

Micah's Call to Social Justice

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I usually approach religion from several directions at once, usually with a mixture of curiosity, reverence and skepticism. I look with curiosity because I'm passionately interested in the questions of the human condition, and I'm hungry for answers that can help me to understand myself and the mystery of which I am a part. I approach religion with reverence because it's a storehouse of human wisdom, the fruit of thousands of lifetimes spent looking into the very questions with which I am concerned. And I look at it with skepticism, because it is a product of human culture and civilization, and is subject to the same distortions and corruptions that can turn even the gold of revealed wisdom into the leaden conventions of orthodoxy.

The tendency to warp religion's wisdom into the shape of one's own bias has always been a risk. During the Roman Empire, for example, the Jewish religion fell on some hard times, so a group of pious Jews called Pharisees worked to bring about a renewal, calling for reforms that would make religious observances part of the day-to-day Jewish practice. Jesus was also a reformer at that time, he too tried to bring the essence of religion into the common person's daily life. He criticized the Pharisees for advocating a legalistic faith and emphasized that one's behavior was more important than ritual obedience. They engaged in such a vigorous debate over this issue that history actually recalls Jesus and the Pharisees as adversaries, rather than as revolutionaries with different approaches toward a common goal.

Whether in America or in Rome, when religion seeks renewal in a culture that's drifting towards secularism, whether Rome or America, there's always the risk of falling into legalistic dogma, and this is where my skeptical side kicks in. I love the wisdom of the ages so much that I watch out for those who would reduce it to ritualistic formulas for salvation. Living in the light of wisdom is not a matter of gazing toward heaven with either confidence or hope; it's a matter of hard

work every day, as we strive to love our neighbors in practice as well as in theory. This temptation to rely on religious ritual, in lieu of the hard work of living a good life, is far older than America or even Rome, though. It was already abundantly clear in the 8th century B.C.E. when the prophet Micah proclaimed his message, one verse of which has been praised as the essence of the Hebrew religion. Many of us have heard it; there's even a version of it in our hymnal, in the readings section. The Unitarian Universalist version goes: "What does the Eternal ask from you but to be just and kind and live in quiet fellowship with your God." And, of course, as Unitarian Universalists, we share an inclusive understanding of the word, God, as referring to the ultimate source of being, truth, and value – however you conceive of them – which can be different for every person.

Justice, kindness, and living up to our highest values. Micah claims that they're the essence of religion. But it's easy for this message to become distorted and confused. We lose the spirit of Micah's message if we think of justice as the business of the courts, kindness as the work of charity, and humility as prudent deference to a God who's more powerful than you are. Let's take a look at the background, at what Micah was talking about that led him to ask his famous question.

Micah was an elder of the village of Morasheth-Gath, which was about a day's travel from Jerusalem. He sat on a council that settled disputes and set local policy. Micah was a farmer who probably worked his own land, well-off but not well-to-do. He doesn't appear to have been rich enough to buy his way into politics, so his position was likely to have been based on merit. So Micah would have been sympathetic to the problems of family farmers – he was one himself – and Morasheth-Gath had some big problems.

There were enemies – there were armies gathering at the border. The village was located on the main road an invader would have to take to get to Jerusalem, so it was important to the kingdom that they fortify this town. They built walls, bunkers, trenches, and sent soldiers to live there to repel any invaders before they got too close to threaten the capital. All of this cost a lot of money, and the local population was taxed to pay for it.

This caused a lot of grumbling and resentment (can you imagine? people grumbling about taxes? Well, they did back then.) but it was clear to them that King Hezekiah was willing to turn their town into a battlefield for Jerusalem's protection, and was sticking them with the bill for what was likely to be their own destruction, no matter which side won. But the consequences of these new property taxes might sound oddly familiar to us today: people got poorer and money became scarce. Family farms, always short of cash, felt the pinch most acutely. They had a lot of land relative to their income, so their taxes were very high. Sensing an opportunity, speculators moved in and offered the farmers loans in order to pay their taxes. And it took only one bad harvest for them to call in the loans and seize the land as forfeit.

Micah was outraged. This was a betrayal of everything the Hebrew covenant stood for. Even if the king had forgotten that the Hebrews were a people joined together by binding commitments to both fairness and mutual assistance, Micah had not forgotten. He went to Jerusalem. With some audacity he walked right in and denounced the government for having sold out the small farmers for political expediency. Rather than tax all the people equally for their common defense, the king had placed the burden on those least able to pay, the family farmers. Their own king had knocked them down and left them vulnerable to the fiscal vultures who stripped them of the property that had been in their families for generations. Listen to Micah's complaint:

“Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil on their beds! When the morning dawns they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away. They oppress the householder and house, the people and their inheritance. You rise up against my people as an enemy, you strip the robe from the peaceful and from those who pass by trustingly, with no thought of war.”

Micah called them to task: “Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people and the flesh off their bones? Who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces and chop them up, like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron?”

Do these words sound harsh? If they do, it's because the Hebrew people were bound together by a covenant of mutual responsibility so strong that the subjugation of human dignity and survival to concerns of profit was absolutely unthinkable. The covenant of ancient Israel required mercy, justice, and obedience to God. These things had specific meanings that were being ignored in the rush of a thriving economy. Instead of being the moral obligation of each and every person, religion was considered a matter of offerings and rituals performed by priests. Even here Micah discovered that the priests had been using false weights to measure the offerings they received, swindling the people under the guise of serving them. Micah pointed out that not only had they violated their covenant to care for and protect each other, they had broken their covenant with God.

Micah reports their disingenuous and sarcastic response: they said in essence, and this is my own very loose translation into today's English – they said, “Wow, God, you got me there! I guess I blew it. How's about I go out and kill a nice cow for you? Or maybe a thousand goats? Not good enough? I know, since I'm guilty, I'll make a bargain. Whaddayasay I kill my oldest child, you know, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

This retreat into a crude and irrelevant bargaining over ritual sacrifice brought a stinging rebuke: “He has told you, O Israel, what is good. And what doth the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” We all know deep down what is right – to be kind and fair; to forgive each other for our faults and mistakes. We should never look upon the misfortune of another as an opportunity for profit, or allow our pursuit of profit to become the cause of another's misfortune.

To his credit, history shows that King Hezekiah took all this to heart and instituted a set of reforms that ended the unjust taxes and the corruption in the temple, and put the loan sharks out of business. Can you imagine a similar response to such a criticism today? Look at all the check-cashing and payday loan shops that are charging as much as 600% interest. Do you think they're a new idea? They've turned up now because the laws that had limited preying on the

poor were set aside by a Congress more interested in profit, in fiscal solvency, than moral solvency.

We Americans are proud of our multi-cultural, secular society, free from religious tyranny. But not all religious ideas are partisan. Some of them are actually true. The idea that we should not exploit each other is not comparable to the idea that we should revere one symbol or another. It is wisdom learned the hard way, from thousands of years of human experience; it's not particular or peculiar to one sect and rejected by another; it's held in common in one form or another by every great religion.

But we have replaced it with the ideology of capitalism and the wisdom of the free market. Objections are either brushed aside misguided or silly, or are answered directly, with words like those of the character Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone's film "Wall Street," who says: "Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms – for life, for love, for knowledge – has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A."

America's belief in this is an utter repudiation of the deep wisdom of every religious faith. And we see the consequences everywhere. Greed as the motive force of capitalism is a cold uncaring guide. It teaches us to delight in the misfortune of others as an opportunity for our own profit. It teaches us that the satisfaction of our own desires, our greed, is an absolute good, modified perhaps by considerations of consequences, but still the best guide we have as to what we should do. The highest morality in capitalism is really just one of delayed gratification – just greed patiently waiting for its payoff.

When individual needs are considered paramount, rather than our deep interdependence, religions arise that endorse greed as an objective good, and this brings us to the warping that American religion has undergone in order to be supportive of capitalism. Though it is certainly not complete – many many churches do promote social justice – it is thorough enough to ground our national consumer ideology in a theology of selfishness. American religion is by

and large obsessed with life after death. Heaven is portrayed as a sort of great private club in the sky where the elite can go and party forever.

Salvation-obsessed religion is selfish religion. It's based on the fear of death and greed for eternal life. It's a religion of looking out for number one and getting in good with the big boss upstairs. And it keeps us distracted, keeps us thinking of ritual observance as the essence of religion. But the essence of religion is responsibility, care, and love for each other.

Our economic system is set up as a zero-sum game, creating a loser for every winner; so we scramble to win, economically, personally, socially. Prestige is meaningless unless there's someone else who doesn't have it. Remember the crooked scales that cheated people in the temple? We Americans have strict rules against that sort of thing – or do we? Isn't capitalism itself a sort of crooked scale? We won't tell you that 14 ounces is a pound, but we will tell you that what cost \$1.00 yesterday will cost you \$1.10 today. Our indexing of value to demand produces the same . . . the difference being that it's based on an ideology that makes its victims complicit in their own exploitation.

Does health care cost more than you can afford? Sorry. Does housing cost more than you've got? Tough. Can't afford child care or a car to get to work? Just don't try to go on welfare. Did you work hard and save enough to pay for your children's education? Too bad – it now costs twice what you saved. And the amazing thing is that we as a people consider this to be normal, inevitable, and even good. Our economic system creates losers, and our ideology calls losers morally inferior. We don't feel responsible for the consequences of our actions as a society.

Our system needs for there to be a certain number of people unemployed but we refuse to care for them because we think they're lazy and they ought to get jobs. Our health care system is based on profitability, so those without enough money don't get treatment. Is greed really all that good?

I think of greed as a force, like gravity. Gravity is neither good nor bad in itself, and it does do a lot of good. It keeps us from floating away, gives our cars traction on the highway, even helps our food go down. But unless we understand and respect gravity and allow for its force, it can do a great deal of harm. It's as

though we were all on a high ground, overlooking an ocean, an ocean of the good things in life. We want to go there, we want a good life. In this example, the people who think of gravity as completely good are the ones who are sitting on a wagon on a broad, gentle slope that leads to the sea. Gravity is nothing but good for them – it helps them roll gently down the slope toward the good things. But much of the high ground isn't a smooth slope at all; in fact a lot of it is an abrupt cliff that separates people from the good things. All gravity can do for them is to yank them off the cliff, off the edge, and smash them onto the rocks below, casualties of the longing for the good things of life.

Greed looks different depending on where you are. Like gravity, it can be helpful or hurtful – it is not in and of itself either good or bad. But it needs buffers, safety nets. It requires that we realize that what is possible for us might be very difficult or even impossible for others. It requires that we acknowledge that the good of all depends on our willingness to be responsible for the well-being of those whose place in society is more like a cliff than a slope. Efforts to care for them are often rejected as socialism; but unless we can take responsibility for the consequences of our rapacious ideology we are no better from those who profited from others' misfortunes in Micah's time. We eat the flesh of our own people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

Mutual responsibility is good. It is right. Mutual responsibility works. Compassionate responsibility cuts through and compensates for the excesses of evolutionary greed. Micah knew that the greatness of a culture was not based on its accomplishments as much as its compassion, and that prosperity that is purchased with the blood and betrayal of its weakest members is not security, but shame. If we want to learn anything at all from the wisdom of the world's religions, let's let Micah teach us to keep our greed from hurting each other, to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. This is the challenge of the human spirit, and it's every bit as urgent today as it was 2,700 years ago.