

Economics & Politics

How to stand on one leg

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There is an old Jewish story found in the Talmud, the Jewish Oral Law, that relates an incident in the life of Rabbi Hillel. 'A man who wished to be converted to Judaism came to his school and said: "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot" ... and Hillel converted him saying: "That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it."' (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

The story may not be familiar to you, but the message of the story will be, for it is the golden rule at the heart of so many religions – treat others as you yourself would wish to be treated. It sounds so simple in principle, something easily learned while standing on one leg. When we are young, scolding parents and teachers use the law to teach us not to hit, steal toys or call people names with the warning call: Would you like it if 'Jonny' did that to you? Yet, as we get older, the far-reaching consequences of our actions blur our culpability. There are no warnings about not buying fairtrade products, of ignoring the suffering that some multinational companies bring to the developing countries, of seeing only the personal, received value in the products we spend our money on. Moreover, in our privileged position in the West, the threat of 'Jonny' retaliating is negligible.

Hillel's comment that we need to learn the laws of the Torah, whilst assuming we already understand the concept of social justice, is sadly misplaced in today's world. In the time of globalisation and neo-capitalism, we no longer instinctively know what is right or wrong. Clever marketing and glossy packaging cover up the darker side involved in pursuing the principle aim of capitalism – profit. The leg of social justice is shown to wobble.

Standing on one leg makes us increasingly vulnerable. Yet, if we take away that one leg, then the whole world is on its knees. It is imperative that we learn the consequences of our actions, imperative that we know who profits and who loses from any transaction. No one likes to see suffering; it is instinctive to want to help those who need it. The way people have responded to the Tsunami disaster is indicative of this. The problem is that we are so used to averting our eyes and blocking our ears we no

longer sense the injustice. In a global marketplace, the golden rule of social justice 'that which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow' still stands; the rest is consumer knowledge – open your eyes, unblock your ears, go out and learn!

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