In graduate school, I joined up with the student campaign for a living wage for our university’s lowest paid employees: those who cooked the food, and cleaned our classrooms and libraries, and tended the beautiful and historic grounds—and were grossly underpaid for their work. I blearily marked student essays before rushing off to another demonstration or antagonistic exchange with university administrators, and arrived at strategy meetings with an armful of books for my comprehensive exams in Judaism and philosophy. What we all lacked in sleep, we made up for with our zeal for wage justice.

The student campaign in question had been going on since the 70s. So exasperating was this exploitative history that we determined it was time for more dramatic political action. Months later, after a series of escalating demonstrations and communications with the administration, we announced that twelve students were on indefinite hunger strike. (By the time we called it off, two weeks later, another fourteen students had joined on). We were very well-organized: daily press releases and rallies, increasing media coverage, a series of speakers and events. I, who wasn’t even striking, lost five pounds in two weeks.

On the fourth or fifth day, at our daily morning rally, we invited a series of clergy in the city to speak. It was very cold and the students on hunger strike looked pale and exhausted. The last speaker, a Protestant minister, came up holding only a Bible, and began to read:

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

It was, of course, the famous words of Isaiah 58, and he read them slowly and with care. And I, a traditional Jew and a student of Judaism, steeped in texts and commandments, felt as though I had never heard them before. The ancient words seemed to hover in the cold, and I thought that across an infinite distance, Isaiah was speaking to these students on strike for a small bit of wage justice, and that he, and the God he served, understood what we were trying to do.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

There is no denying the power, even for just a moment, of feeling that you are being held aloft by words like these. There’s a reason why biblical passages like this are ubiquitous in contemporary Jewish social justice settings, alongside references to the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, or the mitzvot regarding the treatment of workers. The assumption of my colleagues and students that my own political work is rooted in texts and traditions like these, is entirely reasonable.

But in fact, I’ve become a firm critic of “biblical justice” language, unwilling to appeal to the Bible in modern politics even as I became more deeply involved in political work. Frequently invited to speak to university or community groups on themes of religion and political justice, I have inadvertently derailed more than one panel...
If we can’t be honest with ourselves and one another about the inconsistencies and infelicities in the Bible, will we necessarily “read” the world any better?

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