



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Chanukah

Development, Globalization and the Miracle of the Maccabees *From The Sources* Supplementary Resource

Introduction

The Chanukah *From the Sources*, explores globalization, and in particular, the fine line between working towards shared global values and imposing cultural values on those we seek to help. This supplementary resource will examine these issues in greater depth, and respond to the questions: What is globalization?; What are the challenges and opportunities globalization presents for pursuing global justice?; and How can we promote global values in a culturally diverse world?

Challenges and Opportunities

Globalization—or the growing interdependence and interconnectedness of markets, communication, ideas and people across borders—is a key feature of our world today. People around the world share cultural identifications (Michael Jackson and McDonalds) and participate in the same economic and trade systems. We communicate across thousands of miles with new technology (Facebook), and uphold mutual values and regulations (international human rights law).

One of the key features of globalization is the pursuit of economic growth through the expansion of capitalist markets. Instead of generating greater prosperity for everyone, this pursuit has translated into growing economic inequality. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was 30 to 1 in 1960; 60 to 1 in 1990; and 74 to 1 in 1997.¹ Access in today's world—to medical advances, technology and critical resources like food and shelter—largely depends on one's ability to purchase these goods and services. As a result, globalization has created a polarized world of haves and have-nots, increasingly isolating the have-nots from the technologies and systems that are transforming our world.

At the same time, globalization presents great opportunities to promote global justice and address issues such as poverty, health and human rights. As advances in medicine and technology spread around the world, doctors and farmers can share best practices to heal their patients or grow better crops. Our growing interconnectedness has implored us to re-evaluate our obligations to those outside our community, country and regional geographic area. Communities across the developed and developing world have taken up the shared language of human rights to address injustice. International human rights and environmental movements have proliferated in the past few decades, raising awareness and commitment to global issues such as climate change, international labor stands and women's rights. International human rights organizations and the media are also able to use new technologies to increase the visibility of human rights violations to better protect affected communities.

Impact on Culture

The economic institutions and processes of globalization have had an enormous impact on the ways of life and cultural expressions of communities around the world. As a result, many people feel that globalization has put cultural diversity at risk. Some of the backlash against globalization today has taken the form of cultural relativism—groups insisting on the distinction and isolation of their culture from Western culture.

¹ United Nations Human Development Report, 1999.

Yet, cultures are not distinct and isolated; they reflect countless outside influences. For example, the Passover Seder, a ritual meal that Jews identify as distinctly Jewish, contains borrowed customs from a Greco-Roman symposium. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE and sacrifices were no longer possible, Jews adapted the traditional sacrificial meal. From the Greco-Roman symposium they incorporated reclining; eating a mixture of fruit, nuts and wine; holding a somewhat formal and organized meal; and creating opportunity for discussion around food.²

Recognizing the hybrid and constantly-evolving nature of culture is an important challenge to cultural relativism. However, in many cases, developing countries have not been given an adequate voice in developing the economic, social and political processes that characterize globalization. The backlash against “Westernization” can be seen as a response to this disempowerment.

Responses

How can we harness the potential of shared global values and institutions to address poverty and inequality without imposing, or seeming to impose, our own values on those we seek to help? First, global processes must be accompanied by local ownership. As governments, international institutions and international non-governmental organizations make decisions on trade, economic policy and development, it is critical that developing countries have an equal voice at the decision-making table.

Second, as we become more interconnected and intertwined through globalization, we need to allow space for cultural difference and sensitivity. For example, human rights or other shared values can provide a starting point for conversation but cannot provide the full picture. Just because the language of human rights is used around world does not mean that human rights mean the same thing everywhere. The Passover Seder may reflect certain customs of the Greco-Roman symposium, but these customs mean something different to Jews today. And, even the meaning of these customs differs depending on whose Seder table you visit. Similarly, when a particular community uses human rights in their struggle against injustice, the way human rights are expressed, understood and prioritized are deeply adapted and contextualized to make sense in that community. Interactions between people, governments, international institutions and non-governmental organizations need be guided by a respect for cultural difference, and an acknowledgement that the ways people experience and interpret shared values will differ across the world.

Conclusion

Global values, such as human rights, provide an example of how global processes can be a positive force in this world. We can harness these positive forces to address the challenges of poverty and inequality that are also exacerbated by globalization. However, as we engage with a shared global framework of values and action, it is critical that we integrate respect for cultural difference and local ownership. Otherwise, we risk imposing our agenda and values and diminishing cultural diversity in our world today.

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² Kulp, Joshua. “The Mystery of the Four Cups.” *CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism*, Spring 2009.