the hand of Abraham, he began to weep in empathy and fright.

His rabbi knelt down next to him. "'Why are you crying? You know that Isaac was not killed.'

And Heschel remembers, "I said to him, still weeping, 'But Rabbi, supposing that the angel had come a second too late?'

"The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.

"An angel cannot be late," concludes Heschel. "But man, made of flesh and blood, may be."<sup>5</sup> Shabbat Shalom.

**Sermon - Yitro**  
**3 February 2018/19 Shevat 5778**  
**Jackson's Row**  
**Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen**

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Michael Rothbaum: "Ferguson/Fargesn" (Delivered on Rosh HaShannah 5775 at Congregation Netivot Shalom)