

# *The Reconstructionist*

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# Letters

## Reconstructionist *Get*

To The Editor:

Leah Richman's article "Beyond the Egalitarian *Get*" (Spring 2000) caused me to think about my own experience with the RRA *Get*. Before I began rabbinical school I sat on two *batei din* (rabbinic courts) for the purpose of issuing of a *get*, which were officiated by Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman. At both she used the RRA *get* — in an adapted manner, because what made both of these ceremonies distinct was that they were for lesbian couples.

Same-gendered couples face specific concerns around creating and dissolving committed relationships. In the United States there is no legal marriage or divorce for same-gendered couples. This means other, non-civil, ceremonies are of particular importance to same-gendered couples who want to ritualize their commitment and, if need be, the dissolution of their relationship.

I join Leah Richman in her call to revise the RRA egalitarian *get*. I was surprised when I read in her article about the instructions for the rabbis and the consent letter required of the husband when receiving a Reconstructionist *get*. Both pieces render same-gendered couples invisible.

The Reconstructionist movement, in its cutting edge work to create liturgy, synagogues and leadership structures that are egalitarian and inclusive of gay, lesbian and bisexual people, has

begun to make the notion of *Klal Israel* more inclusive. Despite this, the RRA *get*, its accompanying instructions and consent form remain heterosexist and not entirely egalitarian. It is imperative, not only for same gendered couples but for all those marginalized by the traditional categories of *mamzerim* and *agunot*, that the movement rectifies this problem.

Renée Bauer  
Wyncote, Pennsylvania

## On Science

To The Editor:

I was very happy to see the article "Embracing Science: A Reconstructionist Vision for the Twenty-First Century" by George Driesen (Spring 2000). I agree with his point of view. I think there has been a tendency in recent Reconstructionist publications, even the new prayerbooks, to put too much emphasis on personal, individual experience.

Of course a balance is difficult and necessary, not only individual/community, but also feelings/thought. But we cannot ignore the expanding knowledge and insights of science in our day. As Driesen points out, in Reconstructionism there was never a conflict between science and religion. Let's keep it that way.

Ruth Brin  
Minneapolis, MN

## FROM THE EDITOR

### Judaism in the Public Square

As the community of Judea stood on the verge of the Babylonian invasion of 586 BCE, the prophet Jeremiah instructed the first wave of exiles in Babylonia to “seek the welfare of the city to which [God has] exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.” (Jer. 29:7) While it is open to debate whether this is the first recorded Jewish public policy statement, we know that at least from the period of the destruction of the First Temple, Jews have had to navigate and negotiate their way through the wider society in which they often found themselves.

In many cycles of Jewish history, living as an often powerless minority, Jews have followed Jeremiah’s admonition out of necessity if not always out of concern for those around them. To preserve and protect their own communities, Jews often understood the imperative of engaging social issues whose outcome could affect them for good or for bad. Self-interest dictated that where Jewish rights could be violated, it was incumbent on the community, and especially on its leaders, to participate in the “public square.”

With the dawning of the modern era, and the emancipation and subsequent enfranchisement of Jews in western countries that were undergoing the process of secularization, the opportunity for Jews to engage social and public policy issues as equal citizens presented itself. In many ways, the prevailing sentiment was often a carry-over from earlier days: “Jewish issues” requiring “Jewish involvement” were those issues (and only those issues) that adversely affected the Jewish community. When Jewish rights were (re-)secured, the Jewish community could withdraw from presenting itself as a force for public debate.

But in many ways, modernity, especially in North America, opened up a new opportunity for Jews to live fully in two civilizations. Many Jews understood the imperatives of their tradition to mandate action and involvement on the part of individual Jews and the Jewish community on a host of issues, not all of which could be said to have a specifically “Jewish” content. For these Jews, seeking the welfare of the wider community was an ethical imperative, not only a political strategy.

Jews have disagreed about exactly what sorts of public policy positions the Jewish community should take. The civil rights struggle of the 1950’s and ’60’s is recalled as a high-water mark for Jewish activism (and for black-Jewish relations), but southern and northern Jews did not exactly see eye-to-eye on the profile the organized Jewish community should take in that fight.

Organized Jewish opposition to the Vietnam war emerged slowly, in a delicate dance with the Johnson and Nixon administrations around preserving American support for Israel.

In more contemporary terms, the almost normative Jewish public policy opposition to private school vouchers has in recent years been subject to increasingly vocal alternatives. Any number of public policy issues, from immigration to welfare reform, from reproductive rights to church-state separation, from affirmative action to fair housing, have seen both consensus and confusion within Jewish communal organizations.

It has often fallen to the “defense agencies” of the Jewish community to manage the Jewish voice in the discussions in the public square. (The term “defense agencies” is a revealing anachronism in itself.) The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, as well as local Jewish Community Relations Councils, have been the primary vehicles through which the Jewish community has carried out its internal conversations and its external relations. The Religious Action Center of the Reform movement has been a notable exception.

The religious community — synagogues and rabbis — have of course had a voice as well. The teachings, ethics and imperatives of our textual, liturgical and spiritual legacies do not stand apart from the community that inherits and now has custodial responsibility for those traditions. As we enter the 21st century, the weaving together of our public policy agenda and our religious traditions presents new opportunities.

But as the religious community has had to learn to view pluralism as a value and not merely a fact, the Jewish public policy discussion seems destined to a similar future. Formerly sacrosanct Jewish public postures — opposition to vouchers being one current example — are no longer obvious to many in the Jewish community. And as the voices in the Jewish public policy debate proliferate, veterans of the public policy community remind us that the remarkable influence that our relatively small community has been able to exercise in this blessed American democracy may find itself diluted as a consequence of our dissonance.

In this issue we highlight a series of articles, and a higher than average number of book reviews, devoted to Judaism and public policy. We hope to stimulate our Reconstructionist communities to a wider conversation of these and related issues. For surely amidst the contemporary quest for spirituality and community we can also find the resources to “seek the welfare of the city” in which we as a Jewish community can only prosper when the community as a whole prospers — when the opportunity, equality and justice we seek is sought on behalf of, and in coalition with, others in our society.

With this issue, we celebrate the 65th anniversary of *The Reconstructionist*. In light of the theme for this issue, it is worth remembering that on the cover of the very first issue (January 11, 1935), the following words appeared:

*Dedicated to the advancement of Judaism as a religious civilization, to the upbuilding of Israel's ancient homeland, and to the furtherance of universal freedom, justice and peace.*

## Of Theology and Science

In addition to articles and reviews focusing on "Judaism in the Public Square," we are pleased to include a thoughtful essay challenging some of the assumptions of progressive Jews with regard to liturgical metaphors for God, as well as a continuation of the discussion begun in our last issue on the relationship between Reconstructionism and scientific methods and insights.

## Correction

In our Fall 1999 issue I thanked Dr. Deborah Dash Moore for having served on our editorial board since 1994, when I should have acknowledged her loyal and thoughtful service to this journal beginning in 1983.

## Future Issues

Our next issue will look at "Ethics and Decision-Making," and the Fall 2001 issue will focus on "Jewish Identity."

— Richard Hirsh

# The Public Presence of American Jewry: A Reconstructionist Approach<sup>1</sup>

By DAVID A. TEUTSCH

American Jewish religious movements, taking root and flourishing in the democratic soil of the United States, have historically found themselves engaged in the discussions and debates that define public policy. The nascent (and later more established) organizations of the Jewish religious community were frequently the channels through which positions were debated and affirmed.

Uniquely among the major Jewish religious movements in America, Reconstructionism existed as a school of thought long before it emerged as a denominational grouping. Its founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), shaped the movement's ideology and practice through his prodigious writing and speaking as well as by the force of his personality. Thus the effort to develop an understanding of Reconstructionist attitudes toward the public square must begin with Kaplan.

Kaplan viewed religion as the ef-

fect of personal growth and moral behavior, not the cause.<sup>2</sup> He wanted this moral behavior to permeate the lives of Jews, and saw this as critical to Jews doing their part in America. As Kaplan put it:

The Jew to be a true American must be a better Jew. This means that he must belong to a Jewish community where the ideals, by means of which he is to help mold American life, are to be developed. To be a Jew means to participate in some form of Jewish community life where the standards of right and wrong are to be clearly formulated and accepted.<sup>3</sup>

Kaplan came to understand Judaism as a civilization that evolved through its contacts with other civilizations. This recognition of mutual influence carried with it the notion that cultures can be improved by contact with one another, and that it is

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not in America's interest simply to be a melting pot. On the contrary, the greatness of America lies partly in its capacity to allow freedom and distinctiveness not only to individuals but to groups as well. They are capable both of critiquing each other and of learning from one another.

## Culture and Society

This is not an abstract philosophical process but a moral, social and political one that varies from community to community based on history, inherited practices and beliefs, and contemporary conditions. The outcomes of this process often depend as much on emotion and imagery as on moral argument. The process reflects the degree of cultural vigor within the community, and its substance has a major role in determining the community's future. Any culture incapable of making a unique contribution to the larger society will cease to exist. As Kaplan expressed it much later,

Only a Judaism calculated to bring out all that is best in human nature, and to guide us Jews in applying that best to all our human interests, can command sufficient loyalty to insure its survival and advancement. America is a cultural melting pot. Cultural differences that do not contribute to the realization of universal human values are bound to vanish.<sup>4</sup>

## Education and Values

For Kaplan, education is an undertaking that should engage people of all ages, not simply for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but for absorbing values and learning the skills needed to sustain a vibrant Jewish community.

The ideas which set forth the meaning and purpose of community organization from the standpoint of Judaism as a whole, and every individual Jew in particular, must be popularized and made integral to the Jewish consciousness through the process of education in all its stages. The idea of Jewish community must be made as much part of the Jewish school curriculum as Jewish ceremonies and observances, and all possible pedagogic devices must be employed to include it.<sup>5</sup>

Thus there is a long history to the Reconstructionist tradition of lifelong education aimed at intensifying engagement with the Jewish community and its values and applying those values to all the spheres of daily life. Reconstructionists understand speaking out on social concerns as a religious act. And speaking out is intended to lead to political organizing and political change. For Reconstructionists, these too are religious acts. Concern for the welfare of our fellow citizens and for our country is elevated by our values to a matter of substantial spiritual concern.

From the 1930's into the 1970's, Reconstructionists saw action to improve American society as being in the spiritual interest of the Jewish community. An editorial in *The Reconstructionist* in 1950 stated:

American democracy, in affirming the dignity of the individual, recognizes the role of religious-cultural groups in the development of human personality. Loyalty on the part of the Jews and members of other groups to their own religious civilizations is necessary for the full flowering of American democracy. It is needed to safeguard American democracy against the regimentation which issues in totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup>

## Multi-Culturalism

Reconstructionists have argued that the moral vigor needed in a democratic, pluralistic society depends upon moral education that falls to religious and cultural groups. Thus one measure of the worth of these groups in the United States lies in the degree of their ability and willingness to promote the fundamental principles upon which American culture rests. This establishes the importance of these groups and gives them an ability to critique and cooperate with each other. It would allow Americans to teach cultural differences neither as objects of tolerance nor as problems to be solved, but as dialogical effects of the open-

ended negotiation for which the democratic polity claims to provide.<sup>7</sup>

From the Reconstructionist perspective, the strength of the United States lies in its ability to maintain a national culture that supports dialogue while providing the conditions that allow the participant groups to flourish, a point that Rabbi Ira Eisenstein made in his 1941 study, *The Ethics of Tolerance*.<sup>8</sup> This view provides insight into problems with the national cultures that have caused civil war in the Balkans and suggests the level of openness needed in the United States to fulfill American democratic ideals. It restricts — and perhaps even replaces — the ideology of the melting pot.

Why has this shift in American ideology become more important now? In part because it has become clear that governmental and public educational institutions by themselves cannot create the moral vigor America needs. Perhaps more important, they cannot create the web of interpersonal connections found in sub-communities that are the locus for identity, moral education and culture. And in this era when meaning-seeking has become more important for more Americans because their basic physical needs are met, the role of community, spirituality and culture has become more central. Congregations and culturally based communities can play a critical role in sustaining American society. These provide an alternative to consumerism and the materialistic hedonism of the mass media.



## A Vision of Social Justice

The Reconstructionist movement has developed stances on a broad array of social issues. In the early days of the movement these were developed in articles and editorials in *The Reconstructionist*. As the movement became established, these positions were often handled more democratically through resolutions ratified at conventions of the movement (first of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, and subsequently of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, re-named Jewish Reconstructionist Federation [JRF] in 1995) and later of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association as well.

The Reconstructionist position on issues has consistently grown out of the belief that “Judaism as a religious civilization affirms the dignity of the human soul” and that human life in its highest form takes place in community so that “Judaism calls for a social order that combines the maximum of individual liberty with the maximum of social cooperation.”<sup>9</sup>

The 1950 Reconstructionist “Program for Jewish Life” lays out principles that have changed little since. It holds that the Reconstructionist vision requires a “just social order” that achieves a more equitable distribution of goods and power, eliminates all forms of discrimination, provides adequate health and social welfare programs, defends individual freedoms, and espouses world peace and human rights. Subsequent events

strengthened the movement's involvement with environmental issues and issues of inclusion, but it often remains possible to predict movement positions using the 1950 Program.

## Progressive Politics

The progressive origins of Reconstructionist thinking also explain its powerful opposition to fascism and totalitarianism, which long predated World War II. In a 1936 discussion of the meaning of Passover, a Reconstructionist editorial stated:

In fighting to preserve our democratic liberties against the tidal wave of fascism, it is not enough to argue that fascism means tyranny and that democracy affords the blessings of personal freedom. Our work must be extended to establishing the kind of social order where freedom can exist securely. An ideal system of legislation — social reforms that will protect the weak; the abolition of child labor; adequate unemployment insurance and old-age pensions, minimum wage and maximum profit scales . . . will all have to precede the establishment of a genuinely free society. For in the long run, there can be no freedom without justice.<sup>10</sup>

The progressive politics of the Reconstructionist movement were repeatedly seen in Jewish values

terms. Several decades later, for example, Daniel Nussbaum suggested that the two central values guidelines in thinking about government responsibilities are *tsedakah* (justice; the notion that having one's basic needs met is a human right) and *gemilut hesed* (acts of individual caring).<sup>11</sup> He argued that it would be improper to leave the compulsory outcome of *tsedakah* up to the uncertainty of *gemilut hesed*.

Enlightened self-interest and moral demand were usually understood by Reconstructionists to be simultaneous. It was from that vantage point that anti-Semitism was viewed, grouped with other forms of prejudice. Democracy and social justice served as antidotes.

The Jewish stake in removing the blot of white racialism from American life is clear . . . . Every totalitarian American movement, like the Ku Klux Klan, is bound to be directed against Negroes, Jews and Catholics. But as religious Jews we appeal to our fellow-Jews on higher grounds than Jewish self-interest. "Ye shall remember that ye were slaves in the land of Egypt."<sup>12</sup>

## Cultural Reciprocity

The Reconstructionist understanding of an evolving Judaism allowed the movement to accept values from American culture into its own, perceiving this borrowing as strengthening Judaism and helping it

to be more true to itself:

The reconstruction of Judaism to incorporate the best insights of twentieth century American democracy is necessary not only because of the historical accident that we live here, not only because Western democracy is the best available political option at this time, but because, in the American version of such ideals as democracy, freedom, equality, pluralism and justice, we should recognize a spiritual kinship, a contemporary manifestation of traditional Jewish teachings.<sup>13</sup>

In contemporary terms, multiculturalism suggests that this reciprocal influence can be self-consciously mutual.

The liberal ideology that characterized the formative years of Reconstructionism has gradually given way to a democratic communitarianism that emphasizes the importance of voluntaristic communities for creating moral vigor and passing on religious culture. That shift involves recognition that social justice ideals will only be pursued in a country with sub-groups dedicated to preserving the religious values that undergird them. Individuals outside such groups should also make vigorous efforts for social justice. As Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, a long-time Reconstructionist, put it:

We need to demand from our lawmakers no less than what

Rabbi Kaplan demanded of us: To use law to regulate the power we have for developing both individuals' potentialities for the good life and society's potential — for freedom, justice and peace. It is the right thing to do.<sup>14</sup>

## Church and State

One area of ongoing concern for the movement has been religion and civil religion in the public schools. The Reconstructionist movement was always interested in keeping sectarian religious practices out of the public schools and therefore opposed school prayer and Christmas pageants. But the movement also recognized that inculcating American virtues and values is a critical educational function. An editorial in *The Reconstructionist* laid out part of its agenda for that aspect of education, suggesting that schools should teach respect for the sanctity of human life, an awareness of man's limitations, an appreciation of his potentialities for good, a recognition of his propensity to evil, and an assumption of moral responsibility for the welfare of all his fellowmen.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the movement held that schools ought to teach religious values without teaching religious beliefs or practices:

From our perspective, our continued opposition to any attempt to impose Christian doctrine in the public schools by

confusing it with American civil religion is a legitimate and necessary position taken in order to secure our rights as Americans who do not want to be subjected to religious coercion.<sup>16</sup>

## Civil Religion

Kaplan was a major supporter of the development of an American civil religion that could be employed in the schools and elsewhere in public life. He wanted schools to teach what he called "the religion of democracy." In 1951, he co-edited *The Faith of America* with Eugene Kohn and J. Paul Williams to provide examples of rituals and liturgy for such occasions as Washington's Birthday, Independence Day and Thanksgiving. This book illustrates the movement's effort to use such occasions to reinforce American values and ideals in school and interfaith settings.

The effort to think through the strengthening of American civil religion has continued. One writer suggested that sacred American writings, often studied for purposes that are historical or recitative, might be studied in such a way as to be spiritually provocative and affirmative. This might take the form of beginning each school day with a brief reading and discussion of a suitable text from the literature of American democracy. Such study, pursued in the spirit of prayer, might help to convey the spiritual dimension felt to be lacking in our public schools.<sup>18</sup>

## Emphasis on Education

The Reconstructionist movement was from its outset a powerful advocate of public education. It urged all Jews to support the public schools, a position not untypical or unusual for the Jewish community in the 1930s and 1940s. While continuing to support public school education, the JRF passed a resolution supporting Jewish day schools in 1986. By then, many Reconstructionist leaders were sending their own children to day schools. The resolution reflected a recognition that whereas the challenge for several preceding generations of Jews had been assimilating into America, the challenge for the current generation was to acculturate into Judaism. In the years since that resolution, the centrality of day school education to the Jewish communal agenda has only increased.

The shift in positions regarding day schools has led to a reconsideration of the movement's steadfast opposition to any governmental support for parochial or private schools. For the first time Reconstructionist advocates of a school voucher system have emerged. In part this reflects the undesirably high cost of Jewish day school education, which limits the number of children who can attend day school. But it also carries a recognition that the public schools serving marginal populations have failed to teach the religion of democracy in the way that Reconstructionists advocate. The result is that children at risk are

likely to grow up without the vigorous moral education that can be provided by parochial schools. This is a current policy debate within the movement.

One area of public education that Reconstructionist thinking advocates strengthening is moral education — teaching virtues, values and norms that reflect broad social agreement and help create effective citizens. Such virtues include honesty, courage, compassion and commitment to improving society. This pragmatic approach is, if anything, more important to the multi-cultural theory currently advocated by Reconstructionists than it is to the melting-pot theory, precisely because establishing commonalities and shared commitments in a multi-cultural society is so critical. Civil religion should evolve around this common heritage, manifest in the American holidays that can reinforce it. This type of civil religion can interact in mutually reinforcing ways with the religious communities that support it.

## Women's Rights

Given the wide recognition of the Reconstructionist commitment to the religious rights of women,<sup>20</sup> it should be no surprise that the movement has taken equally strong stands in support of the Equal Rights Amendment and of women's reproductive rights. In a January 24, 1936 editorial, for example, birth control was affirmed:

*The Reconstructionist* endorses birth control. It sees in it nothing which is inherently irreligious, immoral and unnatural. On the contrary, insofar as birth control enables human beings to bring into the world richer personalities, it sees in birth control a means for attaining the goal of all moral effort — the spiritual enrichment of each individual.

In that same article, the risk to women from unsafe abortion procedures was also noted.

The Reconstructionist stance on women was consistent with its overall position on human freedom and social justice. Beginning in 1984, it expanded this commitment to the area of sexual orientation when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College decided sexual orientation would be irrelevant for admission to its rabbinical training program. In 1990 the joint movement Homosexuality Commission advocated rabbinic officiation at gay commitment ceremonies and active engagement to eliminate impediments to legal marriage for gay men and lesbians, again seeking a parallel between religious and secular conduct. The Reconstructionist movement understands these positions as being consistent with its commitment to supporting the family as a basic social unit and sees the evolving nature of the family as an inevitable result of broader social change.

The movement worked toward

egalitarianism from its outset, though the definition of egalitarianism expanded over the years. More recently it has moved to provide equal access to people with handicaps and differing abilities. *Kol Ehad*, a task force of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, works to accomplish this end both within the congregations of the movement and in broader society.<sup>21</sup>

## Israel and Democracy

The Reconstructionist movement identified as Zionist from its outset, but its Zionism was not of a politically neutral sort. It wanted the Jewish polity in *Eretz Yisrael* to be democratic, pursuing social justice for all regardless of religion, ethnicity, or color. The first issue of *The Reconstructionist* proclaimed, "We endorse every effort toward the establishment of a cooperative commonwealth in Palestine based upon social justice and social cooperation."<sup>22</sup> Thus it tended to side with Labor Zionists in debates with the Revisionists.

With the establishment of Israel in 1948, Reconstructionists hoped for the implementation of the ideals embodied in the Israeli Declaration of Independence. From the outset of the more recent "land for peace" proposals, the leadership of the movement was supportive in the hope that harmonious relationships in the region could result. Perhaps most strongly of all, Reconstructionists urged from the outset that Israel be a non-theocratic state, and that it enter into a mutual and balanced dia-

logue with Jews around the world.

These positions were controversial in the American Jewish community, where a fervent yet critical Zionism was slow to develop. What is most striking about them, however, is that the approach to American Jewish communities, to the general American polity, and to Israel carried with it the same recommendations, which grew out of values that Reconstructionists attempted to apply to all situations and settings.

## Communicating the Message

For decades, the written word was the Reconstructionist movement's primary way of affecting American affairs, but it was certainly not the only one. Kaplan spoke all over North America, but more important his disciples—hundreds of them his former rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary—carried his views to their pulpits. The early Reconstructionists were interested in using the pulpit to address questions far beyond those of theology and ritual, and encouraged rabbis to address the social and political issues of their time.

Those who protest against pulpit discussion of economic problems seem to forget that Judaism teaches the divinity of man, his right to the fullness of life, and to protection against oppression. . . . Without claiming for rabbinical utterances on social problems any authority

other than inheres in whatever truth they may convey, we insist that no arbitrary limit be placed on the freedom of speech of rabbis on those themes either in their individual or collective utterances.<sup>23</sup>

With the establishment of the RRC in 1968, the graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College quickly moved toward more democratic and community-oriented styles of leadership. Not only did they continue to use sermons and frontal education; they also began using more informal, experiential and affective methods. Social justice projects found their way into religious school curricula and *bar/bat mitzvah* preparation. These ranged from work in soup kitchens to letter-writing campaigns to fundraising for social-change projects.

## Direct Action

One of the ways that the Reconstructionist movement pursues its public agenda is through the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's participation in the work of over a dozen umbrella organizations. Some of these are coalitions composed entirely of Jewish groups such as the Committee on the Environment and Jewish Life, Joint Distribution Committee, and Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. Other coalitions involve many religious groups but focus on narrow issues— for example, the Religious Coalition

for Reproductive Rights, North American Coalition for Religious Pluralism in Israel, and the National Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty. The JRF sends representatives to these groups and in some cases takes an active role in their work.

Equally important is the action undertaken by Reconstructionist congregations and the members within them. Here the range of undertakings is striking. A few examples will have to suffice. Congregation Darchei Noam in Toronto obtained government-backed funding to create a cooperative apartment building, two-thirds of which is subsidized; residents have diverse backgrounds, and some of the apartments are reserved for the disabled. Kehilath Israel in Pacific Palisades, a prosperous Los Angeles suburb, entered into a partnership with a Black church in south-central Los Angeles to provide jobs, tutoring, and other resources while creating a cultural exchange and building social relationships. Mishkan Shalom in Philadelphia invested money from its building fund in community development banks. There are hundreds of such projects across the movement. To encourage these local initiatives, the Federation has created the Yad Mordechai Fund, which supports innovative social action undertakings in Reconstructionist congregations.

## The Challenge Ahead

A young if rapidly growing move-

ment constricted in its programming by its lack of capital, the Reconstructionist movement has not yet invested in a formal public policy apparatus. Nevertheless, the leaders of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation and Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association are committed to the values-based activism portrayed above. Many of the rabbis, rabbinical students and lay leaders of the movement share that commitment.

The future of Reconstructionist involvement in public policy and social issues is sure to be an outgrowth of the history of ideas, affirmations and resolutions which have characterized the movement. As cultural pluralists from the beginning, Reconstructionists are well positioned to support and educate for a pluralistic America where the common goal remains a central concern. The social reality of America continues to evolve: as WASPs decline as a majority, Latino, Asian, African-American and other ethnic populations are increasing. The voice of religious communities committed to a democratic and multi-cultural community which is yet rooted in common affirmation of core values and the preservation of individual rights can become a powerful voice for progress.

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1. Nina Mandel did substantial research for this paper. Melanie Schneider and Rabbis Richard Hirsh, Alan Mittleman, and Jacob Staub offered helpful comments on an earlier version of this pa-

- per. I acknowledge their role with thanks. This article draws upon research done for the Jews in the American Public Square Project of the Center for Jewish Community Studies, funded by the Pew Foundation.
2. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1993), 132.
  3. Quoted in Scult, 133-134.
  4. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York, MacMillan Co. 1948), 56-57.
  5. "The Highest Level of Cooperation," 5.
  6. "A Program for Jewish Life Today," *The Reconstructionist* 16:1, Feb. 24, 1950, 14.
  7. *Ibid.*, 19.
  8. Ira Eisenstein, *The Ethics of Tolerance* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1941).
  9. "A Program for Jewish Life Today," *op. cit.*, 19
  10. "Freedom and Justice," *The Reconstructionist* 2:5, April 17, 1936, 3-4.
  11. Daniel Nussbaum, "Voluntarism and the Welfare State: A Reconstructionist Perspective," *Raayonot*, Winter 1983, 9-15.
  12. "White Racialism in America," *The Reconstructionist* 4:19, January 27, 1939, 4.
  13. Jacob J. Staub, "Living in Two Civilizations: Preliminary Notes Towards a Reappraisal," *Raayonot*, Winter 1983, 24.
  14. Carl Levin, "Lawmaking, Jewish-American Style," *The Reconstructionist* 49:8, July-Aug. 1984, 8.
  15. "The Supreme Court and Religion in America," *The Reconstructionist* 28:11, Oct. 5, 1962, 4.
  16. Richard Hirsh, "Religion in Public Schools: A Reconstructionist Appraisal," *Raayonot*, Winter 1983, 16.
  17. Mordecai Kaplan, "Religion in a Democracy," *Review of Religion*, January 1948, 520.
  18. Hirsh, *op. cit.*, 21.
  19. See, for example, Seymour Cohen, "Religion in the Public School," *The Reconstructionist* 16:4, April 7, 1950, 15-21.
  20. See Ruth Brin, "Can a Woman Be a Jew?" *The Reconstructionist* 34:12, Oct. 25, 1968, 7-14.
  20. "The Birth Control Controversy," *The Reconstructionist* 1:19, January 24, 1936, 4-8.
  21. The effort was launched in 1994. See the undated *Kol Ehad* report published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.
  22. "The Reconstructionist Position," *The Reconstructionist* 1:1, January 11, 1935, 4.
  23. "The Pulpit and Social Issues," *The Reconstructionist* 1:7, April 5, 1935, 4.
  24. See Valerie Hyman, "Moshav Noam Co-operative Housing: Social Action from a Reconstructionist Perspective," *Reconstructionism Today* 3:2, Winter 1995-6, 4-13.
  25. Steven Carr Reuben, "A Black-Jewish Covenant in Los Angeles," *Reconstructionism Today* 2.1, Summer 1994.



# A Journey of Becoming: The Rabbinic Work of *Tikkun*

BY TOBA SPITZER

**B**arukh sheamar vehayah ha'olam — “Blessed is the One who spoke and the world became.” With these words of prayer, Jews daily affirm the awesome power of speech. What a wonderful idea — that Godly speaking can bring a world into being! As I reflect back on my path into the rabbinate, I realize that this fundamental Jewish teaching played a significant role in my decision to become a rabbi, and in my thinking about what it means to work for justice in this world.

## A Voice and a Vision

It was wintertime, 1990, and I was living in Washington, D.C. and working for an organization promoting Middle East peace. Since graduating from college five years earlier I had been on a journey to find work that would give me a role in effecting social change. By 1990 I had had a variety of jobs in progressive organizations, but I still wasn't clear what

my path would be. Driving in my car that winter, I heard Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voice over the radio. It was a recording of a speech in which he eloquently and incisively criticized U.S. involvement in Vietnam, linking his opposition to the war to a broader struggle for racial and economic justice. Listening to King's powerful cadences I thought, “This is the language I want to be speaking.”

It's not that I was imagining myself a preacher like Dr. King. But I did realize in that moment that I wanted to be speaking and acting within a religious discourse of love and justice like the one that I heard on my radio that day. I wanted to be able to speak about economic and political issues with language that not only defined the problems but also provided a vision of a society transformed, language which held the promise of a path that was grounded spiritually and accountable ethically. I realized that the secular discourse

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of the progressive world of which I was a part could not be fully satisfying to me, and some time later that year I began thinking about rabbinical school.

Now it is ten years later and I am a congregational rabbi. I am still on a journey to understand my own work in relation to the larger project of achieving a just and peaceful society, and I wrestle with important questions. What does my commitment to Judaism have to do with my work for justice? What does it mean to be a rabbi and to be committed to social change? Can I reconcile the more “interior” aspects of my role — nurturing the spirituality of individuals, caring for the Jewish community — with the “exterior” calls of justice in the broader society? What follows is an attempt to begin to answer some of these questions.

## The Politics of Judaism

The classic Jewish joke is two Jews, three opinions. In the realm of politics, you could also say “One Judaism, a thousand opinions.” Every possible political claim has been made for the Jewish tradition, backed up by texts and precedent. Judaism is inherently socialistic or inherently capitalistic; it’s fulfilled by democracy or incompatible with democracy; it’s inherently conservative or inherently radical. There are those who argue that Judaism has no particular politics at all, or that the multiplicity of possible positions renders inauthentic any attempt to claim Jew-

ish authority for a particular stand. What’s a Jewish activist to do, especially one who feels both grounded in and compelled by the teachings of our tradition?

While it is certainly true that a variety of positions can be read into and out of Jewish texts, that fact should not keep us from making serious claims on and for our Judaism. Differing Jewish traditions share one common thread: an understanding that the world as it is now is not how it is ultimately meant to be, that things can be different, and that part of our obligation as Jews is to help bring about this transformation. One particularly evocative articulation of this idea is found in mystical Jewish teachings. The mythology of Lurianic Kabbalah tells the story of a world that is fundamentally fractured yet holds within it the potentiality of *tikkun*, repair. According to this story, it is incumbent upon every Jew to play an active role in effecting that *tikkun* by seeking to make whole that which has been shattered.

From this baseline understanding of the need for *tikkun*, we can have many disagreements—about whether the transformation will be this-worldly or other-worldly, whether it will be dependent on the fulfillment of ritual and ethical *mitzvot* or on a re-ordering of secular society, whether it is a universal vision or one particular to the Jewish people. The work of each community of Jews is to articulate its own understanding of what it means to achieve a world redeemed, and to then work for the

realization of that dream.

To do so, we must engage with the teachings of our tradition, with the world around us, and with those in our community who are our companions in this journey.

## Insights, Not Answers

This does not mean picking and choosing Biblical verses and rabbinic aphorisms in order to buttress or “make Jewish” a particular politics. When we seriously and lovingly engage with Jewish texts and traditions in the project of *tikkun*, we are being faithful to a 2,000 year-old tradition of Jewish meaning-making. Like our rabbinic predecessors, we bring our own identities and concerns to the Judaism we have received, and through our engagement with these texts and practices we learn to articulate our own encounter with God, and to understand what that encounter demands of us. Sometimes this means that we learn and gain new insights from the tradition. Sometimes it means challenging that tradition, changing it and creating anew. Sometimes it means being challenged, and changing ourselves. If the process itself is in some way transformative, then we can know that we’re on the right track.

I would argue that I need Judaism to do my work of *tikkun* in the world. Judaism does not provide me with a specific politics in the modern sense, but it does provide me with profound insights about human beings and human society, and about the nature of

the world and its relation to the Ultimate. It gives me a powerful narrative of liberation in which I can ground my own personal journey and the journey of my community. It provides inspiration and spiritual strength in a world that is often disheartening and overwhelming, and offers me language to envision a world transformed. Judaism — my understanding of it — gives me the framework I need to do my work for peace and justice with integrity, clarity and hope.

## Outside and In

When I entered rabbinical school, the image of Martin Luther King, the impassioned orator and marcher for civil rights, was my model of the activist religious leader. The outspokenness of King and other clergy, black and white, and their willingness to put their bodies and their reputations on the line, was a critical piece of the successes of the civil rights and anti-war movements. There are still times when rabbis, like other clergy, are called to “speak truth to power,” to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed and to help give voice to those who struggle to be heard. Sometimes we do this on behalf of the Jewish community, but often we are called to speak out on issues that affect us as American citizens and as human beings, and not as Jews per se.

There are many reasons for taking public stands as rabbis, even on issues that are not directly related to

the obvious concerns of the Jewish community. The voices of clergy are privileged in this society, in that we lend moral authority to debates over issues of social justice. With that privilege comes responsibility. While ultimately public policy decisions need to be made in the secular realm, it is important that religious language — language that helps focus on human needs and human dignity — not be absent from the discussion.

For those who are on the front lines of fighting oppressive policies, our presence can give spiritual uplift and reassurance. Recalling my own lack of rabbinic role models when I was in my twenties and searching for the Jewish equivalents of radical Christian clergy, I believe it is essential that young Jews see Jewish religious leaders calling and acting for a more just and loving society. In so doing we provide both inspiration and spiritual support, even to people that we may never meet.

But while it is important that we as rabbis are visible on picket lines and at demonstrations, that we lend our voices and our authority to causes that we believe will help bring about *tikkun*, this is not the only model for the rabbi as activist. We also have important work to do on the “inside.” One aspect of this is the need for *tikkun* within Judaism itself, in order not to deny the Godliness of any member of our community.

The primary arena for this work over the past 30 years has been the struggle for the full inclusion of women and of gays and lesbians in

Jewish practice and Jewish community. We also have work to do in looking at other forms of difference within our community, and understanding the barriers that may remain, whether based on income disparities, or race, or disability.

## The Inside Work of *Tikkun*

I am also working for *tikkun* on the “inside” in my daily life as a congregational rabbi, where my role is multifaceted. Three overlapping categories shape that work:

- As a teacher and a “connector,” I bring Jewish texts and traditions to American Jews who for the most part do not feel that they have direct access to them. I help empower people to make these traditions their own, and to wrestle with the texts in the ongoing discourse that we call “Torah.”

- As a spiritual guide and counselor, I accompany people on their personal journeys of connection to the Source of All, helping them make meaning in new ways and find sustenance in the Godliness that is around them. There is an aspect of empowerment here as well, as I try to help others find the spiritual strength and wisdom within themselves that will help them on their journeys, especially in their moments of weakness, sadness, and despair.

- As a kind of community organizer, I work with other Jews to create covenantal community that embodies and reflects *kedusha*, holiness, on all levels.

## Text, Spirit and Community

As a teacher, I begin from the assumption that the richness of the Jewish textual tradition, and our encounters with those texts and with Jewish practice, have something to offer in the work of *tikkun*. Perhaps most important is the Jewish “master story” of the Exodus from slavery to freedom, a journey where our people learned to leave behind their chains and to become a community in covenant with one another and with their God. It is a story that we are commanded to teach, to learn, and to relive, and helping modern Jews connect to this story is one of my primary goals as a rabbi. Living in this master story gives meaning and purpose to our Judaism, and keeps us on the path of bringing into being a society that manifests the Godly qualities of *tzedek*/justice and *hesed*/love.

There are also specific teachings and practices that help guide my work. Based in a very different economy that had at its center the service of God rather than the pursuit of profit, biblical and rabbinic teachings about building community offer a powerful counterpoint to our hyper-materialistic and hyper-individualistic American culture. From the prophets through medieval codes of law, we learn that a holy community is one which provides for all of its members, with special attention to the poor and powerless.

The practice of Shabbat teaches that the imperative of “growth” can-

not hijack the fundamental need of human beings and the earth to rest, and that human control of Creation is tempered by a higher purpose. In the concept of *mitzvah* we learn that “doing the right thing” is not a matter of convenience or self-interest, but a sacred obligation. Whether the subject is money, or mindful speech, or an awareness of the blessings and the pitfalls of abundance, Jewish tradition is rich in teachings that can help us create new visions, imagine alternative policies, and remind us of values and priorities that have become obscured in the world around us.

## Confronting Difficult Texts

It is equally important to wrestle seriously with the texts that seem to be counter to a progressive, modern vision of justice and peace. The Biblical writers, and the rabbinic commentators that followed, were struggling with real dilemmas faced by real people, and we are invited to join in that struggle. Is it proper to rejoice at the downfall of our enemies? Is violence necessary or avoidable in the process of liberation and social change? What do we do with practices that might have at one time seemed enlightened, but that we now believe to be oppressive?

In seeking answers to these questions I find that I am forced to think more deeply not only about the texts that I have received, but also about the issues that I am facing today. I am challenged to avoid glib conclusions, and to confront some of the

difficult realities of human nature. In realizing that people who were seeking to do God's will held fast to beliefs that I today see as anything but Godly, I am cautioned against being too definitive in my own proclamations, and am encouraged to embrace the ever-evolving nature of human perceptions of Truth.

Related to but distinct from my role as teacher is my work as a spiritual guide. Whether creating meaningful communal religious experiences or working with individuals one on one, as a rabbi I am privileged to accompany Jews on their journeys of spiritual growth and transformation. The relation of this work to the larger project of *tikkun* may not be immediately apparent, but it is vitally important. In recent decades in America the popularization of spiritual practice has taken on the individualistic, consumerist tone of the overall society, to the extent that attending to one's spiritual growth can be perceived as antithetical to a concern for community and society.

But traditional Judaism cannot imagine individual spiritual fulfillment separate from the community, even when it recognizes the tensions that inevitably arise between communal needs and the individual life of the spirit. As Mordecai Kaplan argued, individual "salvation" — that is, the fulfillment of the unique potential of every human being — is only possible in a society, in a world, where all people are equally able to achieve this fulfillment. For Kaplan, this meant a commitment not only

to individual self-actualization but also to the elimination of political and economic oppression. It meant not only the salvation of the Jews, but of the entire world.

In practice, this work has many components. One is to provide spiritual sustenance and space for reflection and renewal for those who, in their everyday lives, are working to make the world a better place. People who work for social change need rabbis, too, and I hope that more and more of our congregations will come to be seen as welcome places for this important segment of the Jewish community.

## Individual Needs/ Community Organizer

Another aspect is attending to the spiritual needs of individuals — not as a substitute for addressing broader issues, but as a component of what it means to achieve *tikkun*. This includes helping to break down individuals' isolation from one another, helping people achieve a greater capacity for compassion for themselves and for others, and guiding people in making ethical choices in difficult situations. In a society which constantly provokes us to feel that we never have "enough," teaching the daily Jewish practice of blessing and gratitude can be a radical act. To help someone love themselves more fully, and thus be better able to connect to the Godliness within themselves and others, is to take a step towards making the world a better place.

While I would not agree that meaningful social change will be achieved through individual enlightenment alone, at the same time I know that when social movements ignore the humanity and the spiritual needs and aspirations of individuals, they recreate oppressive systems and destroy the possibility of true transformation. As rabbis, we are in a special position to help achieve the kind of salvation of which Kaplan spoke: to help people achieve their fullest human potential, both by attending to their spirits and by keeping our eyes on the wider context of which we are all a part.

Finally, as a rabbi I see myself in the role of community organizer. As such, my main job is not to harangue or convince those with whom I work, but to figure out, together with them, how it is we create this Jewish thing called covenantal community. This so far has been one of the most satisfying and challenging aspects of being a congregational rabbi. What does it really mean to create a community which manifests the Godly qualities of *tzedek* and *hesed*? What implications does this have for how we handle money in the congregation? How do we create a community where caring for one another is understood as a joyful obligation? How does the community nurture the individual, and vice versa? How do we break down barriers of class, of sexism and homophobia, of racism and intolerance, to create truly inclusive communities? How do we, as a congregation, work in partner-

ship with others for meaningful social change? These are huge questions and the answers are not easy. But there are few places where we are privileged to wrestle with questions like these in such a thorough way; Jewish community is one such place. As rabbi I have a special role to play in helping guide this process, even as I learn from it.

## Moving Towards the Possible

When Moses had his first encounter with God at the burning bush, he wanted to know the name of this Being that was calling him to liberate a people crushed by slavery. The answer he received was both ambiguous and breathtaking: "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*," God replied, "I will be that I will be." In this moment, the God of liberation revealed itself as the Power of Becoming, whose essence is the possibility of transformation.

The Jewish journey is also about becoming, about moving towards that which is possible. This helps me as I contemplate the many questions that face me in my work of *tikkun*. There are so many types of balance that I need to achieve — between my own spiritual needs and those of the people I serve; between serving my congregation and serving the larger community; between taking action on behalf of the Jewish community and on behalf of others outside of that community.

My situation is not like that of Martin Luther King. He spoke for a community suffering the worst of ra-

cial and economic oppression in this country. The American Jewish community is among the most affluent in this country, and is no longer an oppressed minority, whatever vestiges of anti-Semitism remain. How do I make the connections between the issues facing an American Jewish community that is largely middle and upper-middle class, and the issues of racism, economic oppression, and environmental injustice that affect other communities? How do we as Jews attend to our own very real spiritual and emotional needs, in a society which leaves very little time for such endeavors, without forgetting about the problems that link us to other human beings in other neighborhoods, other cities, and around the globe?

If the God of Liberation is also the God of Becoming, then I have faith in knowing that simply being on this journey, and wrestling with these questions, is part of the answer. I have faith in the power of Jewish texts and spiritual practices to help me achieve clarity and avoid complacency, to help me be grounded and mindful in what I say and do. I have faith in the power of Jewish community to give me courage, teach me compassion, and to provide me with partners who can challenge and argue and help me learn what I need to know. I have faith that this broken world needs our Torah, just as it needs the wisdom of the rest of humanity, and that my rabbinic voice, and all of our Jewish voices, are needed to help speak the world back into wholeness again.



# Exploring Religion, Social Justice and the Common Good

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

**F**or the past twenty-five years I have been professionally engaged, as a rabbi, an educator and an executive of two different communal organizations, in exploring the nexus between Judaism and justice. For the last thirteen years the programs and curricula of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, which I founded, have reached well over 10,000 Jewish high school and college students. But nothing that I have done has been as rewarding in terms of both outcomes and learnings as the E Pluribus Unum Project, an inter-faith program exploring religion, social justice and the common good that was launched in 1997.

## E Pluribus Unum

The EPU Project emerged from three distinct but interrelated obser-

ventions. As a rabbi, I came to realize how easily religion loses its way. By tending to focus on the customs, ceremonies and forms that give institutional religion continuity rather than the ethical *raison d'être* of their respective faith tradition, many people of conscience turn away from organized religion. I found that many people doing the most important God-work in the world won't ever set foot in a church, mosque or a synagogue. We are looking for God in all the wrong places.

As one committed to social change, I became discouraged when others engaged in political and social change work were dismissive of religion and spirituality. Given how challenging and difficult such work can be, I observed that those who stay with it were sustained by a deep faith that comes from another dimension of reality, from a transcendent source.

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To be able to access that source requires an openness of the spirit to alternate ways of seeing a hard world.

As an educator of young people I experienced how successfully Jewish texts and values could be used to inspire greater commitment to issues of social justice and political activism. I was eager to explore whether the same approach could be used successfully by other faith traditions. Given how much energy for community service and social change emanates from the religious communities of America, it seemed only natural to explore ways that a diverse group of young people could be motivated to pursue the common good in a setting where the primary learning rubric was the religious social teachings of the respective faiths.

## Religions as Sources of Ethics and Values

When the EPU Project was launched in 1997 with initial funding from the Lilly Endowment and subsequent funding from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Person's Foundation and from the Ford Foundation, the expressed objectives were:

- To raise students' awareness of their respective religious traditions as a source of ethics and values that have direct bearing on a variety of major issues confronting our society today;
- To allow students to explore both the similarities and differences between their respective faith traditions and discover those areas of common

interest which might form the basis for a stronger civic fabric in America;

- To help students understand that a democracy rewards those who are most informed and active on issues, and specifically to teach how students can become more effective advocates for responsible social and political change informed by the teachings of religion.

Four discrete strands of the EPU program — the academic track, spiritual arts and worship, volunteer service and advocacy and community building — were designed to maximize the chance that participants would come to see the connection between their respective faith traditions and the need for any practice of that faith tradition to be in the service of some greater social good.

## A Model Program

In the original design of the three-week EPU program for entering college freshmen, each morning the sixty participants were divided by faith group into three faith-alike classes with a faculty member expert in that tradition. Three topical areas — human rights, poverty and the environment — served as the themes for each of the respective weeks. Policy experts would be invited to address the entire community in a plenary session, grounding the students in the specifics of the given issue. Each faculty member had a good deal of autonomy to determine how best to introduce the students to the particu-

lar teachings of that faith tradition as it pertained to the particular policy theme of the week. Every few days, students gathered together to participate in educational exercises which challenged them to learn, compare and contrast the teachings of their own faith tradition with those of the other two traditions.

One of the most surprising findings over the course of the three years was how little most students knew about the social application of their respective faith traditions — despite the fact that the recruitment process brought to the program young people who were far more connected to their religion than the average young adult. This suggested to the project organizers that none of the three faith communities was particularly effective at conveying the social message of their respective traditions.

In an evaluation administered prior to the start of the program, fewer than two-thirds of participants could name even three teachings from their own faith tradition that spoke to any social issue. Over 95% could answer that question by the end of the program. It was less surprising that fewer than a third of participants could cite three religious social teachings of faiths other than their own on the intake interviews. That number rose to over 80% by the end of the program. There was considerable evidence that the EPU educational environment helped students find their voice in relating religious teachings to pressing social issues of the day.

## **Interfaith Exposure and Religious Identity**

A somewhat counter-intuitive finding had to do with the relationship between commitment to faith and the ability of participants fully to engage with others who did not share their religious heritage.

From its inception, one of the commitments of the program design was that we would not sacrifice the passionate embrace of one's own faith tradition in the process of creating an environment that encouraged pluralistic expressions of faith, ethnicity and ideology. We were committed to avoiding this common pitfall of so many well-intentioned interfaith programs. The organizers were not unaware of the peculiar brand of intolerance born out of religious passion and fervor. Yet we believed that before participants engaged in any interfaith approach to pursue the common good, they would need to be grounded in the social teachings of their own respective faith traditions.

Not only did our program design abide by this principle, but in a six-month follow up study of alumni, we found that those most grounded in their own tradition were able to create the strongest relationships with people of other faith traditions in the pursuit of some social justice cause. Essentially, they were more inclined to look to religious cohorts for allies because their experience of faith through EPU bore witness to the relationship between religion and social justice.

It is not that the EPU experience avoided challenging each participants' understanding of one's own religious tradition and that of others; it was programmed to do so. In some cases, the expression of a viewpoint from one faith tradition helped a fellow EPU participant understand or articulate a belief or position from his/her own tradition for the first time. This phenomenon tended to strengthen commitment to one's own faith. At other times, however, the array of ideas about faith and religion from so many different perspectives challenged deeply held views and beliefs. One participant wrote: "I am flooded with new ideas and not sure where I stand with my own (faith) anymore."

While participants may have at times found themselves confused, the faculty was confident that it was the kind of confusion that would help them grow, both in faith and in maturity. The challenge articulated to the participants was to be able to stand in one's own truth while simultaneously being able to acknowledge the truth of another. Clearly, it was the focus on the theme of social justice that got participants to look past the particular elements of their respective faith traditions and encouraged them to engage in boundary crossing to find common ethical elements among all traditions.

## Long Term Impact

With the benefit of a grant from the Ford Foundation, we had the abil-

ity to monitor the effect of the EPU program on our alumni over a two year period.

College sophomores reported that in the year following their initial EPU experience they found that a major shift in their religious self-perception had taken place. They found that they now framed their statements of belief and commitment from a much deeper place within themselves, coming to feel that they more fully owned their convictions of faith. They had moved decisively beyond the stage of repeating what they learned from their parents and teachers. They largely attributed this self-conscious internalizing of deeply felt life commitments to EPU. The group, as a whole, and the individuals that were part of it, were solidly reflective of James Fowler's "individuating/reflective" faith stage, characterized by an ability to live with religious doubts (see James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Harper-Collins, 1981). A dance faculty member invoked a West African proverb to describe the kind of spiritual learning that was engendered at EPU — "the opposite of truth is not falsehood, but another profound truth."

**"Justice, Justice . . ."**

Alumni also more fully embraced the "servant leader" ethic that the EPU model promoted. One student said, "we all discovered that the idea of working for the community and (for) the common good and going

out and making a difference is something that is common in all our religions. . . . Before last summer I'd have been against working collaboratively (with people of other faiths). I would have only worked to support (my religion's) organizations."

A second student said, "Something I got out of EPU last year is looking at the religious texts from our various backgrounds and what our faith in general has to say about the quest for social justice. When you realize that they are so similar . . . you realize how much bigger a group of people from different faith backgrounds you have to work with for the common good. It is a very empowering thing."

In several EPU reunions held during the winter of 2000 this theme recurred with significant regularity. Even as these alumni bemoaned the fact that they could not devote as much time to community service and social justice causes as they would have liked, (owing to their commitment to their undergraduate regimen) virtually all reported on the impact of the EPU experience on their thinking. Some had changed their majors, some had developed new ideas about career goals. All had been challenged to reassess the way that they thought about religion, social justice and the common good.

## Next Steps

As we consider the impact of the EPU Project on the thinking and behavior of 160 young people, all of

whom are now moving through their college careers with varying relationships with churches, synagogues and the communities in which they find themselves, we are given pause to consider the ways in which EPU's unique configuration of themes and disciplines might benefit other fields.

The next phase of the EPU Project was launched during the summer of 2000. Some 50 nationally prominent professionals from the fields of religion, education, social change and the arts were brought together with a handful of EPU alumni and faculty. The purposes was two-fold. First, we wanted to describe and demonstrate the unique EPU programmatic model to individuals who were positioned to incorporate elements into their respective institutions. Second, we structured the program so as to encourage the launching of several new projects which would extend the EPU vision into new settings. Among the most exciting of these is a projected interfaith service house in which recent college graduates would live, engage in study and spiritual practice and work in social justice related organizations for a year. Several other, similarly ambitious projects are in earlier stages of development.

However rewarding and rich the EPU experience has been for those who have lived it, it is clear that we are only scratching the surface of the impact that religion can have on the pursuit of the common good. Indeed, every question that gets answered generates two new questions. The

questions that we intend to pose at our future professional consultations include: To the extent that higher education is concerned about character education, can colleges and universities afford not to integrate the social teachings of the world's historic religions? To the extent that social change organizations seek to provide impetus to and support for people who are committed to the work of peace and justice, how might they marshal the support of religious social teachings?

Last, but perhaps most importantly, given the galvanizing impact of exploring the social teachings of one's own and other faith traditions, how might churches, synagogues, seminaries and parochial schools re-

assess the way that they teach religion? Might it be that the most compelling aspects of each of our faith traditions lie precisely at the intersection between faith and the common good? Is not the purpose of religion to help people tread the very narrow ridge between attention to one's own needs and self-interest, and devoting energies to the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves? Must not religion serve both as a balm for the afflicted soul as well as a spur to the complacent conscience?

These are the kind of questions that EPU poses. It is in our response to these and other questions that we might find some important answers for creating a more just and peaceful world.

# Some Dissonance on the Day School Bandwagon

BY STEVEN M. BROWN

**T**he current love affair with day schools was unimaginable even twenty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Elementary day schools of all denominations and community orientations have convinced parents that a rich bicultural, bilingual, independent school education is a real option for Jews of all movements. The success of these schools in the eighties and nineties has led to a startling increase in the number of new day high schools sprouting up all over the continent.<sup>2</sup> Jewish public policy makers and shakers, particularly those in the federation ranks, have seized on the day school phenomenon as “the answer” to Jewish continuity issues.<sup>3</sup> And while day schools are proclaimed as the best educational investment we can make, synagogue school education has continued to recede as a viable alternative in the minds of many policy makers.<sup>4</sup>

As a professional who has labored diligently in the vineyards of both synagogue and day school education, I find the present mentality troubling.

At the very time when informed students of American Jewish communal life urge the creation of many gateways into Judaism, one institutional format is elbowing all the others out of the way.<sup>5</sup> But everything we know today about learning, individual needs, and multiple intelligences screams that the era of “one-size-school-fits-everyone” is gone. My purpose here is to discuss the serious pitfalls inherent in allegiance to the emerging policy of exclusive support for day schools, and to caution against neglect of other forms of gateways into Judaism. The explosive growth of day schools, and the ensuing enthusiastic support of Federations and family foundations may be blinding policy makers to some troubling facts that could bring the whole enterprise to collapse. Here, then, are some dissonant vibrations about the day school bandwagon.

## Growing teacher shortages

If the *raison d'être* of the Jewish day

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school is to provide a serious, in-depth exposure to Jewish texts, practice, faith development and integrated learning, then the success of these schools will be largely dependent on a corps of qualified, committed Jewish role models (of every denomination, depending on the individual school's mission). These people simply don't exist. Ask day school heads, and you'll find they are all desperate for qualified Judaic studies teachers.<sup>6</sup> Strong anecdotal evidence suggests that nationally, only 150 teachers a year are being produced on the MA level by all the Jewish teacher training institutions in North America. Currently, there are approximately 500 vacancies for teachers in day schools. No one is seriously engaged in developing sophisticated, funded programs to recruit candidates to a profession in great need of fiscal enhancement.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, many day schools have enjoyed the luxury of employing general studies teachers who enjoy working at lower pay in a school atmosphere that offers them more control of curriculum, personal safety and a feeling of accomplishment than might be available in public settings. These legions of general studies teachers could be earning twice as much in public schools. That situation is about to change drastically. Over the next decade the American public school system will need approximately 2,000,000 new teachers to replace retirees and those leaving the profession for more lucrative and personally satisfying jobs.<sup>8</sup> Any no-

tion of supply and demand economics will force a dramatic increase in what public schools will need and be willing to pay to attract new, younger teachers to their staffs.

At the same time, many of the general studies teachers who have helped make our day school systems so successful are also approaching retirement. Think about the teachers in your own child's day school. How many are young, in mid-career, or getting ready to retire? Thus, when graduates of teacher training colleges look for jobs in the coming years, they simply will not be able to afford to work for independent day schools. This is not only a problem for Jewish schools, but for independent schools in general. No major funding of any sort is being targeted at this emerging crisis.

One final policy issue affecting teacher recruitment and retention needs to be considered by the organized Jewish community. At the very least, establishment of a health and welfare safety net for Jewish teachers and professionals ought to be as central to the national debate as day school scholarship funding. Every Jewish teacher, principal or communal worker should be guaranteed adequate health care coverage, a pension plan proportionate to their work in Jewish education and tuition discounts for their children. Jewish educators aren't doing their work to get rich, but knowing that their families are protected, or that their own children can attend a Jewish day school or summer camp would be a power-



ful incentive to recruiting and keeping people in the field.<sup>9</sup>

## Shortage of Qualified School Leaders

Not a week goes by — not one — without my office getting a call or an e-mail from the head of a search committee desperate to hire a head of school for a new day school or to replace one who has left an existing school. Having done it for 16 years, I'm convinced there is no harder job in public Jewish life than being head of a Jewish day school. The range of agendas, demands and constituency needs, and the complexity of modern families require enormous professional, interpersonal, business, educational leadership and visionary skills. Not many people are trained to handle these burdens.<sup>10</sup> Of late some exciting new programs are emerging to fast track leadership, such as the one created at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education with the help of a major grant from The Avi Chai Foundation. A second cohort of 15 talented people began a two year period of training this summer as day school leaders. But the demand far exceeds our current capacity to recruit and train school leaders.

All the research of which I am aware points to the importance of the school head in effective schools. The head must set the vision and tone. Even in a consultative, Reconstructionist model of process, the head's vision, organizational talents and professional skills are crucial for de-

veloping school culture and climate. Where will the newly created day schools springing up all over the country find these leaders?

## Funding Issues

Not only are low salaries a barrier to attracting quality, stable staffs, but escalating tuition costs are squeezing out the middle class parent, creating schools for the privileged few who can afford it, or the very needy who can qualify for tuition aid. Schick points out that "day school families are significantly larger than non-day school families. This is true of non-Orthodox—and certainly of Orthodox—day school families."<sup>11</sup>

My bleakest moments as a day school head came in tearful conferences with parents who had to pull their children from the school because the financial burden was simply overwhelming. Though national efforts are being made to ameliorate the tuition aid issue, the amount of dollars necessary to support school operations and physical plant needs of a growing day school movement committed to excellence are far beyond even the marvelous fund raising capacities of our major Jewish philanthropies.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, families who can afford a quality education will buy it elsewhere if they do not perceive the Jewish day school as a place of distinction. Less affluent families don't want a bargain basement education for their children in order to lower school costs, and will remove their children, sending them

back to the local public school if they do not perceive the school as high caliber.<sup>13</sup>

The understandable desire to concentrate on day school fund raising will of necessity drain available resources from other important Jewish educational and social welfare enterprises like synagogue schools, summer camps, serious adult education, family education and informal youth group needs, and care for the elderly and impoverished.<sup>14</sup> The time has come, therefore, for a serious re-engagement with the school voucher issue, a zero-based review if you will, of Jewish public policy turned into *halakha mi-sinai*. Because I do believe that day schools are an important option for our families, and because the Jewish community alone cannot provide the kind of funding it will take to maintain schools of excellence open to the widest range of Jewish children, I support publicly funded vouchers of significant buying power. Here's why.

## Vouchers

Day school proliferation is clearly a result of a growing post-modern perception by Americans that the industrial model of public schooling is no longer the only option for those who would live a fully integrated ethnocentric, American life. America's post-industrial needs are very different from those addressed by a public school system established at the turn of the nineteenth century as the chief vehicle for homogenizing the immi-

grant population — Americanizing it to insure a work force for industrial America. Current attitudes towards multiculturalism, ethnic pride, and the need for diverse groups to maintain their own uniqueness in the salad bowl of American life, have made it difficult, if not nearly impossible, for the public school system to be all things to all people. You can sit next to a black, Hispanic, Catholic, or Asian child for twelve years in a public school and still turn out to be a bigot if no one deals overtly, systematically and volitionally with a values tradition that teaches you what your obligations are to others on a day to day basis. If Jewish day schools are successful, then they should be measured by their ability to promulgate and instill in everyday behavioral terms the idea that all people are God's creation, created in the divine image. It is our deepest Jewish obligation to care for and support all people. Our curricula need to teach appreciation, even reverence, for other people's cultures and traditions, allowing for interaction and multicultural learning opportunities with children in different schools and social settings.

It is not un-American or disloyal to democracy to advocate that schools be effective. Fairness is not treating everyone the same, it's giving everyone what he or she needs. Mindless devotion to a nineteenth century industrial model of factory schooling for all is not in the best interest of a post-modern economy and emerging culture. One size

school does not fit all. Thus, giving parents a real choice in the kind of school a child attends is a much better fit with contemporary American democracy.

Moreover, the Jewish community that so virulently condemns vouchers is at best inconsistent, at worst downright hypocritical. Jews have made their choice — by moving to the suburbs or electing to send their children to an enormous range of non-Jewish independent schools. When committed to public schools, Jews can choose to live in urban neighborhoods which often have strong coalitions of neighbors who make the local elementary school a unique and different setting when compared to other schools in the district. Why shouldn't less fortunate families have the same choice? The billions upon billions of dollars poured into school reform in this country have not worked. It's *arougewaffene gelt* (throwing away good money)!<sup>15</sup>

Is aversion to vouchers valid on principle or is it really our "making a fence around the law" lest other barriers between church and state come tumbling down? I am reminded of the words of William Doll, Jr., who wrote:

We face the twenty-first century, the third millennium, gripped by strong elements of doubt and fear. If we have a faith, and I hope we do, it is a faith based on doubt, not on certainty. What we do — and we must do

— we do with the realization that it may be wrong; no longer do we have the feeling of certainty and rightness in the universal and metaphysical sense the modernists posited. Such an absolute right (or truth) does not exist. Instead we make particular decisions which we hope will be right for now, for a local time and place.<sup>16</sup>

Is current Jewish public policy still right for this time and place?

## Effective Schools

There is increasing research on what makes for good schools that support learning for understanding. We know that human beings learn best in cooperative groups, when they are actively engaged in learning and able to make personal meaning. Schools that don't focus on these central notions will not be effective in the long run. Day schools are not necessarily any better at doing these things than a fine synagogue school. Though day schools have made enormous strides in broadening the envelope of accommodations for learning differences, a bilingual, highly academic, dual track, integrated general and Jewish studies curriculum is not for every child or family. Presently only 30% of Jewish children in the liberal American Jewish movements attending some form of Jewish schooling attend day schools. The Jewish community cannot — must not — neglect the needs and aspira-

tions of 70% of our younger constituents.

While day school education can be powerful, transformative and helpful in creating literate Jews with a mastery of Jewish content, skills, life styles and culture, our public policy must support alternative models that can be effective and life giving.<sup>17</sup> I am a product of a fine (for its day) synagogue school, Camp Ramah, and I guess some genetic encoding that has predisposed me to a religious life style. We need to reinvent the synagogue school, not ignore it.<sup>18</sup> The Melton Research Center is deeply involved in developing some new approaches to formal Jewish learning based on the latest research in cognitive theory and learner-centered education. Ultimately, no one strategy can solve all the problems of allowing gateway entrants to reconstruct their Judaism, but a certain core of Jewish literacy that can be made personally meaningful by the learner is imperative.

Approaches to reinventing the nature of learning and instruction in the synagogue school become more urgent as we watch a powerful new trend emerging in American schooling: year round schools. In the coming years more and more school districts will move to a six-weeks-on-two-weeks-off, year-round model of schooling. It has many benefits: better use of facilities and staff, greater consistency of learning, avoidance of long down-time where learning is forgotten, and provision of year-round day care. For synagogue

schools, this may mean an unprecedented opportunity to offer two week intensive Judaica immersion programs that can be transformative and life enhancing for our students and families.

Enhanced utilization of our growing and universal pre-school populations for intensive family education and Hebrew language immersion can also be a realistic way of transforming Jewish learning without incurring the fiscal burdens of day school education. Currently we are doing serious research and piloting of Hebrew language immersion in preschool children ages three to five. Much research has shown that the best time to teach a second language is when children are very young and their brain stores the new language near the native language. Early second language acquisition also enhances general academic and intellectual prowess.<sup>19</sup> Imagine what synagogue schools could do, or what day schools could build upon, if by five years old our children were fairly fluent in modern Hebrew! This is now doable. Jewish public policy needs to look carefully at early childhood Hebrew immersion programs for raising the level and quality of synagogue school education.

Make no mistake about my position. Day schools are extraordinarily powerful institutions, but we dare not put all our eggs into one basket, nor forget the pluralistic nature of American Jewish life. Jewish public policy needs to make choices, but it must not sacrifice all the alternative

gateways on the sacred altar of only one.

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1. See M. Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools* (New York: The Avi Chai Foundation, 2000). According to this study there were 185,000 students enrolled in Jewish Day Schools in the United States in 1998-99. Eighty percent of students are enrolled in Orthodox schools, but enrollment in Solomon Schechter (Conservative), Reform, and transdenominational Community schools has risen about 20% since 1992-93.

2. The newest day high school, the Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit, had hoped to open in the Fall 2000 semester with fifteen students. It will open with over fifty!

3. The formation of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE) by Michael Steinhardt from New York in 1997 is a powerful example of how a partnership of individual and foundation philanthropists is pursuing the day school agenda with meaningful funding. Twelve partners have each contributed \$1,500,000, creating a pool of funds used to provide challenge seed grants of up to \$300,000 for new schools. High standards of excellence are used to guide schools in formation and as a condition of acceptance to the project. Funding at least equal to this start up money will be essential to recruiting, training, and retaining qualified staff if these new schools are to succeed in the long run. Jack Wertheimer notes "that by the late 1990s, over 180,000 children attended day schools, compared to 260,000 enrolled in supplementary schools. In absolute terms, this means that the day-school population has tripled over the past 35 years; and the day schools' share of all Jewish enrollments has grown from under 10 percent in 1962 to nearly 40 percent." Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* (1999): 52.

4. For a succinct description of a remarkable "resurgence of serious interest in reviving and even recreating supplemen-

tary education," see Wertheimer, 61-68. 5. Jonathan Woocher suggests that "the more we can construct pathways of Jewish educational experiences that are characterized by extensivity, intensivity, and high quality, and the more Jews we can induce to enter and travel along those pathways, the better off we will be . . . We need to think less in terms of 'programs' at all, and more in terms of 'pathways.' Attending to the connections between and among various programs and settings to create smooth handoffs and synergies that are so often lacking today is the next frontier for Jewish education." Jonathan Woocher, "A Jewish Education Strategy for the 21st Century" (Unpublished), 12-13.

6. A CIJE study reported in 1998 that "coupled with limited formal training is the finding that work conditions are not professionalized. The teaching force is largely part-time; even in day and pre-schools . . . Only 20% of teachers say their earnings from Jewish education are the main source of family income . . . Among full-time teachers in all settings, only 48% reported that they are offered health benefits, 45% have access to pensions, and 28% are offered disability coverage. Adam Gamoran, et al., *The Teachers Report: A Portrait of Teachers in Jewish Schools* (New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1998).

7. For a study that demonstrates the dissatisfaction of day school teachers with their salaries (even more than supplementary school teachers) see Gamoran.

8. See D. Gerald and W. Hussar, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2006* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 1996), 96-661. Public school districts are starting to offer signing bonuses just like for baseball players! Baltimore offers \$5000 towards a house closing; Detroit \$3000 for signing, and Massachusetts offers an incentive of up to \$20,000 over four years for the top 100 candidates. Novice graduates from Jewish teacher training institutions often graduate owing as much in \$35,000 in student loans with no hope of repayment help from communities seeking

their services. (See AFT: Where We Stand October 1998. <http://www.aft.org/stand/previous/1998/1098.html>.)

9. Even where an umbrella policy for medical coverage has been instituted, such as by the Gruss Foundation in New York, cutbacks are now the rule because of skyrocketing coverage costs.

10. In a recent study conducted by the Mandel Foundation researchers found that “over half of the educational leaders in day schools are not trained in Jewish content areas. They do not hold degrees or certificates in Jewish education, Jewish studies, or related subjects. Day school educational leaders also lack formal preparation in educational administration. They fall far below expected standards for public school leaders.” E. B. Goldring, A. Gamoran, B. Robinson, *The Leaders Report: A Portrait of Educational Leaders in Jewish Schools* (New York: Mandel Foundation, 1999).

11. Schick, op. cit. 13.

12. Wertheimer opines, “To put matters into some perspective, let us note that in 1994 the day-school sector alone was estimated to require a billion dollars a year—that is, just for maintenance of regular operations. Federation allocations came to an average of 12.5 percent of day school budgets, a figure that varied greatly from one community to the next” (111). A recent interview with a staffer at UJC (United Jewish Communities) headquarters revealed that total fund raising by federations in North America for 1999 amounted to \$882,000,000 (\$87,000,000 of that amount in Canada). Added to family foundation and endowment gifts approximately \$1.6 billion was the total money raised.

13. See *Report of the Task Force on Jewish Day Schools*, June 1999 (New York: United Jewish Communities & JESNA, 1999). Parent share of school budgets in Jewish day schools varies from 57% to 90% with the average tuition ranging from about \$5100 in Torah Umesorah schools to about \$6000 in Schechter schools (43). These figures are probably much higher now. According to NAIS

(National Association of Independent Schools), 17% of students at independent schools receive need-based financial assistance with an average award of \$6,540. A JESNA report suggests 33% of students in Jewish day schools receive tuition assistance. This writer’s experience suggests that figure is low.

14. Wertheimer comments on allocation trends in federations: “In 1997 the largest allocations to educational programs in the big and intermediate-size communities went to day schools, while congregational schools in most cases received no funding or only a small fraction of the amounts given to day schools” (111)

15. The U.S. Department of Education reported on Friday August 11, 2000 that although half the money from federal education programs goes to the poorest schools, those schools continue to be the most lacking in qualified teachers and technological resources. While secondary schools educate a third of the poorest students in the country, they receive only 15% of \$8 billion each year in Title I funds. Moreover, while half of the instructional workers supported by these funds are only teachers aids, 41% report spending at least half their time alone with students, without a qualified teacher present. Edward Wong, “Poorest Schools Lack Teachers and Computers,” *New York Times*, 13 August 2000.

16. William E. Doll, Jr., *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 60.

17. Woocher suggests “that the complex nature of post modern life requires a more open and less linear mode of thinking regarding problem solving and planning for the Jewish community.” He suggests that we “embrace ‘both/and’ not ‘either/or’ answers. In a world of high variability, we generally do better hedging our bets. Two apparently contradictory courses of action (e.g., seeking to prevent intermarriage, on the one hand, and reaching out to welcome the intermarried, on the other) may both be ‘right’. Many debates in Jewish policy circles (e.g., whether to invest everything we can in day schools or try to transform part-time Jewish education) reflect

a black-or-white view of the world which is simply inappropriate from the perspective of complexity theory" (11).

18. For powerful examples of reinvention and systemic change in the Reform Movement synagogue school see I. Aron, S. Lee, and S. Rossell, eds., *A Congrega-*

*tion of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue Into A Learning Community* (New York: UAHC Press, 1995).

19. See A. Ofek, "Learning the Hebrew Language in Early Childhood," *Melton Gleanings* (Autumn 1997): 4-7.

# Not a Typical Rabbi

BY CHERYL JACOBS

**T**he story is told of Rabbi Hillel, that when he had finished a lesson with his pupils, he accompanied them part of the way. They said to him, "Master, where are you going?" He answered, "To perform a religious duty." They asked, "Which religious duty?" He responded, "To bathe in the bathhouse." They questioned (knowing that bathing, while commendable, is not a mitzvah), "Is that a religious duty?" He answered them, "If somebody is appointed to scrape and clean the statues of the king — how much more so should I, created in the image of God, take care of my body?" [*Leviticus Rabbah*, 34:3]

## Not A Typical Rabbi

I am the Vice President of Public Affairs for Planned Parenthood. I am also a rabbi. I suppose you could say that I am not what you might call a typical rabbi. Of course, with each passing day, the criterion as to what makes a rabbi typical evolves and grows. For example, one no longer needs to be a man to be a rabbi — I am not. It can no longer be assumed that because a woman is a rabbi, she

must be a Reform or Reconstructionist Jew — I am not. I hold a Masters Degree in Christian History from the Yale University Divinity School. I *daven* in *tallit* and *tefillin*. I always wear a hat to synagogue, but will not ever wear a *kippah*. I was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, but find I do my best and most meaningful davening at my Reconstructionist synagogue in White Plains.

I, a Conservative Jew, come from a Reform family and am married to a Reconstructionist — my family alone is the essence of pluralism! All of these nuances are considered to be normal in today's Jewish world. As modern Jews, we are given the opportunity and permission to be who we are and to forge our own paths towards spiritual and religious fulfillment. The way that we worship, the things we choose to do, or not to do, are individual choices to be judged by no one other than our own selves and our God.

## Rabbinic Paths

So, I am secure in the knowledge that I am a normal Jew, yet I know that I am not a typical rabbi. I have

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many friends who are rabbis of all denominations — Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox. By and large, the majority of them fit into one of six categories that I have always considered to be normal and logical rabbinic professions. The most common and popular is the role of pulpit or Hillel rabbi — this is the direction that roughly 90% of my graduating class pursued. They serve as head rabbi, assistant rabbi or even third or fourth rabbi in congregations and universities throughout the world.

The second most popular rabbinical career path is that of educator. Many of my colleagues are principals, teachers and educational directors in day schools and congregations where they work tirelessly day after day to educate the next generation of Jews.

The third category is chaplaincy. Rabbis work in hospitals, nursing homes and all four branches of the military. They have the challenge of meeting many of their congregants “where they’re at,” often at the end of their lives. The people they serve are often far from home, lonely and scared.

### **Academies and Agencies**

The fourth category is made up of the academic rabbis. They are the ones that could never get enough Talmud or History in seminary — the ones whose minds I admire, who work in universities and seminaries and write articles with much more

ease than I do.

The fifth category is work within the Jewish non-profit sector. Rabbis work for organizations such as the United Jewish Communities, the American Jewish Committee or the Anti-Defamation League as educators, directors and fundraisers.

And the sixth and final category is composed of what I fondly call “the lost tribe” of rabbis. These are colleagues who were ordained as rabbis some time ago, but have chosen to drop “rabbi” from their names. When asked their profession, they are unlikely to answer “rabbi.”

I understand that my categories are obviously rough groupings; but consider this: I am not the rabbi of a congregation or the rabbi of a school. I am not a chaplain or an academic — in fact, I don’t even work for a Jewish agency or organization. And I have no interest in dropping my title — I wear it proudly like a shining crown. So the following question begs to be asked: for we rabbis who do not fill traditional rabbinic roles, where do we fit in?

So often I hear the question: “Did you really need to go to rabbinical school to work at Planned Parenthood?” Or more commonly these days, when I share my career choice with others, their faces go blank and they utter just one word, “Oh.” And so, a mere six months out of rabbinical school, I ask myself this question: Am I legitimate in carrying the title I carry though I am not in a normal rabbinic (or even Jewish) profession?

## Journey to the Rabbinate

In order to answer that question it is important to think about how I came to be where I am. I came to New York eight years ago a young, sheltered kid from the suburbs of Boston. I had never been to New York City, and in fact, had never spent a night in a city other than New Haven. As the train pulled into Pennsylvania Station on the day I moved to New York, I gathered my suitcases and stepped out onto the platform only to find myself flat on my face with my bags scattered around me. I thought for sure that I had tripped on a bag left on the platform, yet when I turned to gather my luggage I was horrified to find that I had, in fact, tripped over a homeless woman sleeping on a cardboard box.

Terrified, I did not even attempt to speak to the woman. I instead grabbed my suitcase and cried in fear all the way to my new home — an apartment on the edge of Harlem. I had never seen someone homeless — never, in fact, ever seen the poverty that greeted me on my ride up to 122nd Street. I spent a long sleepless night that first night in New York.

The fear of reality had flooded me as I stepped off that train — I was scared of what surrounded me, I knew no Hebrew and very little about traditional Judaism at all. I had made at least a five-year plan, as well as a substantial financial commitment by coming to JTS and I knew that I had two choices — I could either pack my things and run out of fear, or I

could be proactive and do something.

I count the decision that I made that August evening to be one of my best. That night, I made a commitment to myself and I decided that I would not let fear control me — fear of not knowing how to pray, fear of not knowing enough, and the fear of a city whose crippling poverty and crime seemed inhumane and unjust. I believe that this is the night that I began my journey towards becoming a committed, religious Jew.

## Changing Direction

I did not come to the Seminary to become a rabbi. In fact, I came to JTS to pursue a doctorate in the field of Ancient History. I wanted to be a scholar of interfaith studies. I had dreams of returning to Yale, a full tenured professor, where I would enjoy a large wood paneled office in which I would need a ladder on wheels to reach the top two shelves of my library.

However, after a year in New York I began to become dismayed by the apathy and reticence I saw in religious leaders who did not get involved with secular, social issues. I knew clergy of all faiths who would lobby politicians for the separation of church and state, and I knew colleagues who would spend evenings marching outside the Capital building advocating for peace around the world, but I knew of very few clergy who were willing to spend their evenings in a homeless shelter or minister to women who had been battered by

their husbands.

This is not to say that my colleagues were not dedicated to social action, of course they were; but their issues were specifically related to the practice and observance of Judaism and mine were not. I desperately wanted to find clergy who made *gemilut hesed* (righteous acts) their issue. I wanted to turn on the television and see someone other than Reverend Jesse Jackson or Reverend Al Sharpton advocating for the rights of the silent. And so, it was after my first year in New York that I made the decision — I would pursue rabbinical studies with the clear purpose of becoming an atypical rabbi.

## Hands-On Experience

My career track was unusual for JTS. While my classmates interned at large Conservative synagogues and day schools, I spent six years running the Seminary's *Va'ad Gemilut Hasadim* (Office of Community Outreach). The mission of the *Va'ad* was to place JTS students, faculty and staff in volunteer activities throughout New York City. Our motto, "Helping out for heaven's sake," indicated our desire for the Seminary community to take what was learned in the classroom and use it to do acts of *gemilut hasadim* in the greater community.

It was while running the *Va'ad* that I met James. One day while working at an HIV/AIDS drop-in center, I spotted a man clothed in rags, sitting alone at a corner table shoveling food

into his mouth. It was difficult to believe that there could be a human being beneath the tattered exterior. I watched James for many weeks, until one day he walked into a support group that I ran for the clients. "I want to talk about God," he said.

The voice that emerged was beautiful and clear — not at all what I had imagined. His theological interest initiated a powerful relationship between us. I learned that after a horrific family loss, James tried to heal his shattered heart by using drugs and alcohol. He ended up homeless. He was infected with HIV. He became estranged from his wife and children. "I am broken," he said that day. "I fell into a pit and I just can't seem to crawl out."

Over the next couple of years, James and I talked about God — sometimes loudly, always passionately. He found part-time work in a church. With the money he saved, he rented a tiny studio apartment on Coney Island. After a year, James called me. He said, "I know what God put me on this earth to do — I am going to become a minister. I want to help heal those spirits that were broken like mine." I sat alongside his wife and children on the day James was invested as a Baptist minister. James learned to rely on God, and he succeeded in the climb out of his pit.

## Ministering to the Community

In my classes at the Seminary, I learned pages of Jewish text that

motivated me to become a rabbi: “A person should always measure their actions as if the Holy One dwells within them.” [BT *Ta’anit* 11a-b] But my experience with James, combined with other experiences from working with people with HIV/AIDS, the elderly, homeless and victims of domestic violence, convinced me to follow my heart and use the text that I learned by working with the community at large. My professional training was Jewish, but I had learned that the Holy One dwells within each person — regardless of religion, race or background.

From the time that I entered rabbinical school, I never wanted my training to separate me from the “outside” community — in fact, my goal was to bring communities together, not separate them — and thus I knew that the community at large would be the congregation to which I would minister.

## Making a Difference

I am certain that one can be a good and effective rabbi even if one is not working in a traditionally Jewish setting. And it is because my rational, religious self knows this to be true, that it is worrying to hear “why is a rabbi working for Planned Parenthood?” It frustrates me because the question should be, why would clergy not work for Planned Parenthood?

I spent nine years — first in divinity school, and then in seminary — learning how to be an effective leader and acquiring the skills to

make a difference in my community, whatever community I chose. I am aware that members of the religious right will argue that as a member of the clergy, the work I do at Planned Parenthood is immoral, and supports the very type of life choices that they believe we are not free to make. These opponents most likely hold my work up to their religious standards by making reproductive health care solely a religious issue rather than an inalienable right.

In truth, what I as a rabbi, along with the other staff and volunteers at Planned Parenthood, do are the *mitzvot* of *pekuah nefesh* (preserving life) and *gemilut hesed*. We empower women who feel they are voiceless, and we preserve and improve the quality of life for all of our clients. We preserve and protect life through prenatal care and by educating women and families about their sexuality so that they will not find themselves victims of disease, or pregnant when they are not ready to become parents. We provide information about birth control and we dispense contraception to more people than any other organization in the United States. We discuss adoption, foster care and abstinence, all the while allowing our clients to make rational, well-informed decisions about their own bodies and their own lives.

Reproductive health care and the decisions that women and couples make about their own bodies should be a right that is not questioned by anyone other than those involved. In the religious world, sexuality is often

referred to as an “evil inclination” with dangerous and corruptible powers. However, Nachmanides, in the *Iggeret Hakodesh* taught, “Neither sexual organs nor sexual intercourse are obscene, for how could God create something that contains an obscenity? God created man and woman, and all their organs and their functions, with nothing obscene in them.”

## Holy Choices

Judaism teaches that each person has been created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and thus God expects us to be holy. Therefore, every person should have the absolute right to make decisions for herself/himself concerning the care for, use of and enjoyment of their own bodies. Holiness is not something that is unattainable, reserved for those who live the cleanest of lives. Holiness is something that we grasp every day by mak-

ing choices that revere, and honor our lives.

I am a rabbi and the work that I do is holy work. My congregation is comprised of the women, children and families who depend on the services of Planned Parenthood. One of my major goals as a rabbi of this unique congregation is to lead in the way of Rabbi Hillel whose story I quoted at the beginning of this article. Rabbi Hillel taught his students that they were holy because they were created in the image of God. I advocate for each of my “congregants” to take care of their bodies and to use their voices to make decisions for and about themselves. I encourage each of my congregants to care for themselves because each of them was created in the image of God.

I do this because my tradition has taught me so. I do this because I have an obligation to share what I have been taught. I do this because I am a rabbi.

# *Tikkun Olam:* A Public Policy Focus

BY STEVE GUTOW

**W**e live in an age where poverty, persecution, hunger, the lack of health care and basic educational opportunities affect considerable proportions of the earth's population. The Torah, the prophets, and the other ethical texts of Judaism mandate that the attention and the action of Jews be devoted to such concerns. Most of these problems will not be solved under the rubric of private philanthropy or a "thousand points of light." They require strong political responses. The imperative of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) requires that Jews do what they can to alleviate this kind of suffering. Action that can make a difference in the lives of a great number of people is most effectively pursued in the political sphere. Jewish leadership must be willing to communicate this message if Judaism is to be an effective engine for social change.

## Changing Basic Structures

Repairing the world must be about changing economic and social struc-

tures so that those in need can achieve the means to effect changes in their own lives. If poor people have their own resources and means of supporting themselves and their families, they do not need to look longingly, respectfully or bitterly at the charity of the rich. If lesbians and gay men do not have to fight for the right to live lives unimpeded by discrimination and bigotry, they do not have to spend so much time beseeching legislators and administrators for fair and equitable treatment in housing and jobs. The fight to promote more democratization and the further shifting of power relationships so that women, African-Americans, Latinos, the poor and other persecuted people become more powerful is a political fight; and it is a fight that needs to occupy more of the Jewish agenda.

Whereas today many individual Jews involve themselves in political affairs and seem to take the repair of the world seriously, Jewish tradition often does not appear to be their primary motivation. In the past Judaism has been a powerful motivating

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factor for *tikkun olam*. Since the *Haskala* (the emancipation of European Jews in the nineteenth century) Jews have made great efforts to further social justice. There have been a large number of Jews in the leadership of social justice movements, some who lived religiously Jewish lives, some who only had a limited connection to their Judaism, and some who lived purely secular lives. There is good reason to examine those concepts which have inspired Jews to move the world into being a fairer and more equitable place.

### Prominent Jewish Presences

In the twentieth century in the United States one can see how Jews have played a significant role in America's pursuit of a more just society. Labor and grassroots organizers such as Emma Goldman, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, Saul Alinsky, and Samuel Gompers certainly deserve mention in any roster of those who made a difference in the lives of American workers in the twentieth century. Iconoclasts like Allen Ginsberg and Ben Hecht wrote poetry, plays and newspaper articles that promoted left-wing and liberal causes. The fight for the rights of women in this country has names in its forefront such as Bella Abzug and Betty Friedan.

Progressive legal figures such as Louis Brandeis, Abe Fortas, Arthur Goldberg, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Alan Dershowitz have led the way towards liberal jurisprudential change

in this nation. William Kunstler, Hyman Bookbinder, Abraham Joshua Heschel and a host of other Jewish attorneys, teachers and volunteers helped immeasurably in the battles of the 1960s for the civil rights of African Americans.

These people occupy different places on the continuum of Jewish identity and Jewish practice, but all of them come from Jewish homes and Jewish upbringings. Some, like Emma Goldman, felt the pain of persecution when she and her family were forced to leave Tsarist Russia. Betty Friedan, in recent years, has begun an in-depth course of personal study of Torah to understand more about her Jewish roots. Allen Ginsberg, while accepting the Buddhist faith, never denied the impact of his Jewish origins, and Benjamin Hecht returned to reflecting upon his Jewish identity only after establishing himself as an author of note. Samuel Gompers never appeared to want to discuss his Jewish ethnicity. Yet no matter how much or how little these leaders identified with Judaism or understood the Jewish sources of their commitment to social justice, they all grew up in a Jewish environment.

Another striking piece of evidence of Jewish support for social justice is the Jewish voting pattern in the United States. Most Jews vote against what might reasonably be seen as their economic interests and support the Democratic Party, a political party predominantly supported by the poor and lower middle class. In each of the last two elections over

eighty percent of Jewish voters voted for Bill Clinton. It has often been observed that Jews in America “earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans.”

### **Jewish Roots of *Tikkun Olam***

What is it within the fabric of Judaism that calls Jews to stand up for the rights of the oppressed and persecuted? What are the factors which, when synthesized, have led to such an outpouring of Jewish leadership and participation in the cause of repairing the world? The consistent support of Jews both in action and attitude for social justice causes comes from somewhere. There is a combination of sources within Jewish tradition that causes Jews to take a leadership role in the struggle for *tikkun olam*, and, for those who wish to see our tradition remain in the forefront of this struggle, an examination of these sources is in order.

There are four major Jewish concepts, that, when synthesized, have been the foundation of the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*. If we are willing to study these concepts and promote them now and in the future, they can form, for many of us, the basis of a renewed Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*. These are: (1) the nature of the revelation at Sinai: a call to action; (2) Judaism’s ethical teachings; (3) the persecution of Jews throughout history; and (4) an underlying belief that a person should not surrender in the face of difficult challenges. By understanding these

concepts we can begin to comprehend why there is such an urge within Judaism to create a better world.

### **To Act In This World**

The revelation at Sinai is the experiencing of a voice demanding that Jews live a commanded life and consistently act out those commandments. Many progressive Jews do not follow or even recognize the majority of these commandments, but they often affirm Judaism’s call for action. The legacy of Sinai is a belief by Jews that they need to do righteous deeds in this world. Whether or not there are 613 commandments or just a few ethical mandates, the central concept that Judaism teaches is that we have a duty to act. The Jewish religion is about what can be done in the here and now. In the face of a problem or an injustice, Jewish teaching demands action. Following a commanded life may have different meanings to different groups within Judaism, but the duty to act in this world is of paramount importance.

The second concept in this synthesis is Jewish ethics, which are replete with calls to fight injustice. Hillel said, “If I am not for myself who will be for me? And, if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?” (*Pirke Avot* 1:14) Chapter 58 of the Book of Isaiah is read every Yom Kippur, stating that the reason for the fast is to “clothe the naked and feed the hungry.”

When Deuteronomy discusses the forgiveness of all debt in the *Shmitta*



year or return of land to its original owners in the Jubilee year, the Torah is advocating ideas that are more progressive than anything Karl Marx or the nineteenth century land reformer, Henry George, ever proposed. When Jews grow up hearing “Justice, justice, you will pursue” (Dt. 16:20) or the enigmatic and haunting words of the Haggadah, “We were slaves in Egypt!” an indelible ethical imprint is made on those who are listening.

In our own time, Jews encounter equally powerful voices on behalf of justice. When Mordecai Kaplan states in *Judaism as a Civilization* that “The future of Judaism, even more than that of the other historical civilizations, depends upon its having the courage to commit itself to the cause of social idealism,”<sup>1</sup> Jews are reminded of duties and obligations that can be traced back to rabbinic and biblical imperatives.

## History As Teacher

Yet the demand for action and ethics only form the framework of the call. A tragic history teaches by example what happens when people do not look out for others. Jewish history is as effective a teacher as a history can be. Torquemada and the Inquisition, the Crusades, false accusations of blood libel, the Czars and their penchant for murderous pogroms, and the Ku Klux Klan — as well as the horrific mark left on history by the Holocaust — have all left their imprint on the Jewish people. If others had risen in support of the

Jewish victims of these tragic persecutions, Jewish lives would have been saved. History has taught us that there is a need to stand up against injustice even when non-Jews are being victimized.

Jews profoundly understand the words attributed to German Protestant theologian Martin Niemoeller after the debacle of World War II:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.<sup>2</sup>

Jews are taught that they must act; Jews understand the demands of Jewish ethics; and Jews know what occurs when people do not act to stop injustice no matter who the victim is.

## Against Impossible Odds

One more concept needs to be discussed. Judaism has as one of its underlying affirmations a notion that people can rise to any challenge. One of the earliest stories Jewish young people learn is the story about King David as a young boy. He comes to

bring supplies to his brothers and learns that the Israelites are giving up in the face of an evil giant named Goliath. David, with little more than a slingshot, does the impossible and fells this great evil.

Also from childhood, Jews learn the story of the Exodus. What crazy group of people could have ever imagined that they could rise up from slavery under the leadership of a Moses and achieve freedom? Moreover, when another Biblical story recounts how against great odds Esther saved her people, Jews understand that no matter what the cost may be, it is nonetheless important to resist evil in the world.

In more recent times, when impoverished Jews left the shtetls of Russia for Palestine with little more than Herzl's dreams and Bialik's poetry, they too were living out the Jewish faith in overcoming impossible odds.

If David, Moses, Esther and the beginnings of modern Israel are examples of fighting injustice in the world, it is not surprising that Jewish young people could see themselves following the footsteps of these heroic examples when they decide to tackle the problems of injustice and repair the world. Rabbinic tradition attributes to Rabbi Tarfon the teaching "You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you exempt from the effort" (*Pirke Avot* 2:16).

These fundamental sources for the Jewish mandate to repair the world may be synthesized differently by different Jews in different Jewish cultures, but they provide a wellspring

of motivation and justification for those who believe that *tikkun olam* is essential if Judaism is to be an engine for social change in this world.

## The Call to Action

With all this said, Jews today are not as fully engaged in the repair of the world as they might be. Two factors impede the kind of involvement that many advocates of *tikkun olam* believe to be necessary. Both a movement towards particularism and a hesitancy to enter the arena of political action stand in the way of a more solid Jewish participation in effective social justice action.

Today Jewish leadership puts great emphasis on the internal growth of Jewish life. This emphasis shows itself in the concerns of the great institutions that dominate the Jewish organizational landscape. In both public relations and in allocation of resources, organized Jewish life appears to have embraced particularism.

I do not suggest that there is nothing good in particularism. Jews are writing large checks to Jewish charities, building impressive synagogues and spending a lot of money in rejuvenating Jewish education. But when this focus on Jews alone becomes unbalanced and singular, this particularism becomes something that needs to be ameliorated.

## Abandoning the Larger Society?

Clearly, this is the case at the pres-

ent moment. The emphasis on particularism needs to be curbed. Not only does this particularism support an unbalanced expenditure of resources solely for Jewish causes, but this type of self-concern also brings with it a far more dangerous result: Jews begin to separate themselves from the world at large. If Jews see the improvement of only themselves and their institutions as the single appropriate channel for Jewish energy and Jewish actions, they may become isolated from the non-Jewish universe, and live without regard to the problems faced by those in need who are not Jewish.

This is precisely what is occurring. Jews are found among the many Americans who appear to be embracing an elitist lifestyle. Many live in sheltered neighborhoods and rarely venture forth into places in which they may encounter people different from themselves. Social interaction with African-Americans, Latinos or anyone of a lower socioeconomic status is all too rare. In the last decades a significant number of Jews in America have recreated of their own volition the ghettos of their past.

The danger in following this movement towards particularism is that by continuing in this direction Judaism will lose an important part of something intrinsic to Judaism. In the new Reconstructionist *Mahzor*, Richard Hirsh wrote:

On the eve of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., the prophet Jeremiah

called on his people to “pray for the peace of the land to which I am exiling you.” We Jews have recognized the importance of just government in the lands where we have lived because we have fared better in societies guided by principles of justice, equality and law. Today, in North America, where we strive to fulfill the opportunities inherent in living in two civilizations, our motivation must go beyond what is good for us to what is right for all.<sup>3</sup>

### Challenging Particularism

Is the challenge to this particularism all that it can be? Are those who believe that Judaism has a wider mandate speaking forcefully about their beliefs? Jews are retreating from their universalistic moorings. Isaiah and Jeremiah appear to be losing ground. The idea of being “a light among nations” does not receive a great deal of resonance in many synagogues. There is a fear among liberals of sounding too prideful, too knowledgeable and too demanding. After a talk I recently gave, a listener approached me and said quizzically, “You seemed to be saying that we must involve ourselves in social action. People don’t usually speak to us that way.”

Perhaps, in some synagogues, there is a more selfish reason. Preaching against “big money” and “corporate insensitivity” may upset some wealthy donors and certain corporate

executives. Whatever the reason, the present acceptance of particularistic self-interest should be challenged. Jewish leadership speaks very strongly if the speech is about contributing to the synagogue's building fund. Surely, those who believe in *tikkun olam* can speak just as loudly.

Much is done in synagogues to promote *Mitzvah* days and contributions to the poor and the needy in this world. These are good and important acts. However, most significant change requires involvement in social policy and in advocacy regarding legislation. If there are to be large-scale changes in the lives of the poor and the persecuted, political action is required. Education and health care for the needy in this country will not be fundamentally improved by private donations of time and money.

This is not to suggest that there should be a lessening of *Mitzvah* day activities and the like. They certainly help individual people and contribute to the notion amongst Jews that they should be involved in the pursuit of social justice. These efforts alone, however, are not enough.

*Mitzvah* days, for example, will have no impact on foreign policy. This arena cannot be entered unless Jews are willing to engage in debates in the "public square." Only by joining political movements that support intervention or withdrawal from specific international involvements can foreign policy decisions be influenced. Participation in rallies, letter-writing campaigns and visits to public officials are often the only roads

open to citizens who want to have a voice in the politics of foreign affairs. After witnessing the horrors of Bosnia and Rwanda, the Jewish community can hardly afford to close its eyes to the world in which it lives or only focus its foreign policy involvement on concerns involving the state of Israel. If the problems of social injustice require political action, as many do, very little is being promoted by the community.

### **Affirming the Mandate to Act**

Many Jews believe that Jews should not toot their own horns and make too much of themselves. There is nothing inherently chauvinistic about pointing out to believers of a religious tradition what it is about their tradition that should impel them to take action. When the action is *tikkun olam* and Jews seem to be retreating from following its path, the obligation to expound on what is mandated and why it is mandated becomes pronounced.

When Christians or Moslems or Buddhists extol their own religious tradition and exhort their followers to make this world a more livable place, many Jews enthusiastically support their efforts and their words. Why not seek out and support the same exhortations in trying to help Jews find their way back to their own special path of repairing the world.

Those who believe that there is a special call within Jewish tradition to rise up and fight persecution and unfairness in the world have great

resources from which to draw. The synthesis of the four sources: the call to action, ethical mandates, a history which reinforces our understanding of inaction, and a spiritual mandate to battle against impossible odds, is fertile ground from which to explain the message.

If those who believe in *tikkun olam* as a fundamental principle of Judaism are to be effective, they must speak early and often. They must not be afraid of suggesting that repairing the world through political action is every bit as important, if not more so, than building synagogues, supporting Jewish education or not angering rich contributors. They must be willing to delineate the differences between *Mitzvah* days and supporting legislation.

If the prophets are going to con-

tinue to live today, if “Goliaths” and “Pharaohs” are to be defeated, and if Jewish social activists are going to do what it takes to repair the very broken parts of the world in which they live, they must find the courage and the words to insist and demand that the Jewish people live up to the obligations and mandates of its rich tradition. They must find their “still small voice,” teach it, train it, speak it and live it.

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1. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1957), 471.

2. Martin Niemoeller, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown And Company, 1980), 824.

3. *Kol Haneshamah: Mahzor Leyamim Nora'im*, David A. Teutsch, editor (Elkins Park, Pennsylvania: The Reconstructionist Press, 1999), 579.

# The Politics of Judaism

*The Jewish Political Tradition*, Vol. 1, “Authority”

Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam J. Zohar, editors,  
Yair Lorberbaum, co-editor (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000),  
578 pages

REVIEWED BY SETH GOLDSTEIN

Aristotle wrote that humans, by their very nature, are political animals. We have an instinct, an impulse, to join with others. We are compelled to move beyond our lives as individuals to form communities — well-ordered societies that are mutually beneficial and through which the lives of all are enhanced. Political theory concerns itself with the best way to go about attaining such a society.

Beginning with the account of the events at Mount Sinai, in which a group of former slaves and various others enter into a covenant with another power and at once become a nation, Jewish tradition is a political tradition. Thus a key strand of Jewish thought is concerned with the proper construction of a community, the proper leaders for that community and the proper form of decision-making and community development. Beginning with the Torah, the chain of tradition continuously tries to answer the fundamentally political questions of how best to order

society, what norms do we wish to live by and how can we translate our core principles into virtuous action.

## Jewish Political Theory

Such is the thesis behind *The Jewish Political Tradition*, a four-volume work edited by Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam J. Zohar, and co-edited by Yair Lorberbaum. The entire project is an impressive and expansive attempt to examine the Jewish political tradition. The first volume, “Authority,” has recently been published; future volumes will address “Membership,” “Community” and “Politics in History.” (The work of Walzer, a political theorist at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, may be familiar to Reconstructionist communities — the concluding paragraph of his book *Exodus and Revolution* can be found in *Kol Haneshamah Shabbat Vehagim* [p. 768] and the Passover Haggadah *A Night of Questions* [p. 87].)

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This volume is a sourcebook. Primary texts are arranged around subject headings and are followed by interpretive essays provided by leading political theorists, philosophers and Jewish scholars. Texts are drawn from a variety of sources, spanning most periods of Jewish civilization.

Headings include “Revelation,” “Kings,” “Rabbis and Sages,” “Priests” and “The Good Men of the Town.” Its clear and accessible structure makes this an excellent book from which to learn and to teach. The index even has an entry “maxims” which point the reader to the texts that contain some of the more famous one-liners of Jewish literature.

## Non-Systematic Politics

But the structure of the book, it must be noted, is an artificial one. What is the Jewish political tradition? There is no sustained effort throughout Jewish literature to write political theory — a point conceded by the editors. Similarly, there was no systematic theology throughout key stages of Jewish civilization. The authors of the Bible and rabbinic texts were not writing systematic theology, though they dealt with what could be labeled theological themes. Attempts to examine Jewish biblical or rabbinic theology invariably result in artificial structures and categorizations that may or may not have been relevant to the authors of those texts.

Such is the case with this work. This book is consciously organized around topics related to Jewish tra-

dition as well those related to political theory. However it would be impossible to avoid anachronism when raising, as this book does, such questions as the dichotomy between rights and responsibilities, the importance of consent and democracy, the protection of individual rights versus communal responsibility and the majority rule versus the need for justice. These questions are not the concerns of the authors in their contexts.

But these are the important questions we may ask in order to understand the texts more deeply and make them speak to us today. We can ask these questions, reading the texts through our own lenses, as long as we know we are doing it. Within its framework, *The Jewish Political Tradition* is successful in its attempt to highlight the political aspects of Jewish thought because the commentaries are not intended to be exegesis or explanation, but engagement. These readings of the texts are not definitive. And historical context is less relevant in this book, which has the result of making the texts timeless.

## Covenant

The book opens, appropriately, with “Covenant.” Covenant within Jewish tradition is the means by which the people Israel defines its relationship to God. Through the traditional story of God’s giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and the people’s acceptance of it, humanity and the divine became perpetually

linked and the human understanding of its relationship to God is given a concrete understanding.

Read politically, the notion of covenant serves another role as well — it not only structures Israel's relationship to God, it structures Israel's relationship with itself. A collection of individuals who enter into the same agreement with a higher power at once becomes a community, or as Bernard M. Levinson writes in his commentary on covenant: "The covenant creates the neighbor just as it creates the self" (p. 27). With the covenant at the center of religious thought, he writes, there is no relationship to the divine without a relationship to the other; there is no self outside relationship to the neighbor.

This understanding makes the theological political. Communal obligation within Jewish thought is not new — framing it in terms of political theory is. Communal obligations and privileges are framed not as the duties of co-religionists towards each other, but as the responsibilities of citizens of a polity.

## Interpretation Builds Community

In addition, once in community, the Jewish textual interpretive tradition becomes the means by which Israel fulfills its role as a covenantal partner with God. Witness the interpretation given to the famous "oven of Akhnai" story found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 59b, in which a halakhic argument is decided

against a voice from Heaven, with the rabbis proclaiming "[The Torah] is not in Heaven." By claiming the Torah as its own, and then interpreting it as needed through intellectualism, debate and creativity, Israel becomes true partners with God — the Torah becomes as much Israel's as it is God's. As David Hartman comments, "When the content of revelation becomes a living and expanding corpus of law and commentary, only then does the covenantal community emerge as God's mature partner" (p. 266).

But what is key is that the interpretation is of a legal nature. It is the occupation of interpretation with an eye towards ordering the community that is the fulfillment of the covenant. Taking revelation (Torah), adapting it and setting up the community around its norms is the true fulfillment of the covenant. Israel is thus engaged in the political practice of organizing a society to reflect its highest ideals. (For another example, think how the Articles of the U.S. Constitution and its subsequent interpretation are meant to reflect the values put forth in that document's Preamble.)

## The Prophetic Tradition

Through the active engagement with text, other concepts within Jewish thought are viewed through a political lens and shown to have relevance to today. Take, for example, the section "Prophets." Here the prophet is not merely the voice call-



ing for attention to issues of social justice or preaching adherence to the covenant. The prophet is a political leader. How do we understand this today, in an age in which there are no biblical-type prophets and the idea of a prophet as political leader is antithetical to notions of democracy?

Michael Walzer writes, "What [prophets] want is that people repent of their sins — and then turn, as it were, in place: each person is to enact the covenant in his or her sphere of activity. The goal is a series of turnings, not a change of political regime — although if princes and judges repent, the effect may be something like a change of regime" (p. 217.) The role of the prophet, and not just the prophetic message, is made compelling and recognizable in our own age.

## The Contemporary Jewish World

The last sections of the book, "The Gentile State" and "The State of Israel," address the current situation of the Jews in the world — either living in their own state or as a minority in a foreign country. The first deals with questions of the legitimacy of Jews living under a foreign power, stemming from the Talmudic dictum *dina demalhuta dina* "the law of the kingdom is law." The second deals with the joining of political thought to political power — how does a Jewish state organize itself politically? What role does Jewish law play in the law

of the state?

The texts and commentaries in these sections are rich and thought-provoking. But for modern American Jews, especially those in Reconstructionist communities, the concerns are different. By choosing to live in the Diaspora, the questions of Israel are important as concerns of Jewish peoplehood, but they are do not have immediate political consequence. And Reconstructionists have accepted *dina demalhuta dina* to such a degree, so to speak, that American values and law are not merely tolerable, but embraced and incorporated into how we understand Judaism.

This split reveals the dual nature of a Jewish political tradition; that is, the Jewish political tradition includes both the Judaicizing of politics and the politicizing of Judaism. It is the latter that is of more importance to Reconstructionists. Judaism itself — its theology, textual tradition and structures — acts within a paradigm of political theory. The political questions raised in this volume continue to be addressed in our smaller communities and congregations, not only around questions of governance, but in how we understand God, sacred text, interpretation and community.

## Authority

Perhaps the main question that this volume will raise for Reconstructionist readers is, how are we to understand authority when we say there is no authority? We live in a time when authority is divorced from

power, when *halakhab* cannot be enforced. Saying “the past has a vote, not a veto” implies nothing has a veto — no one thought, idea, person or body of knowledge has the final authority. Also running as an undercurrent throughout the primary texts and the interpretive essays in the book is that necessary corollary to authority — consent. In order to govern, the leaders must have the consent of the governed. Where do we choose to place our consent? Nothing by its very nature has authority, so we must ask questions in our own lives about voluntary adherence to authority and how community boundaries are then drawn.

*The Jewish Political Tradition* provides a valuable resource for addressing this question. Perhaps the most compelling section of the book is “Controversy and Dissent,” which includes numerous texts on decision-making, majority rule and the acceptance and retention of minority opinion. This section also includes a valuable exchange on a key Reconstructionist value, pluralism, represented by the early medieval disputes between Rabbinites and Karaites. Represented by primary texts from Sherira Gaon and Salmon ben Jeroham respectively, these two groups inherit the same tradition, and their different readings then feed off each other, providing stimulus to each other’s intellectual development.

Walzer writes here, “Revelation may be singular in character — but human engagement with this oneness is always, necessarily, a pluralizing

and differentiating process. Individuals and groups come to the one text with their different experiences, interests, and questions; and they come away with different meanings” (p. 353-4). Different communities may locate authority in different places, but all opinions that inherit and wrestle with the tradition are in some way valid.

While issues of interest to Reconstructionists are addressed, noticeably absent within these pages is the Kaplanian and contemporary Reconstructionist response to Judaism and the American political tradition in which democratic principles are incorporated into religious decision-making. Selections from writers from the early Reform movement are included, but aside from the section on Israel, the book fails to include many late-modern/contemporary thinkers.

## The Individual and the Community

The texts and commentaries included in the volume provide much fodder for reflecting on the political within Judaism. In a time when Jewish theological writing is more often than not focused on the individual experience of the divine, a focus on the political and communal nature of religious thought is most welcome. *The Jewish Political Tradition* is an important work because it reminds us that much of Jewish tradition is not solely mystical or spiritual, it is legal and pragmatic. It is not located in the heavens, but here on earth. It

does not stress the individual's connection to the divine, but rather the individual's connection to his or her community. And because at the root

of this connection is the covenant, the work of building and maintaining a society is truly holy work.

# Living Politically in Two Civilizations

*The Politics and Political Culture of American Jews*, by Arthur A. Goren  
(Indiana University Press, 1999), 274 pages

REVIEWED BY REENA SIGMAN FRIEDMAN

**W**hat was the significance of the mass funeral held for the beloved Yiddish writer, Sholom Aleichem, in 1916?

What role did the Yiddish newspaper, the *Morgen Zhurnal*, and its publisher, Jacob Saphirstein, play in Republican politics at the turn of the century?

What can the congressional campaigns of Morris Hillquit and Meyer London (in 1908 and 1910, respectively) tell us about the ethnic and political loyalties of East European immigrant Jews?

How did American Zionists make use of the image of the “*halutz*” (Jewish pioneer in Palestine) to advance their cause?

What did the planners of the 1954 Tercentenary Celebration (marking 300 years of Jewish presence in America) hope to prove to themselves and others?

These are among the thought provoking questions raised by Arthur

Goren in his recently published anthology, *The Politics and Political Culture of American Jews*. Each of the essays in this rich collection explores a discrete topic in American Jewish history, spanning the period from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1970’s. Yet all of them relate in some way to the overall theme of Jewish political activity, both within Jewish communal circles and in the larger American context.

## Collective Identity

On a more fundamental level, the author is concerned with American Jews’ efforts to formulate and project a sense of collective identity which ensures both complete integration into American society and Jewish continuity. American Jewish leaders, he notes, have long struggled with these issues. In his landmark 1907 address, entitled “The Problem of Judaism in America,” Dr. Israel Fried-

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laender, Professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, articulated the anxieties many felt about Jews' abilities to balance participation in American life with retaining group ties and fulfilling their responsibilities to world Jewry.

In essence, this is a book about how American Jews have dealt with the challenges and rewards of "living in two civilizations," to borrow Mordecai Kaplan's phrase. As Goren explains, it is a complex process:

The twin desires for ethnic survival and personal acceptance into American society were rarely posed as an either-or choice. Much of Jewish communal thought was directed toward formulating strategies and programs to mitigate tensions through compromise and accommodation, or by redefining the group's Jewish identity and the character of American nationality. (p. 14)

Some of the essays discuss well known episodes in American Jewish history, such as the establishment of major communal organizations or the contributions of famous Jewish labor leaders. Yet even when the subject matter is familiar, Goren supplies additional information, offers fresh perspectives or provides a more complex analysis.

For example, much has been written about the founding of the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, as well as

the early clashes between their two leaderships and constituencies. The author, however, delves more deeply to examine the backgrounds and motivations of major players such as Louis Marshall and Stephen Wise, enabling the reader to better understand the public positions that they took.

Similarly, most accounts of the early years of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee emphasize the organization's ability to bring together individuals from many different sectors of the community in a common relief effort. Goren demonstrates that, though the JDC's mission was ultimately successful, quite a few tensions lay beneath the surface.

## Zionism

In his chapters on Zionism, Goren also illuminates important, though less well known, aspects of a much discussed topic. While we know that there were many different factions within American Zionism, most scholars have emphasized the work of political Zionists and the movement's early organizational challenges, rather than ideological differences among its leaders. Goren evaluates the impact of cultural or spiritual Zionists within the American Jewish community, focusing on four individuals: Israel Friedlaender, Judah Magnes, Mordecai Kaplan and Louis Finkelstein.

In assessing the responses of the first two leaders to the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, and the

last two to the passage of the Biltmore Program in May 1942, the author discusses the reservations they expressed about the goal of Jewish political sovereignty in Palestine. Once the post-war need for a haven for Jewish refugees became clear, Kaplan and Finkelstein certainly supported the creation of the state. However, the earlier arguments of cultural Zionists — that such objectives were unattainable under existing conditions, deviated from the true goals of Zionism (i.e. the cultural renaissance of the Jewish people) and might exacerbate international tensions — constituted an important critique of mainstream political Zionism.

In addition, these Zionist spokesmen emphasized the importance of the American Jewish community, as well as the positive cultural influence which Israel would have on Jewish life in this country.

## Public Pageants

In other cases, the author examines more obscure events, those not discussed in other surveys or mentioned only in passing, and reflects on their broader significance. One particularly interesting chapter explores the phenomenon of public Jewish funerals in the early twentieth century. The author provides detailed descriptions of funeral rites organized for such well known figures as Kasriel Sarasohn, Orthodox leader and publisher of the *Yiddishe Tageblatt* (1905); the Yiddish playwright, Jacob Gordin (1909); the famous writer, Sholom Aleichem

(1916); and Jewish labor leaders, Meyer London (1926), Morris Hillquit (1933) and Baruch Vladeck (1938).

Goren views the funerals as “public pageants” which variously blended traditional Jewish mourning rituals, East European customs honoring departed leaders, socialist ceremonial and American organizational techniques. The funerals were occasions for communal bonding, when mourners rededicated themselves to the ideals represented by the deceased, affirmed their collective identity and projected carefully crafted self images to the larger society. Along with rallies, parades and other mass demonstrations, the funerals helped to create a domain of “Jewish public culture,” in Goren’s words.

The treatment of the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph is an example of Goren’s ability to view familiar events through a new lens. Several historians have discussed the ill-fated career of Rabbi Joseph, who was brought to the United States in 1888 in a vain attempt by Orthodox leaders to establish a Chief Rabbinate in the United States. Existing accounts of the 1902 funeral have focused either on the fact that Rabbi Joseph died in poverty or on the Irish-Jewish riots which erupted during his funeral procession. In contrast, Goren is more interested in the ways in which East European Jewish immigrants transplanted Old World burial rituals for great scholars to the U.S. as a means of strengthening communal solidarity in their new land.

## Post-War Decades

Much has been written about American Jewry in the postwar decades, including the phenomenon of suburbanization, Jews and liberal politics, communal policy regarding Israel, Jews and the Left and Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights movement. Goren's essay, "Inventing the New Pluralism," sheds light on a little known chapter in the history of this period: the activities of the American Jewish Committee's National Project on Ethnic America. In an effort to defuse the mounting racial tensions of the 1960's, AJC leaders broadened the scope of their work beyond particularistic Jewish concerns to support the interests and preserve the ethnic consciousness of various urban, white ethnic groups. They conducted research, developed educational materials and worked to shape public policy in this area. In the process, they helped to forge a new, pluralistic vision for America as a whole.

In some instances, Goren's book breaks entirely new ground by challenging commonly held assumptions regarding Jewish life in America. His analysis of Jacob Saphirstein and the *Morgen Zhurnal* (the major Orthodox Yiddish daily newspaper at the turn of the twentieth century) is a case in point. The essay "The Conservative Politics of the Orthodox Press" highlights Saphirstein's loyal support for the Republican Party on both the local and national levels. Saphirstein and his followers repre-

sented a segment of the immigrant Jewish community that was conservative, non-ideological, politically savvy and rather parochial in its interests. Such a picture contrasts sharply with the usual image that we have of the socialist minded, cosmopolitan, fervently ideological but somewhat naive residents of immigrant ghettos. As the author notes, this is a topic that deserves greater scholarly attention.

## *The Reconstructionist*

There is much in this volume of interest to those with connections to the Reconstructionist movement. In addition to the obvious appeal of the book's central themes, several of the essays touch directly on the role of Mordecai Kaplan as a bold thinker and major contributor to American Jewish life. In his first chapter, which deals with various efforts to shape a definition of American Jewish identity, Goren presents Kaplan's concept of Judaism as a total civilization. Moreover, it was Kaplan who charged planners of the 1954 Tercentenary of American Judaism with failure to place American Jewry within the larger context of Jewish history or to evaluate its relationship with Israel and other Jewish communities around the world. As noted above, the questions raised by Kaplan, the spiritual or cultural Zionist, regarding the potential dangers of "statism," as well as the ultimate goals of Zionism, remain as meaningful today as in the 1930s and '40's.

In fact, *The Reconstructionist* magazine itself is praised as an important and influential voice within the American Jewish community. Goren cites a series of articles published in the immediate postwar period, a time of turmoil and upheaval for world Jewry. The first of these, an editorial which appeared on January 11, 1946, discussed the concept of the *halutz* which, according to Goren, had by that time become a central motivational image for Zionist work in the United States and worldwide. The journal's editors reinterpreted the term *halutz* to include American Jewish immigrants to Palestine who would not necessarily settle on kibbutzim but would apply their education and skills to the difficult challenge of absorbing the refugees then pouring into the country.

A subsequent editorial, dated January 23, 1948, reiterated this idea, stressing the unique contributions that Jewish settlers from the U.S. could make in bringing American expertise and "democratic principles" to that land. Interestingly, an article by Jack Cohen, entitled "*Halutziut* for American Jews" and published on December 27, 1946, further broadened the notion of *halutziut* to encompass Jewish communal work in America.

## A Wider Context

*The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews*, like many of Goren's other works, focuses on particular events and personalities as keys to

understanding the larger themes and issues of American Jewish history. These varied essays, enriched by well-selected quotations and accompanied by extensive documentation, reflect the author's wide ranging knowledge and erudition. Written in a lucid style, they are valuable reading for academics and students of Jewish history, as well as anyone interested in tracing the roots of aspects of contemporary Jewish life.

In some instances, additional information might have "rounded out" the picture somewhat. For example, the fascinating chapter on the image of the *halutz* in American Zionist ideology includes a great deal of material on folksongs, dances and film. It also describes dramatic photo exhibits, such as the one featured at the Palestine Pavilion of New York's World's Fair from 1939-41. It would have been interesting to note, as well, the impact which art work focusing on *halutz*-related themes had on American Jews' support for Palestine in the early years. Moreover, the author discusses the ideal of gender equality in pre-state Palestine and cites passages from various reports attesting to a more equal role for women in the new society. However, he does not mention the fact that, for many if not most women, the reality fell far short of the ideal, a contention substantiated by much current research.

This anthology makes a most valuable contribution to the field of American Jewish history. Its essays all relate to Professor Friedlaender's



central concern: Could American Jewry “participate in the life and the culture around them and yet remain Jewish?” In this election year, the questions raised by Arthur Goren’s book are particularly relevant and meaningful. Senator Joseph Lieberman’s candidacy focused renewed attention on the role of Jews in American politics, their self-image as a

religio-ethnic group within American society and the challenges of “living harmoniously in two cultures,” as Friedlaender put it. The publication of this volume, which will certainly serve as an important historical guide as we continue to ponder these issues, could not be more timely.

# Jews and the Struggle for Civil Rights

*Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community,*  
by Marc Schneier  
(Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 240 pages

REVIEWED BY MOTI RIEBER

Perhaps no other episode in American Jewish history has given Jews as much pride as their community's role in the civil rights movement of the '50's and '60's. Every time a Farrakhan speaks an anti-Semitic phrase, or attention is called to the sometimes troubled contemporary relationship between blacks and Jews, the Jewish community is likely to respond by pointing to the fact that it was engaged in the civil rights struggle far out of proportion to its numbers in the general population — something of an “after all we've done for them” response. Those few names that manage to remain in the historical consciousness forty years later — Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, for example, or Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who paid the ultimate price — are a source of continuing pride for the Jewish community.

But is this perception of involve-

ment an accurate one? Exactly how much was the Jewish community, or were Jews as individuals, involved in the civil rights movement? Was this involvement and support unanimous, or were there fissures in what many remember as our finest hour?

## Montgomery to Memphis

This is the subject of Rabbi Marc Schneier's fine book, *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Jewish Community*. In this exceptionally well-researched study, Rabbi Schneier traces Dr. King's career from the Montgomery bus boycott to the 1963 March on Washington to King's assassination in 1968 in Memphis. At each step he shows exactly who Dr. King's Jewish allies were, and what roles they played. He also analyzes, with great sympathy and understanding, who among the Jewish community did not support Dr. King and

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why, and who gave public support but did not come through when it counted most.

Although Rabbi Heschel's name appears throughout, and there is a full chapter dedicated to his civil rights work, the main strength of the book is its bringing out of the mists of history the names that we might not otherwise remember. Among these are Rabbi Israel Dresner, who was beaten and arrested as a Freedom Rider in 1961 in Birmingham; arrested for unlawful assembly for attempting to be served at a lunch counter in Tallahassee with black fellow clergy members — an action that led to a Supreme Court case with Dresner's name on it; and arrested in Albany, Georgia for demonstrating outside the county courthouse in 1962.

Another wonderful aspect of this book are the many quotes that Rabbi Schneier has rescued from history's subconscious, such as this one from Rabbi Dresner:

The segregationist makes no fine distinction between the Negro and the Jew. The racists of America fly blindly at both of us, caring not at all which of us falls. Their aim is to maintain, through crude segregation, groups whose uses as scapegoats can facilitate their political and social rule over all people. Our common fight is against these deadly enemies of democracy and our glory is that we are chosen to prove that courage is a characteristic of oppressed

people, however cynically and brutally they are denied full equality and freedom. (p. 70)

The book begins with two chapters of overview, the first of King's life and career, and the second on the Jewish tradition of social justice, which Schneier believes to be the basis for Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement. The chapters then proceed chronologically, incident by incident, campaign by campaign. Later chapters deal with Rabbi Heschel, the splits within the civil rights movement, and the growing rift in black-Jewish relations.

### Active Jewish Involvement

Throughout it all, Schneier finds Jews all over the civil rights movement, and every episode in the thirteen short years between Montgomery and Memphis has a Jewish name attached to it, including, among many others:

- Dr. Marvin C. Goldstein, who integrated his Atlanta dental practice just after the Second World War, well before the question of civil rights was even on the radar screen of most white Americans;
- King's trusted friend and advisor, Stanley Levenson, with whom he spoke nearly every day;
- Morris Abram, who led a fourteen-year legal and political campaign against Georgia's county unit electoral system, which favored white voters in rural districts over black urban voters, sometimes by margins

of one hundred to one; led efforts throughout the '50's to "unmask" the Ku Klux Klan, leading to laws in fifty-three cities which said that the Klan could not rally in their masks; and later served as United States representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights, as legal counsel to the Peace Corps, as president of the American Jewish Committee, and as president of Brandeis University;

- Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, the head of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, who announced support for the Montgomery bus boycott, and various of King's other campaigns throughout the years;

- Allard Lowenstein, who helped develop the idea of the 1962 voter registration drive in which Goodman, Schwerner, and James Chaney were killed. (Interestingly, Schneier brings evidence that the organizers of this campaign were not at all averse to the idea that some northern whites might die for the cause. They believed, with reason, that the deaths of a few white people would have as much impact nationally as the death of a dozen black people.);

- Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who spoke after Jesse Jackson at the 1963 March on Washington and said, "The most important thing I learned [in Berlin under Hitler] is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence." (p. 97)

## Southern and Northern Jewish Views

Although Schneier takes pains to stress the prophetic and social justice aspect of Jewish tradition, he also mentions early on that most of the Jews involved in the civil rights movement were secular and unaffiliated, little if at all conscious of the specifically Jewish element of what they were doing. Having established this, however, Schneier lets the matter drop, and since much of the writings, resolutions and history that he uncovers were from rabbis and such organizations as the American Jewish Congress — that is, identified, affiliated and nationally prominent Jews — the secular nature of most Jewish involvement tends to get lost a bit.

Of course, Jews were not always on the right side in this struggle, and Schneier makes sure to mention these instances as well. Southern Jews, reliving age-old diaspora fears, were afraid that any support they might show for blacks would endanger their own hard won position in the southern middle class. For instance, Dick Rich of Atlanta's Rich's department store knew that if he desegregated his store he would lose white clients, and if he didn't, he would lose black ones. In fact he lost many of both. Southern Jews, afraid — with good cause — of white supremacist violence, by and large chose to keep their heads down, and resented the intrusion of their northern co-religionists, who mostly supported the cause from afar. The Southerners feared they put the

lives and status of Southern Jews in danger. Rabbi William Malev, expressing what Schneier calls a “consensus” among southern rabbis, said “[N]o one has the right to martyr someone else for the cause he believes in.” (p. 40)

## Organized Jewish Support

By and large, Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, B'nai Brith, and especially the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis and UAHC, were supportive of King's work, and often invited King to speak in front of their groups. Many of those northern Jews, of course, were more interested in passing resolutions in support of Dr. King than in getting their heads beat in for him. When the CCAR, meeting in Atlantic City in 1964, received a telegram from Dr. King asking them to join him in the dangerous — and only partially successful — action in St. Augustine, Florida, only 16 of them went. And when Dr. King started to speak out strongly against the war in Vietnam, President Johnson tried to intimidate the organized Jewish community from doing likewise by threatening to cut support for Israel if Jewish organizations spoke out publicly against the war.

King's own affection for the Jewish community is also covered in great detail. Of course, the civil rights movement, like the Negro spirituals before it, took a great deal of its imagery and inspiration from

the Hebrew Bible, especially the Exodus story and the various prophets of social justice, who in particular seem to have been role models for King. King was also outspoken on the subject of the plight of Soviet Jewry at a time when that issue was just beginning to generate attention from American Jews. He appeared at conferences and sent messages of support on the issue (in which Heschel was a major player) whenever his busy schedule permitted, and he continually tried to steer civil rights organizations away from a path of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism — terms he thought were synonymous.

## A Strained Relationship

As Schneier observes, over time increasing strains developed in the black-Jewish relationship. In part this was due to blacks' internalization of traditional Southern anti-Semitism, and later, to an increasingly “blacks-only” attitude on the part of some civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) after 1965. In addition, there was an increasing perception among some blacks of Israel's Arab enemies as “fellow colored victims of Western imperialism.” All of this, of course, only served to turn off the Jewish community, which, while continuing to be politically supportive of the mainstream civil rights organizations, slowed noticeably their personal and financial involvement in the move-

ment.

While Schneier draws out these points in great detail — that is, the reason for the decline of the black-Jewish relationship from the black side of the street — he makes no mention of any part the Jews may have played in this deteriorating situation. For instance, all throughout this period, Jews were moving out of city and near suburban neighborhoods just as fast as blacks could move into them, crippling King's dreams of integration to this day. Theoretically, if those Jews had stayed, the neighborhoods would have been more integrated, the urban infrastructure would have remained stronger, government probably would have given more resources

to the cities and the entire landscape of the last thirty years might have been different. This couldn't help but cause disappointment and resentment on the part of blacks who had bought into King's integrationist vision.

Despite relatively minor criticisms — including a high number of typos that one would not expect in a professionally published book — *Shared Dreams* is a valuable contribution to the history of the civil rights movement, and to the role of American Jews in it. Schneier reminds us that the Jewish community certainly has reason to be proud of the participation of some of its bravest members during this important period in American history.

# Vintage Perspectives

## The Strain in Black-Jewish Relations: A Retrospective from the Pages of *The Reconstructionist*

### "American Jewry Divided on Strategy"

(An Editorial, Volume 34, Number 14, November 22, 1968)

*(No modifications have been made in order to allow this editorial to speak in the language and idiom of its time. —Ed.)*

**A**vital debate is going on within the Jewish community, one which may have far reaching consequences for the security and prosperity of American Jews. The question has not been put in just these terms, but the issue is: shall organized Jewry continue to lend its support to the Blacks' struggle for equality, or shall they disengage themselves from that struggle — as Jews — and devote themselves to insuring Jewish survival, economic and cultural?

#### Division in Jewish Ranks

A wide reading in the Jewish and general periodicals reveals the division in Jewish ranks. Releases issued by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds indicate that Jewish communal funds are being generously directed toward supporting projects, sponsored by civic and religious groups, designed to assist Blacks in raising the level of their

lives. The National Jewish Welfare Board, at the fall meeting of their Board of Directors, heard Irving Brodsky, executive vice-president of the Associated YM-YW's of New York, report on a survey made during the summer of how Jewish community centers and Y's were participating in urban crisis-related activities. The overwhelming majority of executive directors of centers and Y's stated that involvement of their agencies in appropriate activities was "a valid expression of Jewish commitment and values."

"Project Equality," a nationwide interreligious fair employment program, launched in Detroit in 1965, issued its first official progress report recently, showing impressive results. The PE became an interfaith program early in 1966 as the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, the Detroit Council of Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches joined with the Archdiocese to form

a separate PE corporation.

Arthur J. Goldberg, newly elected president of the American Jewish Committee, at the recent annual meeting of the Executive Board in Atlanta, Ga., urged that Jews continue to aid Blacks to achieve full equality. "The great body of Negroes," he said, "do not share the opinion of the few extremists within their own community," and therefore Jews should not be deterred by the minority from fulfilling their traditional function of combating bigotry. Jews should be "particularly sensitive" to the consequences of racial or religious discrimination against any group.

### **Continuing Commitment**

These sentiments were echoed by the Committee's executive board chairman, Max M. Fisher of Detroit. "Jews," he said, "should not withdraw from the battle for civil rights and Negro justice." Dr. Walter Wurzbarger, an Orthodox rabbi, concurred: "Irrespective of all short-term considerations of expediency or enlightened self-interest, we must be guided by our religious tradition which regards involvement with the social and economic concerns of all men as a religious imperative."

Taking a different position, Professor Abraham G. Duker, of Yeshiva University, warned that, as in other critical periods in history, Jews are "being made, this time, the scapegoat for Negro frustrations." Speaking before the 25th Annual Convention

of the Alumni of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, Dr. Duker declared that the "extreme attitudes" of Black power militants in league with those of the New Left could result in the economic displacement of less affluent Jews, forcing them to seek jobs and businesses outside the large cities.

"Harassment, terrorization, agitation and extremist propaganda" of the militant groups may find Jewish teachers, civil servants and professionals pushed out of their jobs through the abandonment of the merit system and the substitution of state and municipal-supported ethnic or racial schools. "This may be only the beginning," he cautioned. "It also carries with it the connotation of second class citizenship." At the moment, no honest dialogue is possible because of the unwillingness or fear of moderate Negro leadership to liberate itself from extremist influences.

### **Protecting Jewish Self-Interest**

Although he took a more moderate position than Dr. Duker's, Mr. Bertram H. Gold, executive vice-president of the American Jewish Committee, nevertheless suggested that American Jews might be leaning in the direction of a change in strategy. "Jews are beginning to feel that their national leadership is more concerned with bettering inter-group relations than with protecting the interests of the Jewish community." Many Jews feel that they are the "par-



ticular targets” of the tensions and conflicts of the urban-racial conflicts. “The social disorganization of the Black slums and changing neighborhoods has directly affected the merchants, social workers, small business men, civil service employees, teachers, cab drivers, doctors and others who provide services in those areas. . . . Though we must reject demands for withdrawal from the civil rights struggle, the Committee’s leadership would not be fulfilling its functions if we were to ignore the legitimate demands for greater power by the Negro community at the expense of hard-won gains made by many individual Jews.”

An Orthodox rabbi, Bernard Weinberger, active in New York City’s anti-poverty programs, warned that Jewish leaders who take strong public stands on civil rights issues “may well threaten the survival of the Jewish community in America.” Noting that Orthodox Jews do not sponsor conferences on urban problems or “dialogues,” he warned that “the reality is that Jews simply cannot speak their minds, openly and honestly, on such burning issues without jeopardizing Jewish lives. Every statement by the northern liberal Jew for the civil rights of the Negro causes some Jew to suffer at the hands of White racists in the south.” He specifically proposed that a new Jewish strategy might begin with Jews getting out of the way of the Black community, giving up “exploitative” businesses in the ghettos and refraining from interference with

Negro efforts to decentralize public school systems.

## Truth on Both Sides

We have studied both sides of this controversy and, we find, as usual, that there is partial justice on each side. Certainly, those with some historical perspective are right in pointing out that social revolutions have generally caught the Jews in the middle. Extremism, which is of the very essence of rapid change, is bound to seek scapegoats and the Jews are ready victims — not alone because of inherited prejudices but because Jews have had to move into those exposed positions in society which were available to them, that is, not already preempted by the establishments. In the United States where the real power remains in the hands of the WASPs and their descendants, Jews have been forced to rise in the interstices of the social fabric. So long as there is no basic change in the concentration of power, the route taken by the Jews remains the only one to which other aspiring minorities can resort — and then comes the clash of competition.

On the other hand, we do not agree that it is possible or desirable for Jews to work out strategies for their own survival which ignore the total social situation. They must recognize that they can prosper only in an open society; and in such a society they must reckon with all groups, religious, ethnic, racial, with whom they must share the common life. Iso-

lationalism within America is as indefensible as isolation from the outside world.

It is true that Jews are justifiably disturbed by the silence of the moderate Blacks and their failure to repudiate the extremists of their own people. We do not hesitate to denounce those Jews of the “new left”

who embrace Arab hate of Israel. We should expect no less from Blacks who despise the blind destructiveness of some of their group. But we must not become extremists ourselves and lose faith in the whole enterprise. In the contemporary world, no one can say “a plague on both your houses.” Plagues have a way of spreading.

# Oppressive Metaphor and the Liberating Literal Sense

BY BEREL DOV LERNER

When we think about our relationship with God, we quite naturally tend to understand it in terms borrowed from language describing the ties and alliances which hold between human beings. It is hardly necessary to mention that the contemporary (Western, high-brow) common wisdom views all such types of relationships between people as more-or-less temporary constructs whose very existence is constantly threatened by the contingencies of social, political, economic and technological change. When a particular kind of human relationship is affected by such changes, it may cease to serve as an intelligible metaphor for the human/divine relationship, a predicament which Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit have called “the fading of the metaphor.”<sup>1</sup>

## Fading and Oppressive Metaphors

Sometimes a theological metaphor

will not merely fade into unintelligibility; it may become positively jarring. Such is the case when ancient texts refer to the human/divine bond in terms of social relationships which are now rejected as oppressive or exploitative, i.e. God as our King, Master, Lord, etc.

Perhaps the best known critique of such metaphors is Mary Daly’s now classic work of feminist theology, *Beyond God the Father*. Despite her radical rejection of traditional Christianity (which she calls “Christolatry”), Daly’s scholarly grounding is in Christian theology, and she (at least in her earlier work) openly adopted central ideas of modern Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich.

## Metaphor and Liturgy

Of course, the Jewish community has not remained untouched by these issues. Members of the Jewish Reconstructionist movement recently expressed similarly critical attitudes

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towards these “politically incorrect” metaphors in the discussion surrounding the publication of *Shabbat Vehagim*, part of their prayer book series, *Kol Haneshamah*. The Spring 1994 issue of *The Reconstructionist* was largely devoted to these issues. One writer there complained that “. . . the image of God as King not only reinforces the notion that men are the real leaders; it also reinforces hierarchy rooted in a single powerful patriarchal authority figure, whether that figure be the rabbi, the corporate executive, or the public official. Jewish liturgy can unintentionally reinforce the legitimacy of excessive presidential power . . . ”<sup>2</sup>

Even those who have discovered ways to make their peace with the traditional liturgy still recognize the “cognitive dissonance [which] results from praying with images of God that one finds archaic, false or repugnant.”<sup>3</sup> We, who are neither ruled by kings nor enslaved by masters, may at first find these metaphors for God unpalatable. However, a more sophisticated approach to theological language must take into account the traditions in which these metaphors occur.

For example, before we reject monarchy as a theological metaphor on the basis of its political implications, it is worth investigating the political uses to which it was put by our predecessors, who both embraced the metaphor and actually lived in a world governed by kings. Most crucially, we must consider whether the notion of God as king was meant to

be understood metaphorically to begin with.

## Divine Kingship Undermines Human Kingship

At least within the Jewish tradition,<sup>4</sup> a strong case can be made for the thesis that when a human power-relationship is used as a theological metaphor, far from strengthening the original human relationship, the metaphorical usage radically undermines the legitimacy of the human relationship.

The notion of God’s kingship is an obvious case in point. One might think that this metaphor would serve as the basis for some version of the doctrine of the “divine right of kings.”<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, in telling the story of Gideon’s campaigns, the author of Judges seems to have arrived at the opposite conclusion:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you, your son and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites.” But Gideon replied, “I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord alone shall rule over you.” (Judges 8: 22- 23)<sup>6</sup>

A similar sentiment informs the story in I Samuel of Saul’s rise to power as the first king of Israel. From the start the prophet Samuel opposes the elders’ request that he appoint a king. God himself complains that “It is Me they have rejected as their

king” (I Sam. 8:7). Samuel, following God’s command, delivers to the people a harrowing catalogue of the injustices which they must expect to suffer under a human monarch, which ends with the chilling prediction, “The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Lord will not answer you on that day” (I Sam. 8: 18).

Despite Samuel’s protestations and warnings, the people insist on being ruled by a mortal king “like all other nations” (I Sam. 8:5). Even after Saul’s initial successes, Samuel continues to harangue the people for having said “‘No, we must have a king reigning over us’ — though the Lord your God is your King” (I Sam.12:12).

## Beyond Metaphor

In order to understand Gideon and Samuel’s antimonarchical politics, it is important to keep in mind that the biblical institution of kingship defines a king’s claim to his subjects’ obedience and loyalty as being unique. In a monogamous society, an individual may not be married to more than one person at a time. Similarly, monarchical political tradition did not allow a person to be a subject of two or more different kings at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, if I recognize God as my king, it is no longer possible for me to recognize some human being as also playing that role.

The rhetorically crucial point of Gideon and Samuel’s talk of “God

our King” is that they are not speaking metaphorically, but rather quite literally. A literal king does not challenge the legitimacy of a metaphorical king (and vice versa). Suppose a Jordanian lover of popular music had complained that Elvis Presley, rather than Hussein, was the true king. We would have pointed out to him that just because he recognizes the metaphorical status of one person as “The King of Rock n’ Roll,” he need not forswear granting someone else the political status of literal kingship. In the same way, if Gideon and Samuel understood God’s kingship to be merely metaphorical, they would have no reason to complain that the anointment of a literal king would somehow impinge upon it.

The literal nature of God’s kingship has striking implications for both language and politics. For more than two thousand years, sophisticated pagan and monotheist readers have dealt with scandalous passages in religious texts by reading them as metaphor and allegory. Embarrassing anthropomorphisms which seem to imply God’s corporeality are safely transformed into descriptions of his power and actions, as in the case of the expression “the hand of God.”

## Liberating Literalism

The problem with these non-literal interpretations is that they cut both ways. Suppose I express my appreciation for some woman’s beauty by metaphorically referring to her as a rose. My use of such a metaphor

will obviously commit me to the notion that a rose itself is in fact beautiful. Similarly, if I express the depth and importance of the relationship between God and Israel by referring to it metaphorically as a relationship between lover and beloved, I must obviously be committed to the notion that human erotic love is not a trivial matter.

We are so used to applying metaphorical interpretation to anthropomorphic religious language that we naturally assume that an expression such as “the Lord your God is your King” should also be taken metaphorically. However, the above discussion makes it clear that the metaphorical interpretation of divine kingship implies that we attribute positive qualities to human kingship, which we then go on to ascribe to God by way of metaphor. Because neither Gideon nor Samuel meant their talk about God as King metaphorically, they were not attributing qualities of human kings to God (nor, reciprocally, God-like qualities to kings).<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, by conceiving of God as King, they reveal how intolerably presumptuous it is for any mere human to assume such a role. Only God, who is absolutely and ontologically different from and superior to human beings, can legitimately claim the kind of power which mortal kings try to wield over their fellow human beings. A human king is literally “playing God.” Just as the association of the practice of worship with the divine makes it unthinkable

for one mortal to demand worship from his fellow, the notion of God as King undermines the attempt of any merely human leader to claim our absolute obedience and loyalty. A people which thinks of itself as ruled by God will have no truck with tyrants who would usurp God’s role.

Martin Buber has stated that this theocratic/libertarian attitude has informed the Jewish spirit since the theophany at Sinai:

The paradox of every original and direct theocracy, that it involves the intractableness of the human person, the drive of man to be independent of man, but for the sake of a highest commitment, already appears in the Sinai covenant.<sup>9</sup>

## God as Master and Liberator

Several other seemingly “archaic, false or repugnant” images of God become paradoxically liberating when understood in their original, literal sense. The human institutions of slavery and servitude are obviously unjust, and the notion of “God our Master” has traditionally been used to undermine and limit precisely these institutions. Just as people who recognize the literal kingship of God will not abide human tyranny, those who call God “Master” cannot allow human beings to claim mastery over their fellows.

Furthermore, scripture tells us that God exercises the uniquely legitimate prerogatives of Divine mastery so as

to undo the injustices of illegitimate human mastery. In Leviticus 25: 54-55, it is God's literal claim of mastery over the Jewish people which underwrites the demand that Jewish servants be freed in the Jubilee year:

If he has not been redeemed in any of those ways, he and his children with him shall go free in the jubilee year. For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants; they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.<sup>10</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud further applies this idea — that the servant of God is free from servitude to mortals — to the relations between employer and wage laborer. No work agreement is absolutely binding, as this would constitute a challenge to God's ultimate mastery:

Rav stated: A laborer may renege [on his agreement to work] even in the middle of the [work] day! For it is written, "For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants" — My servants, and not servants to [other] servants. (BT *Bava Mezia* 10A)<sup>11</sup>

## Servitude and Freedom

The notion of God's mastery does not merely limit the powers of a would-be human master. Those who recognize God's mastery must realize the freedom that this entails in their own lives. The Torah speaks of

the loyal servant who, after seven years of enslavement, rejects the liberation offered by God:

When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall be freed, without payment . . . But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to be freed," his master shall take him before God [or perhaps, the judge]. He shall be brought to the door [or the doorpost] and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his slave for life. (Exodus 21: 2, 5-6)<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai's interpretation of this strange procedure is given in tractate *Kiddushin* (22B) of the Babylonian Talmud:

How is the ear different from all other parts of the body [that it is to be pierced in a slave who refuses his freedom]? The Holy One blessed be He said: "The ear which heard my voice at Mount Sinai when I said, For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants"; My servants, and not servants to [other] servants — and this one went and acquired himself a master — let it be pierced!

According to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai, one's attainment of personal freedom from enslavement to hu-

mans is itself a fundamental expression of one's commitment to serve God.

## Passing Mary Daly's Test

The Talmudic interpretations I have mentioned regarding the notion of "God our Master" have an importance beyond the light they shed on the biblical text. The exegetical imagination will always be capable of inventing apologetic glosses on scripture which make it palatable to contemporary tastes. However, it may be argued that this is not sufficient to justify our continued positive appreciation of biblical texts. Consider, for instance, Mary Daly's opposition to Paul Tillich's reinterpretation of the story of The Fall:<sup>13</sup>

However, as in the case of his analysis of the Fall, Tillich abstracts from the specific content of the symbol, which in fact functions to justify oppressive social structures. Once again there is no notice taken of the fact that the medium is the message. Defenders of this method argue that the symbol "can be used oppressively" but insist that it need not function in this way. This kind of defense is understandable but it leaves a basic question unanswered: If the symbol can be "used" that way and in fact has a long history of being "used" that way, isn't this an indication of some inherent deficiency in the symbol itself?<sup>14</sup>

The style of interpretation which I am here endorsing does not suffer from the deficiencies which Daly attributes to Tillich. Here there is no question of abstracting "from the specific content of the symbol," since the images of God here discussed are being considered in terms of their literal "specific content", rather than as symbols or metaphors.

## Symbol in Context

Furthermore, as is demonstrated by the Talmudic passages here cited (and these exemplary passages could be multiplied with many others from the rabbinic literature through the ages), these purportedly oppressive images of God do not have a "long history of being 'used'" in an oppressive way, at least not within the Jewish tradition. I would go so far as to say that an oppressive interpretation of these notions of God could only be made in spite of how they have been understood by the rabbis. The discomfort of the contemporary faithful with "archaic, false or repugnant" images of God may indicate a deficiency in the cultural grounding of our generation rather than "some inherent deficiency in the symbol itself."

The danger will always remain that people will make incorrect inferences from the propriety of talking about God's superiority to the propriety of talking about the superiority of particular human beings. If, however, for political reasons, we censor all hierarchical religious language, we will also lack the means to speak of di-



vine transcendence.

Of course, those who reject a personalist theology, or who are unwilling to contemplate the possibility of a Being who quite properly relates to human beings as their absolute superior, will still have reason to reject traditional references to God's mastery and kingship. However, as I have demonstrated, the upshot of God's superiority far from implies the endorsement of unequal relationships between human beings.

## Land Ownership and the Exodus

My final example involves the return of ancestral lands to their original owners in the jubilee year. According to biblical law, every fifty years (in the jubilee year), each family, no matter what deals it may have struck in the preceding five decades and regardless of its financial fortunes, regains possession of its original familial lands. Here again we see the divine/human relationship described in the language of oppression. God is the great landowner and we but God's tenant farmers: "The Land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with me" (Lev. 25: 23).

However, divine "monopoly" ownership of land does not imply unjust distribution. In fact, the priestly tribe of Levi, who would seem to be the most natural beneficiaries of such ownership, "have received no hereditary share along with their kinsmen: the Lord is their share" (Deut. 10: 9). Instead, the claim of divine own-

ership is mentioned only in order to undermine any human attempt at gaining monopoly control of land. No one may be permanently disinherited of their ancestral portion, "the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with me" (Lev. 25:23).

## Liberation From Oppression

The three aspects of liberation which I have discussed — freedom from monarchy, freedom from slavery and freedom from monopoly land-ownership — precisely define the liberation described in the story of the Exodus.<sup>15</sup> In Egypt, the Israelites were enslaved by an absolute monarch who owned all of the land (see Gen. 47). The liberation from these forms of oppression is depicted by the Exodus story as the replacement of Pharaoh's dominion by that of God. In the words of the late biblical scholar Binyamin Uffenheimer: "Pharaonic slavery was conceived by Israel as the symbol of human bondage. As against it, the Kingdom of God was meant to be free from any kind of human domination."<sup>16</sup>

Careful examination of one word in the original Hebrew text of Exodus will help strengthen this point. God does not directly call for the freeing of the Israelite slaves, but rather repeatedly demands of Pharaoh "Let my people go that they may worship Me" (Ex. 7: 16, 7: 26, 8: 16, 9:1, 9: 13, 10:3).

The word "worship" is deserving

of further scrutiny. In the Hebrew, it appears as *ve'ya'avduni*, which may also be literally rendered "that they may serve me." The term here translated as "worship" is derived from exactly the same root as the word *eved* (slave or servant), which is used by scripture to describe the position of the Israelites in Egypt.

In other words, God may be seen as demanding that Pharaoh hand over to him the mastery over the Jewish People. When the Israelites fully realize their servitude to God, they become fully liberated from their servitude to Pharaoh. Here again, in the story which has most fundamentally expressed the need for human liberation in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, we encounter the theological-political axiom that only God has the right to make absolute demands of human beings, and what God does demand is that they be free.

1. See their *Idolatry*, Naomi Goldblum, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 30-35. Halbertal and Margalit argue that changes in nature of marital relationships have spoiled the use of erotic jealousy as a metaphor for God's response to idolatry.

2. David Teutsch, "Seeking God in the Siddur: Reflections on *Kol Haneshamah*," *The Reconstructionist* 59:1, 15.

3. Eliezer Diamond, "Image and Imagination: The Revealed and Hidden Faces of God in Jewish Liturgy," *The Reconstructionist* 59:1, 57.

4. David Nicholis, "Addressing God as Ruler: Prayer and Petition," *British Journal of Sociology* 44:1, reviews the political uses of the notion of God's kingship in the Christian tradition.

5. Exceptions to this thesis may be found in the tiny portion of Jewish liturgy, which relates directly to human mon-

archs. BT *Berakhot* 58A states: "One who sees a king of Israel says 'Blessed [is he] who has given of his glory to those who revere him.' [One who sees] a king of the nations says, 'Blessed [is he] who has given of his glory to flesh and blood.'" Also see Sarah Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1997) 334-348. Japhet argues convincingly that several verses in Chronicles (I Chr. 17:14, 28:5, 29:23, II Chr. 9:8, and 13:8) point to a counter-tradition which understands God's kingship as supportive of human (especially Davidic) kingship. Expressions of this tradition may also be found in Psalms. Don Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 117, writes: "The theology of Psalm 89 ... sees the governance of the world as lying in the hands of a dyarchy of God and king."

6. All biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia and New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1988).

7. The ancient Near Eastern attitude towards the king's unique claim to his subject's loyalty is somewhat more complicated than I have described it here. Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 70-75, points out that the Hebrew word *meleh*, while usually translated as "king," may refer to two different forms of political authority, which he calls, respectively, "sovereignty" and "suzerainty." Levenson claims that while the general notion of God's sovereignty does not undermine human kingship, God's role as suzerain (an emperor, or in other words, a master of vassals) strictly implies God's unique rule over Israel which preempts any other claim, be it human or divine. Vassals "must acknowledge only one suzerain, the *great king* [emphasis in original] of their alliance" (71). Both Israel as a nation and the Israelite as an individual stand in the position of royal vassals of the divine suzerain" (72).

8. I should point out that, literally un-

derstood, kingship refers merely to a particular political-legal relationship. The fact that someone is a king tells us a lot about his legal prerogatives in a monarchical state and very little about his essential characteristics. In regard to these the fact that someone may be called a king only tells us that he fulfills the minimum definition of a "person" who is capable of claiming such a role. Similarly, we might infer from the statement "Charlie Brown owes me five dollars" that Mr. Brown is someone legally definable as a person rather than a cartoon character or a cat of the same name. This legalistic understanding of what it means to be a king reduces the metaphysical difficulties of attributing literal kingship to God. The same is true of the terms "landowner" and "slave owner" dealt with below.

9. Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, Richard Scheimann, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 138. Not surprisingly, anti-monarchists in the modern period have made political use of these biblical sources. The great defender of the American and French revolutions, Thomas Paine, devoted several pages of his *Common Sense* to Gideon and Samuel, and wrote of the ancient Israelites: "Kings they had none, and it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of Hosts. And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of kings, he need not wonder that the Almighty, ever jealous of his honor, should disapprove of a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven" (Thomas Paine, *Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, N. F. Adkins, ed. [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953], 11). Paine concludes: "These portions of scripture are direct and positive. They admit of no equivocal construction. That the Almighty has entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false" (13). For further examples of the anti-monarchical use of scripture in the modern West, see Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 127-8. Isaac Abravanel (1437-

1508) was the most prominent medieval Jewish thinker to base an extended anti-monarchical argument on these scriptural passages. The relevant sections of his biblical commentaries are available in English translation in R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (eds.), *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

10. Emmanuel Levinas presents a similar discussion of these sources in his book *Beyond the Subject*, Gary D. Mole, trans. (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 10. I am indebted to Dr. Ralph Bisschops for bringing this to my attention. My analysis also shares a weakness in common with Levinas's Jewish writings. While we both seek universal human liberation, tradition usually only relates to liberation internal to the Jewish people. Strictly speaking, the notions of God as King, slave-owner and landowner serve within Judaism to free Jews from human kings, slaveowners and landowners. The issue of particularism does not touch my central thesis that within Judaism, hierarchical God-talk is liberating.

11. In Levinas' book this is mistakenly cited as 10b.

12. The standard Jewish interpretation would have it that even such a "slave for life" would be freed even against his will in the jubilee year.

13. See Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 31-39.

14. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 72.

15. For further discussion of the relationship between the deprivations of Egypt and the social provisions of biblical law, see my "Redemption: Time and Space," *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 21:3, 178-82.

16. Benjamin Uffenheimer, "Utopia and Reality in Biblical Thought," *Immanuel* 9:1979, 7. See also his *Ancient Prophecy in Israel* (revised edition, Hebrew), (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984) for an in-depth discussion of many of the points I have touched upon in this paper. His treatment of the ancient Near Eastern background for Israel's covenant with God is especially interesting.

# Chaos and Creation

BY ALAN OPPENHEIM

**T**he first creation story of Genesis (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) tries to show how the world became what it is today. Modern cosmologists also have a creation story: the “Big Bang.” Both stories are inferred from the science of their respective times and both stories are naturalistic because they seek an explanation rooted in nature and experience rather than in the supernatural. The two stories seem to reinforce each other because both are based on observations of the same universe. That the biblical authors and the cosmologists assign different causes for the evolving universe reflects the long tradition that modern scientists have of trying to explain natural phenomena in terms of physics and chemistry, and their ability to use the tools of modern science to see objects as small as microbes and molecules, and as large as galaxies — all invisible to our ancestors.

## The Ancestors and Their Tools

To speculate about the origin of the world requires language, which is the medium of thought, and it requires imagination, which releases thought from the mundane. Archae-

ologists see traces of written language beginning about eight thousand years ago. Spoken language goes back much further in time and is inferred from the appearance of complex social organizations at archeological sites.

Imagination is inferred from the evidence of symbolic behavior, such as funerary practices and the appearance of ornamentation that seems to be unconnected with utility. Funerary practices, such as the intentional burial of the dead, appear to be a form of respect for one’s ancestors and a means of connecting past generations with the living. Some of the earliest ornamentation with paint appears at burial sites.<sup>2</sup>

By ten thousand years ago our ancestors had transformed themselves from hunter-gatherers to systematic collectors of wild cereals, had fashioned bone and shell ornaments, and had decorated stone vessels with geometric designs. By six thousand years ago they lived in collections of settlements that required sophisticated planning for survival. They had an agriculture that used irrigation, workshops that produced ceramic objects, and a metallurgy that produced cop-

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per and gold for artisans to fashion into decorative objects. Their language had to be rich enough to deal with resource planning and to formulate behavior codes that enabled a larger central settlement to work together with satellite settlements for the common good. At some time between six thousand years ago and ten thousand years ago the ancestors of modern humans probably had linguistic skills and imaginations rich enough to wonder about the origin of their world.

### The Ancestors' Picture

Some of our ancestors were keen observers of the world around them. Their observations of soil conditions, rainfall, seasonal cycles and the connection of those cycles to the seasonal cycles of the constellations of the night sky, enabled them to plan. They had a practical science that was effective for them.

Some of our ancestors must have wondered about the beginning of the world. They knew that tools and buildings were made by humans, that cereals and grains were processed by humans, and that ornaments were fashioned by humans for the living and the dead. For every manufactured object there was a human maker. When they saw a dwelling, it was rational to infer a builder. It is not a proof that there was a builder, but it is rational.

By inference from their known world, it was plausible to suppose that there were "makers" for things

like the ocean, the earth, the sky, the winds, the stars, the sun and the moon, the planets, the plant and animal kingdoms, and finally, for humans. For some of our ancestors it was sufficient to have a pantheon of these "makers" who were responsible for the separate aspects of nature. For others of our ancestors, it was even more plausible to suppose that there was a single "maker" who began it all. Call that "maker" God. This explanation of creation reflects human experience with tools and nature.

### The Cosmologists' Tools

The cosmologists also begin with tools. One is a tool of astronomy: the telescope that receives the light from the sun, the stars and the galaxies. Astronomers learn from the light how far away objects are, what they are made of, and whether they are moving toward or away from us.

Another set of tools are the laws of physics that were discovered from careful measurements of the world of nature. These laws are quantitative descriptions of such phenomena as gravity; electricity and magnetism; nuclear interactions; and the motion of material objects of fluids and of light. Newton found equations that give a quantitative description of the motion of solid objects and of fluids (liquids or gases). Maxwell discovered the equations that give a quantitative description of electricity, magnetism and the radiation of light. Einstein modified Newton's and Maxwell's equations to give a quantitative de-

scription of the behavior of matter and light in the presence of objects that are massive like our sun and the stars.

## Chaos Theory

The newest tool of science is chaos theory, which describes the complex behavior of certain nonlinear physical systems.<sup>3</sup> A physical system is any collection of material objects, such as a gas or a liquid. Disturb a linear physical system and it will respond proportionately to the disturbance. Double the disturbance and the response is doubled. Disturb a nonlinear physical system and it will not respond proportionately to the disturbance. The response could be larger or smaller. Disturb a chaotic system and it will respond in such a complex way that there is no discernible pattern in the response that can be traced to the disturbance. That is, the system is called chaotic if the effect, the response, seems to be unrelated to the cause, the disturbance.

Actual physical systems can have linear or nonlinear or chaotic regimes, like a smoke plume rising in still air. At first, the plume rises straight up as a thin column: the linear regime. Then, as the plume rises higher, it begins to wriggle erratically in response to small disturbances of the ambient air: the nonlinear regime. Finally, the column of smoke diffuses and spreads with no discernible pattern other than that of a widening blob: the chaotic regime.

The name "chaos theory" became

attached to the study of such complex systems during the second half of the twentieth century. It was later seen that when an apparently chaotic system was disturbed, it could actually develop into a discernible structure or pattern. What is important is that not only can a structured system become chaotic, but a chaotic system can become structured. One reason is that such systems are dynamic; they evolve in time. Another is that a part of such a system interacts with other parts of the system so that the system as a whole is continually adjusting itself. In one case structure goes to chaos and in the other case chaos goes to structure. The process in which chaos becomes structured is called self-organization.

What is most important about self-organization is that there can be a huge number of chaotic states that emerge into only a few different structures. The process in which many possible chaotic states emerge into a few structured states is called emergence. The atmospheres of the Earth and Jupiter furnish examples of such self-organized, emergent structures.

On small scales from inches to miles the motions of the air appear chaotic, but when conditions are right, the atmosphere organizes itself into the huge circulating patterns of highs and lows that we see on the weather maps. No pattern is identical but the highs and lows resemble other highs and lows that we have seen in the past. The patterns, which emerge on scales of hundreds of

miles, are reproducible and similar. Moreover, an atmosphere with circulating highs and lows is more likely than a purely chaotic atmosphere. Similarly, the giant red spot seen in the atmosphere of Jupiter appears to be a giant storm system that has persisted for about three hundred years.

## Self-Organization and Emergence

Self-organization is thought to be the key “maker” of structure in the universe, a naturalistic mechanism of change as the universe evolves.<sup>4</sup> It is actually observed in physical and chemical systems in the laboratory and in mathematical models of such systems that are run on computers. Though it is observed in some systems, there is no proof that self-organization into emergent structures holds for everything. Nonetheless, it is a plausible explanation for today's cosmologists as God was a plausible explanation for our ancestors.

Why are self-organization and emergence plausible for a scientific picture of creation? In Genesis creation is strictly causal. There is no contingency. In terms of probability, according to Genesis, the probability that there would be humans is 100%. Once God said “Let there be something,” it was. On the other hand, before chaos theory, the scientific estimate of the probability that an earth-like planet could exist about a sun-like star with just the right climate for living creatures like us to evolve from some kind of primeval

soup was vanishingly small, contingent on too many unlikely chances. Still, we exist.

Scientists require a creation mechanism with a reasonable probability for our existence, not one with a minuscule probability. There is a minuscule probability that an egg can be unscrambled, that the air in the room could condense into a solid chunk by itself. These are not reasonable probabilities. We tend to reject minuscule probabilities as unlikely. This is where self-organization comes in. It is a plausible explanation for the appearance of structure in the universe. Just as the structure of highs and lows in the atmosphere is more probable than pure chaos, self-organization offers reasonable probabilities for the appearance of other kinds of structures, such as galaxies and living beings — even though scientists can not prove that such a mechanism is true in general.

## Genesis and Cosmology

In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was chaos and waste, and darkness covered the primordial deeps, and the wind of God hovered on the waters. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light (Gen. 1:1-3).

That is very much like the “Big Bang” of the cosmologists. The universe appears suddenly as pure light without apparent structure, a good approximation to chaos. Structure

begins to appear from chaos in the next steps of creation.

God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. (Gen. 1:4)

On the second day God separated the water below from the water above with an expanse that God called Sky. (Gen. 1:6-8)

On the third day God separated the dry land, called Earth, from the waters, called Seas. (Gen. 1:9-10)

## The Cosmologists' Big Bang

Through their telescopes astronomers see an expanding universe. They can estimate how fast it is expanding. They reason that if the universe always expanded, there must have been a time when it was enormously compact and vanishingly small. That time, currently estimated to be about fourteen billion years ago, is the time zero from which all other times are measured. The sudden explosive appearance of our universe is not something that most cosmologists try to explain. At some tiny fraction of a second after time zero, perhaps one hundredth of a second,<sup>5</sup> is the time when today's known physics could have begun. At that instant, the universe was enormously hot, so hot that no atoms or matter as we know it could exist, only an undifferentiated blob, a primordial soup of radiation

and elementary particles — the cosmologists' version of the featureless light of Genesis.

After the first three minutes the universe consisted mostly of light, neutrinos, hydrogen and helium nuclei, and electrons. The end of the first three minutes corresponds to the separation of light from darkness and the separation of the waters from the Earth in Genesis. It is the cosmologists version of the first duality.

## The Order of Creation Becomes Different

On the fourth day God set the stars in the sky to serve as signs of days and years, and made the sun to dominate the day and the moon to dominate the night. (Gen. 1:14-19)

According to today's science, the stars come first, then the earth, and finally living things appear. However, there was no compelling evidence for our ancestors to have a different order of creation. They lacked the tools necessary to see it otherwise.

The cosmologists explain the formation of stars in this way: A few hundred thousand years after the beginning, the universe had expanded and cooled sufficiently so that atoms of hydrogen and helium had formed.

Think of the universe of atoms as a very tenuous cloud of gas. It does not stretch the imagination to suppose that there were small irregularities in the cloud. At any point where the cloud was denser, the atoms



would be attracted toward each other because of the force of gravity between them. In time they would clump together and attract more and more of the surrounding gas. Eventually the gas would become a full-fledged star that shines.

## Points of Agreement and Disagreement

At this point the picture is similar. Genesis and cosmology have stars. In Genesis the mechanism of creation is God's words "Let there be..." In the cosmologists' picture the mechanism is the Standard Model<sup>6</sup> which encapsulates the known physics of our day and ends with stars. Each approach is rational for its time.

Genesis did not have to explain galaxies, huge collections of stars separated by even more immense starless voids, because until the twentieth century no telescopes were strong enough to see that the other galaxies were not just part of our own Milky Way galaxy. They appeared as smudges among the heavens to our ancestors.

Today we see galaxies separated by starless voids. We see what appear to be galaxies of galaxies, an intricate filigree of galaxies spun out through space. Cosmologists explain this structure of the universe, the galaxies, the collections of galaxies and the starless voids in terms of self-organization.

Think of the stars as particles of a gas, a fluid that follows the nonlinear laws of fluid motion. The space

and time scales of the motion are huge, but on those scales the gas of stars can be treated mathematically like any other fluid. Just as storm structures develop in our atmosphere and the red spot developed on Jupiter, so are collections of billions of stars believed to emerge into galaxies through self-organization. Moreover, these are not arbitrary structures. There are elliptical galaxies that range from almost perfect spheres to flattened eggs; and there are spiral galaxies that look like pinwheels in space — such as our own Milky Way galaxy. There are not many different kinds of spiral galaxies, just variations of a few themes. Self-organization appears to be more efficient than any random process.

Now, by a similar stretch of imagination, if the galaxies themselves are treated as the molecules of an even vaster fluid, then self-organization could produce the emergent collections of galaxies (galaxies of galaxies) that the astronomers see as they search the distant reaches of the universe.

## Life: The Difficult Explanation

On the third day . . . God said "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. (Gen. 1:11)

On the fifth day God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that

creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. (Gen. 1:21)

On the sixth day God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. (Gen. 1:25)

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." (Gen. 1:26)

The order of creation of living things in Genesis is not the same as modern science would order it. But there was no reason for our ancestors to order it differently. The mechanism was, as usual the words, "And God said, 'Let there be . . .'" There is no contingency; there is 100% probability that each creation would occur. This is satisfying because life does seem to exist. If self-organization and emergence should be the scientific mechanism for the creation of life, though the details are presently missing, it would give a non-negligible probability for the appearance of life on Earth. Scientists could be happy with that because they are used to dealing with probabilities rather than certainties.

## The Reconstructionist Connection

The first creation story of Genesis and the creation story of today's cosmologists are naturalistic. Neither tries to fathom the central mystery of the creation of the universe since there is no way that the authors can transcend the limitations imposed on them because they themselves are part of the same universe; they must discover their world through observation and imagination. The why of creation is inaccessible to them and to us. Only the what is accessible. Indeed, the approach of today can be thought of as a natural evolutionary change from the approach of Genesis 1:1 through 1:31. As the tools evolved, they affected what was seen and how, inevitably, it was interpreted. The mechanism of creation changed in a rational way from God to the laws of physics and chemistry and the tools of chaos theory. The mechanism will continue to evolve.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, conceives of God as the creative principle of the universe.<sup>7</sup> This bridges the naturalistic approaches of Genesis and of scientific cosmology as both are concerned with what happens after creation. The divinity inherent in nature is also inherent in humanity. If, as quoted above from Genesis 1:26, humans are given dominion over the earth and all that live upon it, then they become responsible for it.

This is nicely reflected in the traditional second paragraph following the *Shema* in the Reconstructionist liturgy and the note below it.<sup>8</sup> The paragraph says that if the people serve God then nature will reward them, but if they turn to other gods, then nature will dry up for them. The note interprets this as saying, “. . . If we continue to pollute the environment — and thus display contempt for the integrity of God’s creation — pure rain will cease to fall, and the ground will cease to give forth its produce.”

As the concept of creation evolves, so does the meaning of the sacred text.

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1. It is a pleasure to thank Eva Oppenheim for critical readings of the text that helped clarify the arguments. It is also a

pleasure to acknowledge comments by Daniel Beshers, Daniel Kleppner, Avi Winokur, and Richard Hirsh that contributed to the content of this article.

2. Thomas E. Levy, ed., *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (New York: Facts on File, 1995).

3. James Gleick, *Chaos* (New York: Viking, 1987).

4. Per Bak, *How Nature Works* (New York: Copernicus, 1996); Paul Davies, *The Cosmic Blueprint* (New York: Touchstone, 1988); John H. Holland, *Emergence* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998).

5. Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) 5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

7. Richard Hirsh, “Mordecai Kaplan’s Understanding of Religion and the Issue of Cosmology,” in *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies*, Ronald A. Brauner, ed. (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1979).

8. David A. Teutsh, ed., *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1994), 68.

# Transforming the American Synagogue

*Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform  
the American Synagogue* by Sidney Schwarz  
(New York, Jossey-Bass 2000), 300 Pages

REVIEWED BY ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL

**T**his past Rosh Hashanah, David Margolick, a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, published an essay in the *Forward* on the “pure torture” he experienced in trying to find a synagogue for the High Holy Days. Margolick described himself as among those who are “proud of their Judaism but struggling to find a home within it.” Every year he ends up in a pew, thumbing ahead in the prayer book to see “how much more I have to endure,” inevitably turned off by the “pretentious and banal” sermons, the “excruciatingly repetitious and rote” services and the “hierarchy and passivity of the whole experience.”

The reaction from readers to the article was swift and merciless. “The *Forward* should be ashamed to have published” the article, wrote one. “[H]is vituperative utterances about synagogues and clergy serve no use-

ful purpose.” Wrote another: “Margolick’s article hits a high of narcissism and a level of egotism that is awesome even in such a narcissistic and egotistic age.” Other letters described the article as “a remarkably sustained whine” and “obscene.”

Even controlling for the fact that angry people are more likely than sympathetic people to write letters to the editor, I was taken aback by the overwhelmingly negative response. Of more than a dozen letters that arrived at the newspaper, only one showed any *rachmones* for Margolick’s plight. “When a Jew searches, particularly in these days of repentance and introspection, he should not be greeted with anger,” it read. “Instead, we should be reaching out to help him understand that the nature of the days is more important than a particular language or a charismatic leader.”

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## Dialogue between the Generations

Rabbi Sidney Schwarz's *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* is, in effect, a dialogue. It takes place between a generation of Jews like Margolick — baby boomers, Schwarz writes, who have been “totally turned off by the synagogues of their childhood” — and Jewish professionals like Schwarz, who understand this generation’s “attempt to connect one’s own life with a sense of larger purpose and meaning.”

Writing out of “a frustration with hundreds of synagogues across America that have yet to understand the needs of today’s Jews,” Schwarz calls for a “new paradigm” that he labels the “synagogue-community.” The four characteristics of such a synagogue are “an organizational culture that promotes a high level of participation and engagement of large numbers of members, strong spiritual leadership, an ability to articulate the mission of the institution, and the willingness to promote a serious and challenging version of Judaism.”

Schwarz’s book is valuable, first and foremost, for placing the current “crisis” of Jewish continuity in the context of larger social trends in America, and removing the discussion from the cycle of communal recrimination, self-flagellation and triumphalism in which it usually takes place.

## The Synagogue- Community Model

Schwarz’s synagogue-community model combines the full-service philosophy of the classic suburban synagogues built in the 1950’s and ’60’s with the participatory, egalitarian, democratic and self-consciously countercultural approach of the havurah. For the jaded reader who thinks that “community” and “synagogue” are about as compatible as “compassionate” and “conservatism,” Schwarz provides portraits of four such synagogues, along with biographical essays by their happy customers.

“Customers” is the operative word here, as Schwarz joins a growing list of religious observers and thinkers, including Robert Bellah, Richard Cimino, Robert Wuthnow and especially Wade Clark Roof, who understand, without disparagement, that the baby boomers’ search for spirituality is inseparable from the commercial and political culture of the past fifty years.

That’s not to say that the search for a synagogue is just another shopping trip, or religion a commodity intended to please the buyer no less than the right car, the best schools and perfect neighborhood—although that’s part of it. The boomers’ search for purpose is no less sincere and no more “shallow” than that of their parents and grandparents. However, it has been shaped by political upheavals that engendered a deep distrust of authority, social changes that

fostered a “commitment to egalitarianism and an openness and tolerance to a wide range of lifestyle choices,” and long periods of prosperity that gave them, “despite their aversion to organized religion,” the wherewithal to devote “a great amount of time and resources to explore a variety of spiritual groups and disciplines.”

### Informality and Stability

Certainly, there are narcissistic aspects to this exploration, and a degree of faddishness that clashes with Judaism’s search for timelessness and continuity. Boomers may ridicule the “edifice complex” of their parents, who built campus-like “synagogue centers” that were busier for weekday bingo and Sunday *bar mitzvah* classes than on Shabbat itself. But at least they built. For all their self-conscious “spirituality,” too few *havurot* have yet to inspire the sort of commitment that will allow them to escape the church basements and borrowed sanctuaries they call home.

Schwarz’s model squares the difference between these generational responses. “The synagogue-community captures the spirit of the *havurah* in its decidedly low-church style with an emphasis on participation, informality, contemporary music, and spontaneity,” he writes. “However, recognizing the shortcomings of the *havurah*, it offers much more structure. Synagogue-communities may have rabbis, cantors, and professional educators. They may have their own

building and school, which in turn require substantial dues collection and ancillary fundraising.”

### Empowering the Congregation

Schwarz provides two very different paths to this synthesis of the old and the new. The first proposes a transformation in the role of these rabbis, cantors and professional educators in the interest of “empowering” congregants. Schwarz describes this process of rabbinical *tzimtzum* (contraction) in his discussion of Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, MA. From the time he was hired as rabbi in 1971 until his recent retirement, Lawrence Kushner pushed for levels of congregational involvement that sharply contrasted with the professionalized Reform synagogues of the day. Congregants were encouraged to lead services and chant the weekly Torah portions. They established a burial society and an array of social action projects.

Empowerment extended to the content of the services themselves, and congregants created a library of gender-neutral prayer books. Kushner’s organizing principle, writes Schwarz, is that “the job of a rabbi is to teach the members of the congregation how to run their congregation without rabbinic help. The rabbi must be sufficiently restrained so that the members have the room to experiment, fail, learn, and grow.” The irony here is that teaching a congregation to run without rabbinic help demands an incredibly creative and

charismatic rabbi.

Empowerment was also the theme of Schwarz's own experience as the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD. "As a rabbi, my responsibility was to raise and frame the issues and then serve as teacher and resource for the members who were drafting" a communal mission statement, he writes. "The fact that the drafting, feedback, and ratification process was entirely in the hands of the membership signaled that the locus of authority in the congregation would be the laity. The empowerment that resulted from this method had the effect of getting the members to take their responsibility extremely seriously."

## Charismatic Rabbis

The second path to creating the synagogue-community seems to be almost the opposite of empowerment, as Schwarz demonstrates in his chapters on two New York congregations, the Orthodox Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in the Bronx, and the post-denominational Congregation B'nai Jeshurun on the Upper West Side. Both attract a devoted, even fanatical following; both were developed by "larger than life" rabbis out of the remnants of ailing congregations; both maintain a tradition of top-down rabbinic and professional leadership.

Schwarz writes that the late Rabbi Marshall Meyer, the guiding light behind B'nai Jeshurun's revival begin-

ning in the mid-1980's, "assumed . . . prerogatives that would be unheard of in most other congregations." Even following Meyer's death in 1993, "strong rabbinical leadership, regarded by some as idiosyncratic during Meyer's tenure, had become an institutional value." Hebrew Institute, he writes, seems to be run as Rabbi Avi Weiss's "private shul, and . . . everyone, from the rabbi to the average member, likes it that way."

The top-down models of B'nai Jeshurun and Hebrew Institute allow the institutions' (i.e., the rabbis') missions to be expressed with utmost clarity, undiluted by the factional politics of a synagogue board and independent of the advice of a membership committee. In B'nai Jeshurun's case, that means a strong emphasis on social action reflecting the prevailing politics of the Jewish Upper West Side and an emotive spirituality that will not be contained by the tenets of any one denomination.

Hebrew Institute, meanwhile, has become the flagship of "open Orthodoxy," and Weiss's independence allows him to withstand the pressure from the right that has sunk other modern Orthodox rabbis in their attempts to reach out to non-Orthodox worshippers, integrate women's study and prayer into Orthodox life and maintain warm relations with the other denominations.

## The Role of Music

Interestingly, both congregations are widely known for the musicality

of their Friday night services. At Hebrew Institute, prayers set to the melodies of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach transformed dutiful Friday night davening into a standing-room-only extravaganza. Raucous clapping and dancing are also the hallmarks of B'nai Jeshurun's *kabbalat Shabbat* service.

Two separate services at "BJ" attract some 2,000 Friday night worshippers — although not David Margolick, who writes in the *Forward* that he is "repelled" by the cantor's chanting, "[b]ooming out over the room, dwarfing those who listen to it . . . I find it impersonal, pompous, condescending." I would have preferred that Schwarz include similar dissenting voices in his portraits, but that's probably because I'm a journalist, not a rabbi or communal worker. At the same time, and in the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I am a member of Hebrew Institute, and my firsthand knowledge only increases my admiration for the accuracy of Schwarz's reporting and analysis.

## Beginning of Change

What becomes clear in *Finding a Spiritual Home* is that the transformation of the American synagogue depends on finding a creative and charismatic rabbi, and giving him or her the latitude to experiment and

develop a mission. If there is a weakness in the book, it is that Schwarz never really answers the "how" in its subtitle. As he acknowledges more than once, the rabbis he profiles had the luxury of starting their own synagogues from scratch, or taking over from moribund institutions with, as in the case of B'nai Jeshurun, "a notable history but little else." It would have been useful to include a chapter on a rabbi who took a financially stable but spiritually ossified synagogue center, with its entrenched board of directors, and moved it successfully in the directions Schwarz suggests, either on the empowerment or top-down paths.

Or it may be possible that it is too early to write such a chapter, that Schwarz's "synagogue-community" paradigm is only just emerging on the cusp of American Jewish life. The most hopeful signs in the book are that B'nai Jeshurun and Hebrew Institute have created rabbinic training programs in the hope of replicating their success at other synagogues, and that Schwarz successfully turned his shul over to a talented younger colleague. The rabbis, professionals and volunteers who will mainstream the synagogue-community may lack only time and experience. What they don't lack, thanks to Sidney Schwarz and the rabbis he profiles here, are role models.