

Will we plant the seeds of freedom from want and hunger today for our nation's children? Will we recognize the great need, the urgency that demands we do more than "let things take their course," or put our children off with the promise that "tomorrow is another day"? Will we replace compromise and fear with bold and courageous action for America's children, poorest in a land of plenty?

Prayer: God, take my heart when it trembles in fear, shrinks back in anxiety about conflict, and fill it with courage and boldness to speak your word of justice and call on our nation's leaders to make a place for all children in our rich nation. Amen.

Sunday: Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue

Reading: *You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.* (Deuteronomy 16:19-20)

Reflection: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel knew something about pursuing justice. He walked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in the march in Selma and memorably said of that experience, "It felt as if my feet were praying." Heschel commented on this passage from Deuteronomy, "The term 'pursue' carries strong connotations of effort, eagerness. This implies more than merely respecting or following justice."¹

This week we prepare our hearts and minds for the National Observance of Children's Sabbaths which will lift up the needs of children and families in our nation, explore the texts and teachings of our religious traditions which call us to pursue justice, and then engage us as individuals, congregations, and communities to answer God's call to protect children. As we do so, we are invited to cast off hopelessness or discouragement, to rise above any feelings of powerlessness or of being overwhelmed. Instead, let us seek a deep well-spring of eagerness and energy to pursue justice for our nation's children. Let us look forward with anticipation and hope to the difference we can make, as individuals, as congregations, and as a nation-wide community of justice-seeking people of faith.

Prayer: Eternal One, you call us to pursue justice and only justice. Instill in me a spirit of eagerness that responds with joy and energy and determination. Amen.

¹ *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2004.

Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue: Answering God's Call to Protect Children

Daily Devotional Guide

By Shannon Daley-Harris

National Observance of Children's Sabbaths 2011



Children's Defense Fund

Monday: Walking in God's Ways

Reading: *For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* (Deut. 10:17-18)

Reflection: A CDF poster shows a baby, crawling, wearing a diaper with a bulls-eye target on it, over the caption “When it comes to budget cutting time, they always start with the easiest targets.” In this political season when there has been a devastating failure of our nation’s leaders to declare with one voice that they will defend and not cut the food, education, health care, and other services that are vital to our children and poorest families, the words have never been more true.

Babies, now as in the Deuteronomist’s day, aren’t very good at making bribes. Children don’t make campaign contributions, or vote, or lobby, or do much of anything to tip the scales in their favor or just keep the scales even. Children and their cause are outweighed by contributors, campaigners, corporations, and constituents. It’s an old, old story. Isaiah, using the same Hebrew word for “pursue” as in yesterday’s passage from Deuteronomy, says of the nation’s leaders, “Everyone loves a bribe and runs after—pursues—gifts. They do not defend the orphan and the widow’s cause does not come before them.” He warns a nation headed fast in the wrong direction, leaving children and poor parents behind.

We are called to love the stranger—those who are seen as “other” to the people in power because they differ in race, ethnicity, nationality, language, and income—because God loves them just as God has loved us. Even as God executes justice for the orphan and widow, so too are we called to pursue justice for today’s “orphans” and “widows”—that is, children and parents who are most vulnerable and have the least economic, family, or community supports upon which to draw. We are called to do justice for them because that is what God expects of us!

Prayer: God of justice, help me to love as you do. Open my heart to the most vulnerable children and families that have a special place in your heart. Embolden my voice to declare your priority for justice for children and poor families. Remind me that I do so because of the love I have known and will always know from you.

love God, walk in God’s ways, and observe what God has commanded us by seeking justice and mercy for those who are youngest, poorest, and most vulnerable? If we do so, we will be blessed by the well-being of our children—the growing edge incarnate.

Prayer: God of blessing, every day you invite me to make choices to love you and walk in your ways. Help me this day and each day to choose your way of love and justice, and to seek the well-being of all the children with whom we have been blessed. Amen.

Saturday: Be Strong and Bold

Reading: *Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: “Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the Lord has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you. [God] will be with you; [God] will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.* (Deut. 31: 7-8)

Reflection: America’s children are, in the words of a National Council of Churches documentary, “poorest in a land of plenty.” Children—16.4 million children—are waiting for us to stake a claim for them in this, our land of plenty. Langston Hughes wrote a poem titled “Democracy.” Remembering the words of scripture calling us to “be strong and bold” with the assurance that God will not fail or forsake us as we make a place for our children in a land of plenty, read now these words. Imagine, if you will, that they give voice to our nation’s children:

Democracy

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and
fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.

I do not need my freedom
when I’m dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow’s
bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

What does that mean for our actions today with and for children and families in poverty?

Prayer: Gracious God, forgive my forgetfulness. I forget to pray. I forget that it is you who has brought me thus far on the way. I forget that seeking justice for children and fragile families is not optional but a command. Remind me, O God, when I forget. Keep me forever on your path, I pray. Amen.

Friday: Choices

Reading: *See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in [God's] ways, and observing [God's] commandments, decrees, and ordinances, than you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.* (Deut. 30:15-16)

Reflection: Howard Thurman, minister, philosopher, and educator, wrote in a meditation called *The Growing Edge*, “Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born... This is the growing edge. It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and [people] have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. The birth of the child—life’s most dramatic answer to death—this is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge!”³

Throughout scripture, God’s sure promise is the blessing of children. When Abraham and Sarah are called to their growing edge, to leave the security of all they have known, the promise is that God will bless them with children as numerous as the stars and sand on the beach. The fulfillment of that promise continues through other sacred stories and on into our lives today.

We face profound choices every day—as individuals, as congregations, and as a nation. The juxtaposition of those choices—life or death, prosperity or adversity, protecting the weak or bending to the powerful, the common good or self-interest—is our growing edge. What will we choose? Will we

Tuesday: Tight Fists or Open Hands?

Reading: *If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the needs, whatever it may be. Beware that that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’* (Deut. 15:7-11)

Reflection: Have you ever gotten (or given) a grudging apology? Have you ever received (or given) unwilling help—the kind where a request for, say, help moving the couch is met with heavy sighs, rolling eyes, and slowly moving feet? Such an apology or help feels hollow—almost worse than no apology or help at all.

This passage is amazing because in it we are told that it is not enough to go through the motions of giving financial support to those in need, with resentment or reluctance. Scripture tells us that this is about more than a *transaction*; it is about a *transformation*. That is, the economic transaction is needed and we are expected to complete it, but the transformation of our hearts—the way we feel about helping those in need—is an equally important part of the equation.

Look again at the words in this passage describing the wrong attitude toward giving and people in need. Do they characterize us as individuals, communities, or as a nation making decisions about our response to people in need?

Now just imagine what it would look like for us as individuals and as a nation to “give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so.” Perhaps it looks like the internet executive who stood up in a town hall meeting with the president and said, sincerely and with a smile: “Tax me.” He wasn’t taking a vow of poverty, or berating himself for having become wealthy, but with a willing heart and open hand he was affirming that there are people in need in our land and that together we should meet the needs.

³ Howard Thurman, *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Meeting, 1984

God expects of us open hearts as well as open hands. It is the only posture that enables us not only to give what we have, but to receive all that God would bestow on us.

Prayer: Dear God, I am so afraid to open; my clenched fists! Who will I be when I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before you with empty hands? Please help me to gradually open my hands and to discover that I am not what I own, but what you want to give me. And what you want to give me is love, unconditional, everlasting love. Amen.²

Wednesday: Cries to God

Reading: *You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you and you would incur guilt.* (Deut. 24:14-15)

Reflection: Joseph and his son Joey are caught in the middle. Joseph is a blue-collar Italian American who grew up on Long Island and has worked all his adult life painting cars in auto body shops. His wife, who used to work as a bookkeeper, has multiple sclerosis and now lives in a nursing home. The loss of a second income put him and Joey into the growing number of working poor families. Joseph has been laid off twice in the past few years, but managed to find another job within weeks. Recently, he lost three weeks of pay between jobs. By the time he pays for his housing costs, he has little left to live on since he makes only about \$600 a week.

Joseph describes what it feels like to be among the “working poor,” saying, “I’ll be honest with you. I’m barely hanging on by a shoestring. Day by day. Week by week. People try to encourage you but you know what? Things are bad. People don’t really understand. I’ve learned to eat a little something in the morning. I don’t eat lunch. I drink from the hose at work. That’s just how things are. You gotta sacrifice for your child. Sometimes I feel like hanging it up but I can’t. I’m a one man army here.”

The experience of the “working poor” is not new. Notice in the passage from Deuteronomy that those who are “poor and needy” are also “laborers.” Today, as then, you can work a full-day and still be in poverty—the current federal poverty level for a family of four is \$22,314—or \$60 a day. Of our

nation’s 14.6 million children living in poverty, 65 percent live in families with someone who works. The popular stereotype that people who are poor are lazy is heaping insult on top of injury. With our nation’s low wage jobs and rising unemployment rate, many Americans are discovering for the first time that poverty can overtake anyone.

Our passage reminds us that God hears the cries of the working poor, including complaints of unjust wages or unfair conditions of employment. What cries has God heard today? Do we listen to those cries as well? What kind of change would God have us work for in response to the cries of working parents in poverty?

Prayer: God, I trust that you hear my cries to you just as you hear the cries of those who labor and yet remain in poverty. Hear now my prayer for strength, determination, and commitment to do what I can to ease the difficulties of families whose work leaves them in poverty. Encourage, too, those who cannot find work and despair of securing a job. Amen.

Thursday: Remember

Reading: *You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.* (Deut. 22:17-18, see also vv. 19-21)

Reflection

“If you ever see a turtle on a post, you know it didn’t get there on its own,” goes the saying. Sometimes it seems we are a nation of turtles perched on posts who look down at the remaining turtles on the ground and wonder why they aren’t as lofty as we are.

Time and again in scripture, God warns the people against the amnesia of success and security—forgetting, once they have “made it,” of where they came from and that they didn’t do it on their own but only by the grace of God.

The memory, the recognition, that we haven’t gotten where we are by dint of our own sheer wonderfulness but by God’s grace isn’t merely intended to inspire gratitude, a thankful heart. It is intended to shape our *actions*, to guide our active acts of justice on behalf of those who are still struggling. That work for justice isn’t offered as a divine suggestion or nice idea, but as a command.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1995.