
Reviewed by Sandra Slater, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC

*Social Justice*, the sixth book in the series *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices* explores the extensive legacy of Jewish involvement in social reform and contextualizes modern issues within the historical and theological “mandate to pursue social justice” (ix). Editors Elliott N. Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg deliberately organized the book to explore a particular issue and then its connection to the *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, and *Torah*. Commentary by leading scholars and rabbis explore specific issues through responses to a “case study.” Largely, the slim volume offers only superficial coverage of the many and deeply complicated societal issues in America. Useful for those unfamiliar with Jewish teachings and practices, the volume offers little for scholars.

Core Jewish texts demand observant Jews engage in philanthropy, charitable giving (*tzedakah*) and pursue righteousness (*tzedek*) through the improvement of people’s lives. Jewish mandates insist upon improving the world while maintaining human dignity. Observing these obligations through political, economic, and social activism allows the Jewish community to advocate on behalf of the underrepresented, unheard, and marginalized. By incorporating a series of texts from the ancient to modern, the editors establish God’s mandate over time and its relevance for contemporary society.

The editors explore several issues: *Poverty and Health Care*, *Discrimination and Preferential Treatment*, *The Environment*, and *Criminal Justice*. Each section begins with a scenario that exemplifies the social crisis most prominent in that theme. For example, “Poverty and Healthcare” posits that “Benjamin” wants to improve society, but has limited resources and time. What course should he take to best contribute to society? Offering options and citing statistics, the Case Study concludes rather openly with the question, “Do you agree that it is our civil responsibility to help alleviate poverty and assist the uninsured and underinsured? If so, to what extent?” (32). Rather that suggesting solutions, the following texts and sources contextualize Jewish beliefs about charity, kindness, and giving to the poor. Yes, there are...
citations from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, Torah, Mishnah and various commentaries from rabbis throughout history and across the world all indicating the necessity of tzedakah in society. The strength in this approach is the richness of the citations, the tapestry of approaches, opinions, and perspectives. Each case concluded with a section exploring ways to contribute and possible solutions to “Benjamin’s” dilemma.

Environmental concerns are addressed at the individual, corporate, and civil levels, understanding that available options vary among these three distinctive groups. Citing sources that indicate God’s gift of the world to humanity and man’s responsibility as stewards of the earth, the intellectual tradition places responsibility of environmental protection squarely upon humankind. Arthur Waskow, author of a response to the portion of the text addressing environmental concerns, suggest eight areas in which practices of tikkum olam could be employed: carbon emissions, energy consumption, construction codes, transportation changes, land use, food consumption, education, and even Shabbat, a time to reinvest in one’s family and neighborhood (86-87).

Relying heavily upon the Jewish dedication to preserving life at all costs, the editors explore the death penalty and the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system is fraught with corruption, inconsistency, under funding, and failure to rehabilitate and educate criminals in America. This work suggests that exploring issues such as restorative justice programs and reevaluating the causes of criminal conduct could be more effective. Poverty disproportionately affects minority populations making them more vulnerable to criminal activities. What role could better education, more access to healthcare, and less economic disparity have on the crime rates in America? There are few answers to these questions and the deep complexity of criminal justice reveals itself through the inability of this book to adequately offer viable solutions. Furthermore, this section acknowledges only in passing the fact that criminal conduct is not always linked to societal failures and many of the most serious issues facing our justice system fail to conform to a standardized model of crime. Criminal cases cannot be generalized and must be understood within their own unique circumstances. The only point of agreement in this section is the inadequacy of the death penalty in curbing crime. Certainly, most Jewish thinkers
reject the death penalty as a solution, but this controversy is only a small fraction of the larger and deeply troubled system of justice in America.

The greatest weakness of this text is most visible in the second case: Discrimination and Preferential Treatment. Everyone acknowledges that discrimination exists and appears against various groups and different historical moments in a range of severities. This book insists that Jews should avoid discriminatory practices and stand with those who face prejudice in society. Anyone familiar with Jewish teachings finds this an obvious and very rudimentary assertion. Jews actively fought against racial discrimination in American and marched with the leaders of the Civil Rights Movements. Often the victim of persecution themselves, the Jewish population recognizes the dignity and right to exist peacefully for all people. The editors use the large umbrella of discrimination to discuss Same-Sex Marriage, Treatment of the Overweight and the impact of prejudicial behavior on the family. The crux of the argument is that when people are discriminated against Jewish should protest this treatment. The frustratingly brief assessment of discrimination absolutely fails to explore these issues with any credibility or investment. Thirty-five pages cannot adequately address such an enduring and complicated subject like discrimination. Same-Sex Marriage alone could fill an entire monograph.

Overall the Social Justice volume of Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices is too ambitious. Each case study could easily have been a volume, and likely more successful as such, particular the themes of discrimination and criminal justice. The series Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices stands as a wonderful contribution to Jewish studies and the weakness of this volume is not representative of the series.