

How Liberal Jewish Values Inspire my Work

Citizens UK - Tamara Joseph

Tamara Joseph is a community organizer with Citizens UK, and the new Social Justice Worker with Liberal Judaism.

'Doing Justice' is at the centre of what it means to be a Liberal Jew, and many people are led by their Jewish values to become involved in social justice movements. For me, things happened the other way around.

My father's family were Jewish, but he had rejected Judaism as a young man and married a non-Jewish woman. I was raised as a secular humanist, suspicious of organised religion and believing that you should rely on your own intelligence, judgement and conscience rather than relying on an inherited tradition.



It was my experience of trade union organising in America that prompted me to explore my Jewish identity. I kept finding that where there was social justice organising, there were Jews, even in places like Minnesota where there weren't a lot of Jews about. I became curious about what the connection was, and started learning about the history of Jewish trade union organising in America. It was in trade unions that I also came to feel that we make meaning collectively, and to see how powerful and beautiful it can be to understand your own history and culture. I learned to see value in the collective and to bring that into balance with the value I place on individual conscience and judgement. I became convinced from my own experience that what people say they believe doesn't count for that much – it's what they actually do that really counts, and our moral decisions - which way we jump when the chips are down - are really mostly determined by the web of commitments, relationships and habits which we have already formed.

For me, Liberal Judaism is my ethical community, the place where my values are affirmed and supported and where I am challenged not only to reflect on them but also to act on them. It also expects of me that I won't accept traditions unquestioningly, but will weigh what meaning and relevance they have for me in my life today. We have a history, both biblical and recent, of slavery, exile, persecution and living as refugees. Each year we are commanded to remember that we ourselves were slaves in Egypt and we ourselves were freed, and that we should be kind to the stranger because we know what it is to be a stranger in a strange land. No wonder that Jewish communities have taken a stand on refugee rights, labour rights and liberation struggles.

I first became aware of the work of Citizens years ago when TELCO (The East London Citizens Organisation) was working on the Living Wage Campaign. Community organizing works by building coalitions between civil society organisations like schools, mosques, synagogues, residents associations, trade unions and refugee groups. These organisations work together to campaign on issues of social justice that directly affect their members, and together they have the power to win meaningful change. The Living Wage Campaign was started by working parents in East London who were working two or more jobs and still couldn't make ends meet. Believing that if you work full time you should be able to earn enough to live on, they started a campaign to convince employers to pay enough to lift their employees out of poverty. Thousands of London families have been lifted out of working poverty as a direct result of the Living Wage campaign, and hundreds of millions of pounds have been put into the pockets of some of the lowest paid workers in the UK. Today the Living Wage Foundation certifies Living Wage employers and thousands of employers have signed up.

Citizens UK is now the largest civil society coalition in Europe, and works on a range of other issues, from refugee rights to mental health, hate crime, social care and housing. With my current job, working with Citizens as a social justice organizer within Liberal Judaism, I've come full circle.