

# **SOCIAL VISION BY PROFESSOR PHILIP WEXLER**

## **An Introduction and Summary**

### **WE ARE AN INTERCONNECTED SOCIETY**

The human experience is a de facto jigsaw puzzle by design. The soul of each human being is endowed with one part extending outward – i.e. his/her unique talents and gifts which were given to share with the world, and a part which is missing that points inward – i.e. the human dimension that requires reliance on others, what sociologist Philip Wexler calls “reciprocity.” (Wexler, pg. 111).

For the puzzle to be completed, one must ignore the exterior, body-based differences, and focus on the inner life – that of the soul. This interconnectedness is fundamental to creating a happy, just, and caring society.

### **IS THERE A WAY TO “REENCHANT” THE WORLD?**

Today, we find ourselves in a difficult social environment. Not only are we confronted with real environmental, social, and economic problems, but our ability to find solutions to these problems is limited by a political divisiveness and rancor. The world seems split between two disparate poles. While there have always been differences of opinion, today they seem greater. Those involved in the debate exist in different worlds, unable to find common ground because they are unable to share common assumptions of truth.

In *Social Vision*, Philip Wexler argues that the challenges we face as a society or within ourselves have always been present in the modern world (Wexler, pgs. 1-8). Wexler bases his theory on sociologist Max Weber’s famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Weber refers to so-called modern life as “an iron cage,” that has contributed to myriad social ills: loneliness, alienation, and other mental health issues. With the rise of materialism, life loses its meaning. As Weber says, “people were oriented to acquisition as the purpose of life.” This drive to acquire and amass became a driving force and eventually replaced even the goal of true happiness. Under this system, the world became “disenchanted”; it lost any sense of magic. People became lonely, and stepping outside of the hyper-competitive capitalistic world, represented a fall from grace.\*

### **IF THE WORLD WAS BASED ON KABBALAH AND HASIDISM, HOW WOULD THINGS BE DIFFERENT?**

Perhaps there is a way to organize the world around a different paradigm? If, as Weber claims, Capitalism is riddled with problems what would happen if Kabbalah and Hasidism, either in a pure or more secularized form, was used as a model for society? As Wexler says, “society could be read and interpreted differently – reimagined – using conceptual tools borrowed from the world of Kabbalah and Hasidism.”

Wexler suggests that the Hasidic Ethos differs from Weber's "Iron Cage" in a series of crucial ways:

- 1) **Hasidic Ethos at its mystical core is social (Wexler, pg. 14).** All people are connected and responsible for one another. Unlike the system that Weber describes, the world is not divided into the "saved" and "unsaved." In Hasidic philosophy everyone is struggling to "do the right thing." That shared mission connects everyone at the most basic level. The world is no longer divided into "us" and "them."
- 2) **Hasidic Ethos is fundamentally joyous (Wexler, pg. 16).** Weber explains that Capitalism removed all goals from society save the productive accumulation of wealth. Even happiness as a motivating factor disappeared. Hasidism is all about joy and happiness. One must 'serve G-d with *simcha* (joy). If one thinks about the purpose of man and the goal of the struggle - that we have the ability to become partners with G-d in the development of the world - it is difficult not to be happy.
- 3) **Hasidic Ethos endows the embodied soul with cosmic significance (Wexler, pg. 17).** Salvation is not man's main goal. In Hasidic philosophy, the soul dressed up in a body "is actually engaged in a cosmic drama, a dynamic interchange of unification, communication, and yes – joy" (Wexler, pg. 17). Here we see the embodied soul as having a relationship with G-d and not merely serving as an object of grace.
- 4) **Hasidic Ethos celebrates the transformation and reconciliation even for evildoers (Wexler, pg. 17).** In *Social Vision*, Wexler looks at the Lubavitcher Rebbe's approach to the correction industry. As mentioned above, people are not divided into 'good' and 'bad', 'rich' and 'poor', or 'saved' and 'unsaved'. Everyone has the potential to do good.
- 5) **An egalitarian ethos is central to the orientation of the Hasidic ethos (Wexler, pg. 18).** As suggested earlier, there is no place for the 'us' and 'them' model that is prevalent in Weber's "Iron cage."
- 6) **In the Hasidic ethos divinity is contained in the mundane (Wexler, pg. 19).** Under Capitalism there is no divinity. The pursuit of capital is the ultimate end. In Weber's "iron cage" there is a division between regular life and the divine. In the Hasidic ethos, the world is created through G-d's speech. If G-d were separated from the world, there would be silence and the world would cease to exist. In the Hasidic ethos, man amplifies the divinity inherent in the world and aids G-d in the continuous act of creation.
- 7) **The Hasidic ethos emphasis humility and egalitarianism (Wexler, pg. 19).** In Weber's "iron cage" one is aware of one's status as evidenced by wealth. The Hasidic ethos is egalitarian. Everyone has the potential to connect to G-d. Those with talent and means should therefore possess humility.
- 8) **The Hasidic ethos conceives of wealth as belonging to all people (Wexler, pg. 19).** Instead of a sign of success or "salvation," wealth in the Hasidic ethos is seen as a communal good. The wealthy merely control the disposition of this communal good.

Wexler's argument is revolutionary. Rather than viewing Judaism and its Hasidic expression as a religion, operating in small corners of the world,, Wexler sees the Hasidic ethos as containing a model for a total restructuring of reality. Not since Weber's classic 1905 treatise do we see such an ambitious argument.

To prove his point, Wexler provides examples in five areas of social policy where the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson) applied Hasidic philosophy to contemporary problems. Wexler treats these policy recommendations as a laboratory within which he can test his theory that the Hasidic ethos can be used as a new organizing paradigm for society.

## **HASIDIC ETHOS AND SOCIAL POLICY**

### **1) Assistance to the Poor: the dynamic of giving and receiving (Wexler, pg. 111).**

Modern social discourse is divided along two poles. On one side there is the individualistic orientation of capitalism and on the other side there is the collective orientation of socialism. The Hasidic ethos does not develop along either of these lines.

In Hasidic thought, wealth is not seen as a sign of greatness. It is regarded as belonging to the community. It is gifted to individuals as long as they give a portion of it away. According to Hasidic thought, both the giver and the receiver benefit from the act of Tzedakah (Wexler, pg. 114). The Rebbe argues that the relationship created through giving Tzedakah is so important that it will remain even after the coming of the Moshiach (Pg. 115). "Every encounter with the other must be seen as a living testimony to the Craftsman, the creator that freely chooses to create and sustain this person" (Pg. 119). Every encounter with the other is an encounter with the Divine. The relationship created between the giver and the receiver is not transactional, rather it is a manifestation of something cosmic and sublime (Pg. 115).

### **2) Education: a long-term investment to reshape society (Wexler, pg. 147).**

The Rebbe describes education as a long-term investment to reshape society. Education is not defined by the acquisition of knowledge nor the desire to "make a better living." Education, according to the Rebbe, is not simply an exercise in facts and figures but a way of transforming society (Wexler, pg. 152). To achieve this end, education should focus on building character and developing a student's moral and ethical code. The Rebbe argued that a moment of silence in the morning would go a long way towards reframing student perspective. Without a moment of silence there is "a self-interest that subordinates everything to the all-consuming impulses of "personal desire"; and in an utter disregard for the wants and needs of others (Pg. 169). As with all social policy suggestions, change is both difficult yet simple. The Rebbe argues that a moment of silence would orient the student's focus outside of themselves and lay the foundation for a different kind of world.

### **3) The Justice system: the inhumanity of incarceration (Wexler, pg. 179).**

Finally, the political tide is beginning to turn against mass incarceration. As Wexler points out, the Rebbe has long been against non-purposeful imprisonment. In the "Iron Cage," arrest and incarceration have a clear purpose. If humanity is divided into the saved and unsaved, then committing a crime would be evidence that a person

belongs to the latter. Thus, they should be removed from society and separated to a place where they can do no harm.

The Rebbe criticized the practice of incarceration. Every person has a purpose. That purpose requires freedom for it to be fulfilled. Jail prevents a person from being able to fulfill their purpose. There are other more effective ways to repair the damage done by crime. When absolutely necessary, incarceration should be used “a means to provide a place for self-reflection and self-improvement with educational resources, guidance, and support” (Wexler, pg. 196).

Rehabilitation is part and parcel of the Hasidic ethos because crimes are actions, not manifestations of character. “Whatever one has done a moment prior, one is always involved in the moral mission, to one’s socio-mystical responsibility as long as one may live” (Wexler, pg. 193). Incarceration removes agency and actually contributes to more criminality than before the incarceration. The Rebbe encourages changes to the penal system and has organized the Aleph Organization to work with prisoners and change the system.

#### **4) Solar Energy and the sacralization of science (Wexler, pg. 201).**

The human relationship with the earth is also part of the conversation. Whereas Weber’s “iron cage” sees the earth as mundane, merely a tool to be utilized in the pursuit of wealth, Hasidism sees the world as possessing a divine immanence and therefore worthy of sacralization. Midrash explains that the reason man was not created circumcised was to relay the message that one must take raw created material and improve it. Just as circumcision is seen as one of the most important commandments, so too, the idea of improving the world is seen as essential. Solar energy is the method advocated by the Rebbe. The Rebbe believed that solar energy was beneficial on two fronts: first, it is renewable and improves the environment. Second, solar power would remove our reliance on foreign sources of fossil fuels and strengthen democratic countries politically. The sun also relays an important lesson to humanity. A sun that does not give off energy is a black hole. Because it does not give off energy, it actually absorbs it. “Man’s purpose is also to give off energy, to shine and to radiate goodness to another” (Wexler, pg. 210).

#### **5) Dynamic Reenchantment (Wexler, pg. 219).**

The final chapter of *Social Vision* focuses on the Rebbe’s central philosophy rather than policy recommendation/s. For the Rebbe, Judaism is dynamic. As demonstrated throughout *Social Vision*, “Jewish thought encompasses all aspects of life; every new theory, new invention, or, piece of knowledge” (Wexler, pg. 219).

The service of G-d in its totality is founded upon the principle that both of these attitudes must be maintained by 1) “upstanding” i.e. standing strong, without change, and 2) “walking” i.e. progressing “from strength to strength” to the point that they have no rest (Talmud Berakhot 64A) (Wexler, pg. 220).

The Torah is also constant and dynamic, ‘standing’ and ‘walking.’ *Halacha*, the term for “Jewish law” literally means “path.” The term implies movement and growth from strength to strength. The synthesis of these two opposing forces lies in the “serious business of Torah study.” Veteran scholars make unique contributions to the

development of G-d's eternal wisdom. Instead of being static, Torah develops along the academic idea of the creation of knowledge. Perhaps, uncovering knowledge would be a more appropriate description. Just as in the previous sections, the world is seen as being sacred and our behaviors – our thoughts, speech, and action have the ability to increase that holiness and transform the world.

**“The Rebbe was an activist Torah interpreter. His discussions of education policy; of the relationship between poverty, affluence, crime; and in his critical theorizations of socio-mystical justice, humanism, and ecology have transformed the world” (Wexler, pg. 222).**

Chabad has had a tremendous impact on the world. Today there are “4,900 Chabad Lubavitch emissary families, or shluchim, operate 3,500 institutions, in 100 countries and territories, with activities in many more and Chabad on Campus serves students and faculty at 500 campuses with 284 permanent centers” (Wexler, pg. 223). The transformation is based on activity at the grassroots level. “One individual at a time, one interaction at a time, one moment at a time, one family at a time- that reshapes and re-enchants communities, creates new communities, and re-enchants the world” (Wexler, pg. 226). The Rebbe wanted to resacralize and re-enchant the everyday experiences and interactions of people everywhere. It is Wexler's hope that this activity, in addition to meeting the Rebbe's goals, will provide a new paradigm for social reality, one based on the Hasidic ethos that will provide true transformation and solutions for these and other problems.

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#### Additional Notes:

\*In his work, Max Weber explains how the Protestant work ethic - a value system that emphasizes hard work and discipline as a sign of salvation - created the Capitalist system in which we find ourselves today. Before the reformation, craftsmen enjoyed making things, not money. If paid more, they would work less. For them, the ends of life lay outside of one's job. Calvinism turned making money into a religious calling. People's fortunes were predetermined, and wealth signified an act of “Grace.” Those with money were chosen by G-d to have money. Great wealth signified status and special selection for salvation. The poor were not selected. The world was divided by Grace, and the more a person earned, the more G-d's favor shown down upon them. The old concept of being satisfied with one's lot and having enough disappeared.

Weber calls this system “an iron cage.” The world was divided into us and them; dark and light. Everything became categorized and instrumentalized. Money became an end. Success was defined by the accumulation of capital. Making money became a vocation in the larger sense of the word. Financial gain turned into a religious calling.