

# *The Reconstructionist*

Volume 68, Number 1, Fall 2003

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## FROM THE EDITOR

The theme of this issue, “*Tikkun Olam: Theory and Practice*,” offers an opportunity for reflection on general as well as specific ideas and issues related to the contemporary Jewish concern for “repair of the world.”

One of the curious aspects of contemporary Jewish popular culture is the detachment of a concept (in this case, *tikkun olam*) from its context (in this case, *kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism). *Tikkun olam* begins as a theological category integral to the Lurianic creation myth of the “shattering of the vessels” containing the “sparks of divinity.” The task of restoring the sparks falls to humanity.

In current parlance, *tikkun olam* has gone the way of other traditional Jewish categories, notably *mitzvah* and *tzedakah*, and has become a generic term for social-action policies and positions held by many Jews (if not always by as many Jews as was once the case). “*Mitzvah*” has long since become detached from the context of covenant and commandment and reduced to “a good deed;” *tzedakah* has long since become detached from classical halakhic guidelines and reduced to “charity;” so, too, has *tikkun olam* been severed from its mystical moorings and often reduced to “social action.”

There is a paradoxical passage in the Torah that provides an essential insight into what Judaism has to say about social justice and human society. In Deuteronomy 15:4-5, we read: “There shall be no needy among you — since the Lord your God will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving to you as an inheritance — if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day.” No sooner are these words pronounced than we read, one verse later, “If however, there is a needy person among you . . . do not harden your heart and shut your hand.” The passage concludes: “For there will never cease to be needy people in your land, which is why I command you: open your heart to the poor and the needy in your land” (15:11).

From this passage in the Torah, we derive no position on, for example, welfare, or workfare, nor do we get a standard of measurement that tells us when we have “opened our heart and hand” widely enough. What we do get is a pessimistic (or simply realistic) message that the needy will always be with us. In the face of this reality, the Torah commands us (*mitzvah!*) to do something quite specific: “open your heart to the poor and needy in your land.” Jews are commanded — not encouraged — to be concerned with those in society who are in need. It may be peculiar to the Jewish tradition that it speaks so often to attitudes — “You shall love the Lord your God,” “Do not cover” — but we are commanded to be concerned.

How do we act on that concern? Maimonides teaches that the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* is “to help our poor and support them according to their needs.” Curiously, we are not commanded to remove the person from his/her neediness, that is, to create a messianic society in which there are no needy (*tikkun olam?*) — the Torah has already told us that the poor will always be with us. But we are

commanded to see that the basic human needs of those without means are provided.

When Maimonides suggests that the mitzvah of *tzedakah* is to help “our poor,” he raises the issue of universalism and particularism. To what degree should the Jewish community concern itself — as a Jewish community — with the needs of the general society and the individuals within that society?

This is a much more difficult question because, beyond the question of attitude, it raises practical questions of community time, dollars and power. Some suggest that the Jewish community — again, as a Jewish community — ought only to focus on specifically Jewish issues such as Israel and anti-Semitism. Others advocate that the Jewish community ought to be active — again, as a Jewish community — on all the broad policy issues that affect our society, including, for example, the death penalty, the minimum wage and reproductive rights.

The prophet Jeremiah (c. 586 BCE), in the name of God, commanded the Jews exiled to Babylonia to pray for the welfare of the place where they found themselves. In the time of the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), Rabbi Hanina could teach, “pray for the welfare of the [general] government; without fear of it people would eat each other alive.” Do Jews hope and work for the general welfare out of self-interest (we are safe when the larger society is stable), or is the logical extension of the obligation to our fellow Jews our obligation to our fellow human beings? (We need to help the poor, not just our poor.) A current Jewish debate centers around whether a Jew who donates money, for example, to a hospital, orchestra or museum, or to some general communal agency, but gives nothing to any specifically Jewish project or cause, has fulfilled the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

There is an obligation of concern and an imperative to action that clearly derives from Jewish tradition. But the specific form of that imperative can only be formulated through study, debate and discussion — it cannot be derived from simple, often simplistic, appeals to selected verses in the Bible. We Jews, who abhor the mindless fundamentalism that makes appeal to scripture without context and interpretation, ought to be equally wary of those in the Jewish community who seek to compell our participation in a given program or policy by quoting Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice, justice shall you pursue,” as if that were an imperative with obvious policy implications.

For example, we share, presumably, a commitment to equality. But what exactly does that mean? Nathan Glazer, in his book *The Limits of Social Policy*, suggests that there is a debate between those who seek equality of opportunity and those expecting equality of results. We do not, as Jews, have an easy answer to questions of affirmative action, for example, because here the universal/particular intersection is crowded with ideological traffic. What to one community constitutes justice to another implies discrimination. Simply to say that we, as a Jewish community, support justice and equality does not yield consensus on policy or action.

Our societal problems admit of no easy solutions, and appeal to religious values does not necessarily result in a convenient consensus — after all, in the

culture wars of America, scripture and religious beliefs can be cited for and against almost any issue. Nathan Glazer puts it this way, sounding a bit like the Deuteronomic writers:

Against the view that to every problem there is a solution, I came to believe that we can have only partial and less than wholly satisfying answers to social problems . . . although social policy had ameliorated some of the problems we inherited, it had also given rise to other problems no less grave in their effect on human happiness . . .

We are in need of a sophisticated engagement with the imperatives of *tikkun olam*. While *tikkun olam* consciousness pervades our community, there is often a constricting set of assumptions about where all Jews (or, on a smaller scale, all members of a synagogue) are, or ought to be, on any given series of issues. The process of arriving at a position and/or program ought to be one in which differing viewpoints are heard, and allowances are made for disagreements.

Synagogues and their *tikkun olam* committees must allow for, and encourage, education, debate and discussion. On some issues, it will be easier to achieve consensus: for example, about running a clothing drive, or collecting food for the poor. On other issues, such as participating in anti-war demonstrations with groups that are hostile to Israel, complex and difficult concerns need carefully to be sorted out. Courageous positions can be staked out in isolation, but they can also be achieved, and perhaps be more effective, when reached through consensus.

Time and energy are limited resources. Do we spend enough time identifying community issues on which a coalition of synagogues — and/or other religious organizations — could work? The Jewish community, through many of its agencies and organizations, provides many entryways into *tikkun olam* work. Should synagogues duplicate services and programs that can be engaged in existing venues? Should synagogues be where *tikkun olam* projects happen, or should synagogues be the liaison between their members and the wider community programs? Should every synagogue run a food drive on the High Holidays, or place Mazon envelopes on the seats? What can be accomplished, given the resources?

In this issue, we offer a lively discussion on aspects of *tikkun olam*, focusing on ideas as well as programs, and spiritual as well as social concerns. We hope our readers find themselves challenged.

This issue was supported as part of a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation for academic and programmatic initiatives devoted to *tikkun olam* at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. We thank Rabbi Rachel Cowan of the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Rabbi Deborah Waxman of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College for their support and assistance in conceptualizing and sponsoring this issue. We also thank Rabbi Sidney Schwarz of our editorial board, who suggested several of the authors who kindly contributed to this issue.

— Richard Hirsh

# Making Our Synagogues Vessels of *Tikkun Olam*

BY MORDECHAI LIEBLING

“The Jewish protagonists of social idealism should realize that the Jewish religion came into being as a result of the first attempt to conceive of God as the defender of the weak against the strong and that it can therefore continue to serve as the inspiration in the present struggle.” —Mordecai Kaplan<sup>1</sup>

**I**n the Exodus story, the quintessential liberation story and the Jewish foundational myth, when Moshe is at the burning bush and receives his mission to lead the people to freedom, he asks God, “Who shall I say sent me?” God’s response: “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* — I shall be what I shall be, Tell them that *Ehyeh sent you*” (Exodus 3:14).

Arthur Green, in his new book, *Ehyeh*,<sup>2</sup> teaches that for the kabbalists, *Ehyeh* is the deepest and most hidden name of God. God is the possibility of all that can be. Green writes:

In the moment when Moshe needed to give the slaves an answer that would offer them endless resources of hope and courage, God said tell them *Ehyeh sent you*. The time-

less God allowed the great name YHVH to be conjugated, as though to say *Ehyeh*, I am tomorrow.<sup>3</sup>

## The Challenge of Justice

The centrality of working for social justice was part of Mordecai Kaplan’s vision for Reconstructionism. Kaplan believed that reconstructed religion had among its goals the need to mobilize human beings, through their own power, to combat social evil.

For those committed to social justice, this is a time of crisis for the planet, for the United States, and for Israel. The large majority of scientists agree that global warming is approaching a crisis stage; the United States has the largest disparity between rich and poor in its history; Israel is struggling with poverty, with nearly 20 percent of the population facing insecurity about obtaining food, and the occupation results in everyone’s freedom being restricted.

## Failing to Mobilize

Having been the executive director

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of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation for twelve years, I know as well as anyone that not only have we not succeeded at mobilizing our members to work for social justice, we have not made it one of our highest priorities. We are not alone — the level of social action in Jewish congregations in all denominations is low. I attended a meeting of the rabbinic advisory council of the Jewish Fund for Justice a few years ago, and the leaders of all three liberal movements were bemoaning the lack of social action work at the congregational level.

Our synagogue communities are not fulfilling Kaplan's original vision. We need to strategize about how to lead our communities into a full embrace of the mitzvah "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" — "justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20).

To help us strategize, I want to describe some of the terrain in which we are operating.

### **Competing Claims on Attention**

We cannot underestimate how two issues have affected the institutional Jewish community's attention to issues of poverty and justice. First, the 1990 national Jewish population study shocked people with its statistics on assimilation and intermarriage, and from that point on an enormous percentage of communal resources turned inward to combat these trends. As a community, we have become more myopic and increasingly focused only on our needs.

The second issue is, of course, the

situation in Israel. Israel not only takes up a lot of attention, again focusing time and resources on our own affairs, it divides the community. Many of the people most drawn to social justice issues are precisely those who oppose the policies of the Israeli government, and they feel less drawn to be in a Jewish setting, given how most public Jewish voices support the policies of the Israeli government. Though this may not be true of most Reconstructionist congregations, it does affect those considering the very idea of joining a congregation.

### **Constraints on Discussion**

More importantly, in the current climate, Jewish institutional leaders do not want to challenge the United States administration on policy issues because they do not want to risk their influence in matters concerning Israel. This landscape means that synagogue social action committees do not have a larger Jewish context within which to operate. Not only do they have to overcome the inertia within the congregation, but they often also find the larger community to be an impediment to their work.

In addition, the increasing number of very wealthy Jews in positions of power has changed the position and focus of some groups. One example is the struggle over domestic policy issues in the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the umbrella organization of Jewish community relations councils and national Jewish "defense" agencies. The JCPA historically took classic "liberal" positions, but in the last few years it has been pressured to make

changes in the direction of more conservative positions, most notably regarding issues of low-income housing. Around the country, the number of independent JCRCs is dropping, as Federations absorb them, further weakening the profile of the Jewish community in social justice issues.<sup>4</sup>

## Reviving Interest

The apathy in our community about issues of poverty and justice reflects the apathy nationally. Until recently, there has been a low level of political activism across the country.

Partially in response to the pervasive low level of synagogue social action, the non-denominational organization Amos was conceived to help train and motivate congregations; sadly, it lasted only a couple of years. However, it did produce at least one enduring piece of work. Amos commissioned Stephen M. Cohen, a leading expert on Jewish sociology, and Leonard Fein, author and activist, to do the largest and most extensive study ever undertaken of the attitudes of American Jews to social justice.<sup>5</sup>

The study was completed in 2002. Some of the key findings are useful and very heartening for us. According to the study, about 90 percent of American Jews agree with the following statements:

- “Jews have a responsibility to work on behalf of the poor, the oppressed and minority groups.”
- “When Jewish organizations engage in social justice work, it makes me feel proud to be a Jew.”

- “Jewish involvement in social justice causes is one good way to strengthen ties with other groups in society.”

Three out of four said that “a commitment to social justice is at the heart of my understanding of Judaism.”

## Commitment Remains Central

Asked to rank “what quality you consider most important to your Jewish identity,” 47 percent picked commitment to social equality, 24 percent religious observance and 13 percent support for Israel. By four to one, those surveyed agreed that synagogues should sponsor more social justice programs. Paradoxically, about half said that their synagogue had the correct number of programs. (Interestingly people do not like the phrase “social justice”; only 24 percent found it appealing.)

When I first read this study, I frankly found it quite astounding and puzzling. A commitment to social equality is far and away the most important aspect of Jewish identity for a representative sample of the Jewish community. The large majority of American Jews deeply understand that Judaism at its core is about justice. If this is true, why is the level of synagogue activity so low?

One reason offered is that only 15 percent prefer to promote social justice as part of a Jewish group, while more than 70 percent, while not opposed, are indifferent. This is a very important finding. For us to mobilize our congregations, we need to be able to address this ambivalence.

Cohen and Fein make an interesting point about the tension between

universalism and particularism that Jews have been living with for the last 150 or so years. The tension is often framed as “How can Jews become an integral part of the larger society, while still maintaining a particular tie to other Jews?”

## Universalism and Particularism

How does this play out in synagogue social action?

The universalist might ask: If I want to be universalist, undertaking work for the betterment of society — why should I do it in a particularist, meaning Jewish, context? If I want to play out my particularism — my identification with Jews — why should I at that moment turn it toward universalist ends? When I am with Jews, I want to “do Jewish,” and when I am acting to change the secular world, I am being universalist. Another way of looking at this: It is precisely those Jews who are most drawn to the universalist values of Judaism who may be most disturbed by what they perceive as parochial or “ethnic” issues.

The challenge is to make the universalism/particularism paradox a tension that leads to energy and action, not ambivalence and paralysis. As many traditions teach, paradox can be a source of wisdom if we live with it and embrace it.

Murray Bowen, the founder of family therapy systems theory, stated that the fundamental tension in all systems is between the force to differentiate and the force to merge. He based this on observations by scientists in the fields

of biology, physics, chemistry and astronomy. In psychological terms, this is the central human tension of how to be both an individual and part of a larger unit — be it a marriage, a family or a community. As Lawrence Leshan wrote:

On the one hand, we all have the drive to be more unique and individual, to heighten one’s own experience and being. On the other hand is the drive to be part of something larger, a full-fledged member of the tribe.<sup>6</sup>

## Competing Cultures

Recently, some anthropologists and systems theorists have postulated that the flow of human history from its origins involves the alternation between cultures focused on “I” (individualism, embodied in elites) and those focused on “We” (communal, embodied in attention to the collective).

In a model developed by Ken Wilbur and Don Beck,<sup>7</sup> the culture of modernity (the culture of the West for most of the 19th and 20th centuries and still the dominant culture), is an “I” culture; they dub it the “I improve” culture and it sets these goals:

- Strive for autonomy and constant change;
- Seek out the good life and strive for abundance;
- Progress through the best solution;
- Enhance living for many through technology; and
- Play to win and enjoy competition.

There are positive sides to this “I”



culture. It is productive, goal-oriented, energized, and focused on results and outcomes, and it creates a strong middle class. The negative side is that it is materialistic, self-absorbed, short sighted, and focused on high-need achievement, and it encourages people always to want more.

## Seeds of Change

Every culture produces the seeds of change for its transition. In the 1960s, in the West, more people began to discover that material wealth does not bring happiness or peace. There were renewed needs for community, sharing, and a richer inner life; there was a sensitivity to the have/have-not gaps. This is the period in which the Reconstructionist movement began to grow, when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was established and our congregations began to increase. This communitarian “We” culture is relativistic and sociocentric; it is the culture of “we become,” and its goals are:

- To liberate humans from greed and dogma;
- To explore the inner beings of self and others;
- To promote a sense of community and unity;
- To share society’s resources among all;
- To reach decisions through consensus; and
- To refresh spirituality and bring harmony.

There are positive sides to this “We” culture. It is consensual and inclusive, empathetic, sensitive to broader human conditions, and concerned about others. But there are also negative sides to

this “We” culture. It can impose blinding group-think approaches. People are treated as members of groups, not as individuals. And it is characterized by identity politics, too much emphasis on feeling, a vulnerability to narcissicism, and a naïveté about power.

While this culture is clearly not dominant in governments or the economy, it is powerful in intellectual, artistic, and popular culture — postmodernism, relativism, multiculturalism, and the move to spirituality. This culture values consensus, seeks spirituality, is egalitarian and humanitarian and tolerant; its leadership style is the “sensitive facilitator.” Its organizational style is social networks — and it sounds a lot like the culture of Reconstructionism.

## A New Culture Emerging

The hope for the transformation of culture is activated when people feel overwhelmed by economic and emotional costs of caring, when they are confronted with chaos and disorder from lack of structure and clear hierarchies of value, when they feel a need for tangible results and functionality, and when *knowing* becomes more important than *feeling*.

This reminds me of congregations I consult with that were formed by groups of like-minded people, are somewhat structureless and, when they hit sixty or seventy families, realize that feel-good, informal structures with loose-knit rules simply do not work any more — that they now have to develop a structure, set clear values, and have some formal hierarchy.

Wilbur and Beck maintain that a new culture is beginning to form. Their key point is that this new culture realizes that all of the previous levels of civilization coexist at the same time, and that objective economic and social conditions will produce cultures at different stages and with different needs living alongside each other, without the need to force one culture to accept solutions for another.

Beck worked extensively in South Africa with the African National Congress (ANC) and the government during the transition from apartheid. He learned that the steps of evolutionary change could not be skipped. Imposing the values of the “We” contemporary culture of the West on a society that needs to develop economically and politically does not work; it requires a more goal-production-oriented culture. This is yet another way of stating the lesson: We can’t impose our culture on others.

## Evolution and Progress

Here is Kaplan writing about evolution and progress in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*:

Although progress is not always in a straight line, the course of human history shows that the human race is moving in the direction of enhanced personality and enhanced sociality. Where people once identified society with a small family, tribe, or clan, we are beginning to think in terms of a world society. At one time every detailed act of the individual in the pursuit of work or leisure was

hedged about by the traditional taboos of the tribe, and had to conform to ancestral habits. People today are demanding and obtaining more and more of autonomous direction in the development and expression of their personalities. Personality and sociality are not static goals. They can never be reached and passed. But their pursuits give meaning and value to human life, and renders it inherently worthwhile.<sup>8</sup>

Kaplan is defining progress as the simultaneous development of a greater identification with an increasingly larger group — and the growth of greater individual freedom and creativity. This is very much in keeping with the paradigm that Wilbur and Beck are now developing about how civilizations have evolved. For Kaplan, as it is for Wilbur and Beck, progressive evolution is the ability to reconcile the “I-We” split on a larger and more sophisticated level. (Keep in mind that the “I” can also be my nation or nationalism juxtaposed to the “We” of the international community.)

For Kaplan, God is the spirit that makes for resolving the paradox of personal self-realization and social communion; God is the resolution of the universal-particular, merge-individuate tension.

## Spiritual Development vs. War

Lawrence Leshan has written that one of the two ways to satisfy the two conflicting drives simultaneously and without contradiction is through spiritual development or mysticism. Unfor-

tunately, the other way is through war. (This is part of his fascinating thesis about why societies have not been able to prevent war.<sup>9</sup>) A spiritual understanding allows us to view ourselves as separate individuals and as part of the total cosmos, with nothing ultimately separate from anything else.

How does this relate to social action, *tikkun olam*, and the repair of the world? In part, I want to explore how our belief in and relationship to God fit in. Spirituality can be seen as feeling connected to or even merged with all of creation. It is the quintessence of universalism. Religion is the translating of that feeling into a system of beliefs, ethics, rituals and hierarchy, thereby making it particularistic.

## The Place of God

The classic Reconstructionist formulation of God is “the power that makes for salvation” — for making the world better, which is our understanding of “salvation.” In that formulation, the power that is God is multidimensional, universal. God is the urge within us to bring about a more just world, God is the energy we use to fulfill the urge; God is in the vision we have of a better future. We fulfill our godliness through the process we use to bring about a better world. God, then, is not only in the means and ends, but also in the very fabric of wanting to repair the world. The role of God in the classic Reconstructionist formulation is inspirational and sustaining, and I would guess that the large majority of Reconstructionist congregants (whether or not they are in-

involved in *tikkun olam*) would not, without reflection, describe this as their experience.

Many believe that God is that energy that helps bring about *tikkun olam*, but they do not know how to have faith in it upon which they can draw. We do not know if ultimately peace and justice will prevail; we do not know if the good guys are going to win or lose, we do not believe in an end-of-days messianic miracle — so what does it mean to have faith?

It is faith in the possibility that society will improve. Remember Kaplan’s definition of progress — the individual experience of self-actualization will grow deeper and be increasingly available to larger numbers of people, while at the same time individuals will identify ever more deeply with an ever-growing number of people.

## Evidence of Progress

By those criteria, we are making progress. Just think how much more individual freedom is available to women around the world, or about how much disaster relief is provided to people around the globe, how much more the world is becoming a global village. On a personal note, I have a child with Down syndrome; the possibilities that he has today have, in all likelihood, never been available before to people with mental retardation.

Having faith can give us the strength and vision to act more powerfully, as the God that we have faith in acts through us. It is not the faith of waiting for something to happen; it is not the faith of passivity; it is the faith that

inspires us to act. Interestingly, the Jewish Fund for Justice, a secular group, in its analysis of the low level of social action activity in synagogues, cites the crisis of faith of many American Jews. JFJ acknowledges that God is neither a motivating force in the lives of most Jews nor a factor in helping determine values and priorities; this is an area ready for change.<sup>10</sup>

Cultivating an understanding of God that results in this kind of faith would provide buoyancy for our synagogues as vessels of *tikkun olam*. I have no easy answers about how to bring this about. Opening the conversation is very important. Conversations about our understanding of God can be very intimate; many, if not most, people feel vulnerable and even timid about expressing their beliefs, and many are even unsure what their beliefs really are.

## Hard Questions

Consider the importance of such questions as: What are your beliefs about God and *tikkun olam*? What do you have faith in? Does this faith support your *tikkun olam* work? If not, could you draw upon it? And consider how difficult it often is to have such conversations.

It is by acting on the Jewish teachings of working for justice through a Jewish identity that we express our universal and particular needs and values simultaneously, and we need to be explicit about this.

As a result of our unique diaspora history, Jews have a long legacy of seeking to balance the universal and the particular, of being a Jew and a citizen of a

large culture. Living in two civilizations in the era of the Global Village, we have a rich history upon which to draw.

## Congregational Life

Going back to our organizing challenge, the survey with which I began shows that our congregants believe that social justice is a fundamental aspect of Judaism. How does this translate to congregational life?

Above, I outlined a formidable set of impediments to congregations becoming more activist. It is important to know the terrain in which we are operating. It is all too easy to blame ourselves, to think we are not doing a good-enough job, and to feel disheartened — and then our energy drops. This is where faith comes in. There are, in fact, reasons for optimism. In the nation as a whole, there is an upsurge in political activity. We have the new phenomenon of Web-based organizing, with organizations such as MoveOn.org and Take Back America. Community organizing is increasing with groups like Jobs for Justice, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, ACORN and the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation).

Most congregations relegate social action work to a committee, and its effectiveness frequently depends on the abilities of the chair. All of the responsibility for fulfilling one of the key tenets and identity pieces in Judaism often falls here. Sometimes the rabbi is supportive and sometimes not. A healthy system integrates the major responsibilities. It also allocates resources: How much staff time is devoted to sup-

porting this work; how much money is allocated for programming; how much time on the board agenda is there discuss these issues?

## Integrating, Not Segregating

Integrating *tikkun olam* values into the internal decision-making life of the congregation is one valid choice either for the *tikkun olam* committee or a special task force. The Washington-area Jews for Justice group has compiled a very detailed audit for its congregations to help them understand the choices they have made. Let me suggest the kinds of issues a synagogue can examine:

- Do you pay your support and maintenance staffs a living wage?
- What benefits do staff members get?
- Are there pension plans for support staff, and what kind of health insurance is offered?
- Where do you bank? Could your banking be transferred to a community development financial institution?
- With whom do you contract for landscaping or other services, and what are their employment policies?
- What is the environmental impact of your facility?
- What kind of paper goods do you buy? Do you buy fair-trade coffee?
- Do you make your facility available to other groups?

I am sure that the above list can be expanded. By raising these issues, congregants become educated and the issues then have an impact on their lives. The congregation models taking responsibility for its actions, the way an individual needs to take responsibility.

## Practical Applications

In talking about where the synagogue chooses to bank and how it uses its assets, individuals will begin to examine their practice. In talking about a living wage, people will think about how much they pay people who do domestic work for them. Perhaps they will think about how much they tip service workers, realizing that many of them do not earn a living wage. While this does not address public policy issues in the larger picture, by raising them as policy issues within the congregation, it raises the larger questions. *Tikkun olam* begins at home.

Every synagogue committee can integrate *tikkun olam* concerns into education, ritual life, the building and grounds, personnel, and especially the fundraising committee. This whole systems approach then apportions responsibility and provides a supportive context in which the *tikkun olam* committee can do external work. Several years ago, when the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation began a series of workshops on growth and outreach, the message was that the whole congregation is part of outreach and each committee had to make it part of their work. The same is true of *tikkun olam*.

Taking responsibility for one's actions is the heart of any spiritual path, and taking responsibility for one's role in society is the heart of good citizenship. A congregation that does both serves as a model for its members. This is living successfully in two civilizations.

## Facing the Problems

To begin taking responsibility, one needs to know that a problem exists. There are significant numbers of poor and working-class Jews. The most recent census shows that one in five Jews in New York City lives below the poverty line. Yet the majority of Jews are middle and upper-middle class. The median Jewish income is 50 percent above the median income of others in the United States. The American middle class as a whole is insulated from confronting poverty. As our incomes have gone up, we have grown more distant from the problems of poverty. We do not understand how poverty affects choices that we make in our lives about where to live, work, and send our children to school.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Jacob Riis shocked America with his photos about the invisible poor, and contributed greatly to progressive public policy. Half a century later, Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*,<sup>11</sup> which helped bring about Great Society legislation such as Medicare and food stamps.

The invisible poor are now more invisible than ever. African-Americans are still disproportionately poor — and housing patterns in urban areas are more segregated than they were thirty years ago. The United States today has the highest proportion of immigrants in the total population since the early 20th century. This time, immigrants are far more likely not to be Caucasian, which compounds the problem.

## Short and Long Term Needs

Many synagogue social action committees make the poor visible by focusing on direct service projects such as food pantries, soup kitchens and homeless shelters. These focus on short-term needs; but many people drawn to activism want to work on advocacy for policy issues, addressing the long-term problems and causes. Even people involved in direct service can grow tired. This is not to say there is no place for direct service, only that advocacy and direct action need to be in balance.

In the Torah, the obligation to take care of the poor is unwavering; it is our responsibility. Taking care means both direct service and structural or policy change. The Torah tells us not only to give money, food and clothing — direct service — but to have a sabbatical year, when debts are forgiven; a jubilee year, when property is redistributed and everyone starts out again; and to pay a living wage. There are many policy changes far short of redistribution that would make significant differences.

One of the most effective motivational tools is hearing people's stories. I recently spoke at the national Hillel *Tzedek* conference. One college student talked about how she was not an activist until she spoke to the maid in her dorm and only then realized what it meant not to be paid a living wage.

## Service Work and Advocacy

Congregations can make the poor visible; direct service is a part of it. Some congregations are part of the In-

terfaith Hospitality Network, neighborhood networks of churches and synagogues that house homeless people for a week at a time. This is a national effort.

Participating in the organization Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger, is another means of making congregants aware of poverty in America. The basic principle is that whenever there is a *simha*, three percent of the cost of the food is donated to Mazon. Currently the largest agency in the United States combating hunger, Mazon directs its funds to both direct relief and advocacy.

There is a tension in many congregations between direct service work and advocacy. Advocacy can seem potentially divisive, and too large an issue if conceived of nationally. Focusing on local (city or state) policy can ameliorate much of this. On a political level, it frequently is less “hot button” than national issues. Good educational work can be done on issues without necessarily taking positions. Even raising the policy questions can be important.

I want to highlight a new effort of the Jewish Fund for Justice (I referred to its analysis earlier). It has developed an excellent program to revitalize synagogue social action based on working in coalitions with other faith groups. It is described in a pamphlet, “Faith Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life.” (It is available free by contacting [www. jfjustice.org](http://www.jfjustice.org).)

## Respect for Differences

Congregations can encompass more

than one position on an issue. Multiple positions can be advocated within the unity of the congregation. This is most easily done in the context of educating people about the issues. It can also be done in the realm of advocacy. Different committees or working groups of a congregation can take different positions. The congregation as a whole needs to be fair about resource allocation and time. The congregation as an institution does not have to take a position on an issue and it can allow committees to engage in advocacy work. This will require careful negotiation, trust and civil behavior. This can only work in an atmosphere of respect, with everyone accepting that reasonable, moral and ethical people may have different opinions.

The roots of Judaism are in the commitment to create the conditions where each living being has the opportunity to manifest godliness in daily life. The tradition teaches that justice is a necessary condition and that we are mandated to pursue it. The roots grow out of a faith in God that by definition guarantees that the possibility of attaining justice always exists. It is our task to cultivate that faith.

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3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. Some of these ideas were developed in conversation with Arthur Waskow.

5. Steven M. Cohen and Leonard Fein,

“American Jews and Their Social Justice Involvement: Evidence from a National Survey,” sponsored by Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice, 2002, unpublished.

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9. Leshan, *op. cit.*

10. “Faith Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life” (New York: Jewish Fund for Justice, 2003).

11. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).



# Judaism and Justice

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

**J**udaism is a big subject. Having had the privilege of teaching converts to Judaism, I have experienced the challenge of understanding Judaism through the eyes of the uninitiated. It can be overwhelming. There are our sacred texts. There is history, philosophy, and literature. There are all the customs that revolve around life cycle, holidays and ritual observance. There are cultures unique to Jewish communities in countries all around the world. What is it that unites the Jewish people?

At a time when more Jews ask the question, “Why be Jewish?” well before they are even interested in pursuing the question, “How shall I be Jewish?”, it is incumbent on us to frame some good answers. Our “market” has been schooled on instant messaging, media sound bites and MTV images. While the educator in me wants to respond to the skeptical inquisitor who asks, “Why be Jewish?” by offering a dozen basic books, the pragmatist in me knows that this is a non-starter. There are too many alternatives making claims on the time and attention of my potential Jew. There is a need for us to state succinctly just what it is that Judaism offers the contemporary Jew if we are to have any chance of staking a claim to his/her loyalty.

## Core Principles

It is easy to despair. Judaism is a rich tradition and it can take a lifetime even to scratch its surface, not to mention understand its finer nuances. I take comfort in the fact that Jewish sages of the past must have faced similar challenges, yet tried to capture the essence of Judaism in easily understood and remembered formulas.

Maimonides (12th century) framed the core of Judaism in thirteen key principles. Joseph Albo (15th century) formulated three core principles and six dogmas that derived from those principles. In the second century, Shimon the Just offered one of the most memorable three-part formulas of the “pillars” of Judaism — *Torah* (study), *avodah* (service or worship) and *gemilut hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness) (*Mishna Avot* 1:2). One generation later, the sage Hillel, when confronted with a challenge from a Roman soldier, boiled Judaism down to one principle: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others. The rest is commentary; now go and study.”

## The Purpose of Judaism

While there are disadvantages in any attempt to reduce Judaism to bite-size

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formulas, to a generation with a short attention span the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. I have taken to asking my students a big question: "What is the purpose of Judaism?" It is amazing how often I am met by mystified faces.

Sometimes, the more Judaically knowledgeable the person, the more confused s/he becomes. Indeed, for Jews who have been raised in Judaically rich Jewish homes, who have benefited from a solid Jewish education and who come to adopt Jewish lives filled with prayer, ritual practice, learning and good deeds, the value of a Jewish lifestyle is self-evident. Yet even for such a Jew, there is the danger of losing the forest for the trees. "What is the purpose of it all?" is a question that helps one to focus and to center.

And then there is everyone else: American Jews who are affluent, well-educated, living lives filled with all kinds of opportunities . . . and yet Judaically illiterate. If they had any exposure to Judaism, it might have been in an afternoon Hebrew school, or with some obligatory lessons that were required to qualify for celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah. As they come into adulthood, the little they remember of their Jewish education is uninspiring. Just as they reach an age when they can begin to appreciate some of the depth, beauty and wisdom of Judaism, they go AWOL. They are educationally unavailable, and their ties to the organized Jewish community will be, at best, tentative.

Imagine if this constituency of Jews had emerged from their brief exposure

to Jewish education with a clear and memorable message of the purpose of Judaism. Perhaps, then, they, like Hillel's Roman soldier, might have considered taking up the challenge to "go and study" at some later time when they became mature adults.

## Justice and Holiness

Based on my reading of Judaism, there are two compelling answers to the question: "What is the purpose of Judaism?" The first purpose is based on Genesis 18:17-19, when Abraham first "hears" or apprehends God's call: to extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world. The second purpose is based on God's revelation to Moses, which is recounted in Leviticus 19:2: The Jewish people are told to be a holy nation, and to bring holiness into the world.

Now, this is not a bad start. "Why be Jewish?" Because Judaism is a heritage that extends the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world and brings holiness into that same world. I think that I might now have the attention of more than an occasional Roman soldier.

Judaism believes that one way holiness is brought into the world is when people act with justice and compassion. The core text connecting the ideas of justice and holiness is Isaiah, chapter 58, a section that is read, not coincidentally, as the *haftarah* on Yom Kippur. The holiest observance on the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur is the very day on which our personal behavior is the yardstick by which we fulfill the obligations of the day.

Is not the fast that I desire the un-  
locking of the chains of wicked-  
ness,

the loosening of exploitation,  
the freeing of the oppressed,  
the breaking of the yoke of servi-  
tude?

Is it not the sharing of your bread  
with those who starve,  
the bringing of the wretched poor  
into your house,

or clothing someone you see who  
is naked

and not hiding from your fellow  
human being in their time of  
need?

(Behave this way and) Then shall  
your light burst forth as the dawn,  
your waters of healing will flour-  
ish again,

your righteousness will go before  
you and God's glory will be be-  
hind you.

Then, when you call out to God,  
God will respond, "Here I am."

(Isaiah 58:6-12)

## Ritual and Ethical Laws

Much has been made of the distinc-  
tion in Judaism between those laws that  
are between a person and God and  
those that are between people and  
people. The former tend to get catego-  
rized as "ritual laws," such as keeping  
the Sabbath or keeping the laws of  
*kashrut* (dietary laws). The latter tend  
to get called "ethical laws," such as giv-  
ing charity or visiting the sick. Early  
Reform Judaism made much out of  
emphasizing the importance of the lat-  
ter and the irrelevance of the former.

In creating a faith that would allow  
Jews to integrate easily into general so-  
ciety, the particularities of ritual law  
seemed to be an unnecessary impedi-  
ment. Conversely, Judaism's legacy of  
bringing prophetic principles of justice  
into the world was a source of pride.

The dichotomy between "ritual" and  
"ethical" laws is not always helpful.  
Even as Reform Judaism has spent the  
past several decades trying to reclaim  
parts of the Jewish tradition that the  
early architects of their movement dis-  
missed, to most liberal Jews, the ethi-  
cal principles of Judaism have a self-  
evident value that the more particular  
parts of Judaism do not. It is against  
this backdrop that contemporary Jews  
need to reassess the relationship be-  
tween justice and holiness.

The Torah calls the Jewish people an  
*am segulah* and an *am kadosh* (Deut. 7:  
6, 14:2), a special nation, a holy na-  
tion. Building on ideas rooted in the  
pagan Near East, Abraham and his off-  
spring created a monotheistic faith that  
gave birth not only to Judaism, but to  
Christianity and Islam as well. If the  
core principles of Judaism were to sur-  
vive, the Jewish people needed to shape  
a culture and a lifestyle apart from the  
surrounding nations. The biblical ad-  
monition against "whoring after other  
Gods" (Judges 2:17, 8:33), later edicts  
prohibiting intermarriage between Jews  
and non-Jews, and the growth of a  
body of customs that distinguished  
Jews from others, were all driven by the  
need to keep Jews a people apart, a holy  
nation. Indeed, the Hebrew word for  
holiness, *kedusha*, derives from the root  
meaning, "to set apart."

## Holy Apartness, Reconsidered

In the modern Western world, many Jews came to believe that this “holy apartness” was an unfortunate holdover from an earlier era when Jews were consigned to ghettos, persecuted and even killed. Modern Jews believed that in a world that welcomed Jews, indeed a world that made “our” Ten Commandments a basis for Western notions of morality and ethics, there was no longer a need for Jews to be a people apart.

The liberal/universal bias of so many modern Jews either led to a polite “benign neglect” of the notion of Judaism’s “holy apartness” or an outright rejection of the idea as incompatible with modernity and pluralistic societies. That was certainly the perspective brought to the issue by Mordecai Kaplan.

At the dawn of the 21st century, this liberal/universalistic ethic is being challenged by many thoughtful people. Much of the world is seized by a radical Islamic fundamentalism that sees Western, liberal democracy as an evil, surpassed only by the evil of Zionism, Israel and the Jewish people itself. Each is regarded as an infidel force that needs to be eliminated by any possible means.

## Challenges of American Culture

Nor is this the only threat to the values and ideals that Judaism brought into the world. Increasingly it is obvious that secular American culture is not the “neutral setting” that it was thought to be a century ago, a setting that would allow for a multiplicity of faiths and ethnic groups to co-exist, leading to a

rich cultural mosaic in a tolerant and pluralistic America. This country’s affluence and its love affair with consumerism has created a culture that is at odds with Judaism’s emphasis on justice and holiness.

The pursuit of corporate profit that enriches the few creates a marketplace without a conscience. American corporations market violent toys, video games and movies without regard for the fact that in doing so, they contribute to America having more homicides than any other country. The selling of sex — in music, movies, magazines, and on television — makes it virtually impossible to raise children who understand and value the sanctity of loving relationships, the family and the virtue of modesty.

The widespread phenomenon of dishonesty, stock manipulations, and corporate financial scandals in politics and business among educated and professional people sends a message that “it is OK as long as you can get away with it.” These examples of moral decay exist against the backdrop of a society that has allowed the gap between rich and poor to grow wider with each passing year.

## Distinctive Jewish Values

For several generations, many American Jews were convinced that American values were more or less the same as Jewish values. The logical extension of that assumption was that it was not worth the time to learn the language of Judaism, since America provided much the same set of values. It was a license for Jewish illiteracy. It

went without saying that Jewish “holy-apartness” was chauvinistic, exclusivist and un-American. Why should Jews hold themselves apart from an America that gave them unparalleled freedom and economic opportunity? We should drink deeply and fully from the cup of American society.

It was these assumptions that lay behind Mordecai Kaplan’s rejection of the idea of chosenness. Hoping for a world in which all religions might undergo the same kind of reconstruction that he was proposing for Judaism, Kaplan envisioned a world parliament of religions at which the people who brought the idea of chosenness into the world — the Jews — would voluntarily relinquish that claim. In return, all the other religions of the world, having created their own versions of tribal chauvinism, would similarly relinquish voluntarily their claims on exclusive truth.

World events of recent years have been hard on Kaplan’s brand of liberal universalism. Though we might continue to admire the sentiments he so eloquently set forth, most of the Western world has been rudely awakened to a world struggle in which democracy, freedom and pluralism are identified by adherents of radical Islam as a scourge that must be eradicated from the world. Judaism, of course, does not escape indictment by these same extremist elements.

## Truths and Insights

Now it seems clearer that increasing numbers of Jews, and a not insignificant number of non-Jews, are coming

to see that within Jewish texts there are truths and insights that are in short supply in the world. It is also clear that throughout history, Jews have had some measure of success in making these values operative in their communities.

Ironically, at the dawn of the 21st century, it seems that we have not traveled so far down the road from our ancestors who understood that Judaism was “counter-culture,” offering a way of thinking and living that was embraced by few others in the world. Whereas once the cultural norm from which Judaism dissented was paganism, today it might be religious fanaticism, hedonism or secularism. From this perspective, the idea of *am segulah*, “holy apartness,” has newfound appeal. There may well be no other way for the values and ideals envisioned by Judaism to be expressed and carried forward in the world, even if those ideals are not yet embraced by the society at large. For much of Jewish history, the biblical expression *am levado yishkon* (Numbers 23:9), “Israel is a nation that dwells alone,” was descriptive. Today it has become prescriptive. Unless the Jewish people succeeds in holding onto some parts of the values and ideals of justice and holiness, over and against societies and cultures that have either rejected or ignored those ideals, there is no way for those principles to endure. It can only be done by reclaiming the importance and value of the Jewish people being “holy-apart.”

## Abraham and “the Call”

As we grapple with the core com-

mitments of Judaism, we would do well to turn back to the Abraham narrative in the book of Genesis. With Abraham, God begins to build a covenantal relationship with one family, a family that becomes the Jewish nation. If one family can respond to God's call "to do what is right and just," (Gen. 18:19) perhaps the peoples of the world can come to live that way as well. Perhaps the Jewish people can become, in the prophet Isaiah's famous words, a "light of the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). Mordecai Kaplan himself, in *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, identifies the same verse as the source of the Bible's humanistic (as opposed to its mythological) message. It is the way that the Torah "provides inspiration and guidance in consonance with 'God's way of justice through law.'"<sup>1</sup>

It doesn't take long for Abraham to internalize the lesson. For only a few verses later, Abraham challenges God to act in a just manner as he threatens to destroy the inhabitants of Sodom and Gemorrah. Abraham asks of God: "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen. 18:23-33).

The Jewish people today are challenged by Abraham's legacy. Our community is a mixed bag with regard to living the legacy of Judaism and justice. On the one hand, we can take pride in the numerous organizations that have been created within the Jewish community in recent years that address the issue of justice. From the most prominent national organizations, like the Jewish Fund for Justice, Mazon, the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy and the American Jewish

World Service, to smaller organizations that work in particular areas, like the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Poverty or the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, every week thousands of Jews roll up their sleeves to try to act in the spirit of the prophets to care for the most vulnerable in our society and our world. These are Jews who understand that Judaism is nothing if it is not about justice.

But the majority of Jews are unaware of such efforts. The reality is that most of our community is quite far from the experience of the "stranger, widow and orphan." The gap between rich and poor in America has widened. Today, the bottom 20 percent of Americans earn 4 percent of the national income; the top 5 percent earn 21 percent of the national income. In 1973, the top 5 percent of Americans earned 11 times more than the bottom 20 percent. Today, that multiple is 20! It is no secret on which side of that divide American Jews stand.

Teveye told us that it is no sin to be rich, but it sure makes it harder to understand the plight of America's most underprivileged populations. I find many members of the Jewish community increasingly insensitive to the challenges faced by poor people in George Bush's America. Even as our community sponsors some commendable efforts to fulfill Abraham's legacy, many Jews have worked hard to widen the distance between their life station and the life station of those in need. We have a lot of work to do to bridge the gap between our talk and our walk.

## Jewish Survival

In the end, Jewish insiders who worry no end about Jewish survival may be barking up the wrong tree. Whereas our parents' generation sought out the institutions of the organized Jewish community — synagogues, federations, Israel — as their primary locus of identification, our children are loathe to view themselves quite so parochially. The last two demographic studies of the American Jewish community (1990, 2000) give evidence of a weakening of ethnic ties with each successive generation. This trend will not be stemmed by finger wagging over intermarriage or rabbinic sermons on the evils of assimilation.

Among the few magnets of identification for younger Jews are Jewish or-

ganizations that define their mission in the keys of justice and holiness. Find the organizations that engage Jews in renovating the homes of poor people, tutoring inner-city children, working the line at a soup kitchen, and the like — and you will find young Jews. Find the organizations that talk about Judaism as a path to holy living, as a way to encounter one's inner life, as a way to experience the transcendent in a world gone mad — and you will find young Jews. Ironically, these paths — justice and holiness — are Judaism's most ancient messages, messages that we would do well to rediscover in our own day.

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1. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 10.

# From Woodrow Avenue to Woodrow Avenue: The Path of an Organizer and a Jewish Community

BY ARI LIPMAN

There are times at work when the thought flashes through my mind, “What is a nice suburban Jewish boy like myself doing here at this Haitian Seventh Day Adventist prayer group meeting?”

Let me offer a bit of background. For the past three years, I have worked as an organizer with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), a coalition of 80 religious congregations and community organizations representing approximately 55,000 people from the diverse religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds that make up Greater Boston: Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Muslim; White, African-American, Latino, Haitian, Cape Verdean, Vietnamese, Brazilian, Ethiopian, and Nigerian.

GBIO is part of a national network called the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in 1940 by famous Jewish radical Saul Alinsky. Alinsky was more noted for his organizing work

with Catholics, labor unions, and the African-American church than for setting foot in a synagogue, but increasingly, synagogues of all denominations are joining IAF organizations in cities around the country as a way to strengthen their congregations and to act powerfully on their mandate to seek justice.

## Acting in the Public Arena

Ultimately, the purpose of our organizations is to develop the ability to act powerfully in the public arena. This power — without which our talk of *tikkun olam* and *gemilut hasadim* is just talk — originates from two sources: organized people and organized money. Each congregation that is part of GBIO possesses this power in abundance. Congregations pull together regular budgets to sustain their operations, and gather as a community every Saturday or Sunday, in numbers ranging from

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50 to 5000, to fulfill their collective purpose.

In many congregations, this power is organized exclusively for the literal praise and worship of God. In GBIO, we challenge our congregations to take this power in a new direction: to act for justice. With the collective power of 80 diverse congregations working together, the potential for social and spiritual transformation is enormous.

## Common Characteristics

Although each IAF organization has a structure and culture indigenous to the city in which it is born, there are several common characteristics:

- Broad-based, diverse institutional membership: IAF organizations build their power by developing a multi-religious, multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual coalition.
- Multi-issue platform: In order to serve the varied interests of the diverse constituencies that comprise IAF organizations, we organize simultaneously on multiple issues of concern to the families in our congregations — housing, education, jobs, health care, recreation, transportation, immigration, etc.
- Relational culture: The first emphasis in our organizations is to build relationships, one on one, among clergy and lay leaders, both within congregations and across our membership. These relationships, forged in common action, become the glue that holds our organizations together.
- Leadership development: IAF organizations become congregation-based

institutes for the development of the public arts of relationship building, strategic planning, power analysis, negotiation, compromise, public speaking, and political judgment.

The Jewish Fund for Justice recently produced an excellent publication entitled “Faith-Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life,” which argues persuasively how Jewish congregations can benefit from participation in broad-based organizations like GBIO.

## Meeting a Community

In this article, I would like to add the perspective of an organizer whose life — both personal and professional — has been transformed through this work. Two years ago, I was given the assignment of organizing in Boston’s sizeable Haitian community. I knew nothing of Haitian language, culture or political experience, or of the Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods where the immigrant community had settled. After dozens of individual meetings with church and community leaders, I slowly gained my bearings and started visiting some of the most vibrant centers of community life.

In listening to the stories of the Haitian men and women at worship services and the aforementioned prayer group meeting — the oppression they suffered in their home country, the discrimination they face on these shores, the trials they endure in their workplace, their struggle to find adequate housing and health care, their hopes and

dreams for their children in America — I learned not just about the present reality for hundreds of thousands of my neighbors in this city, but also about my own family and community.

## **222 Woodrow Avenue**

When Abraham Lipman, my great-grandfather, arrived in Boston from his native Lithuania in 1910, he settled with his family in a densely packed neighborhood of triple-decker houses on the border of Dorchester and Mattapan. He and his neighbors on Woodrow Avenue shared three characteristics: They were Jewish, they were immigrants and they were dirt poor.

With little formal education and a need to support his wife and six children, my great-grandfather took a menial job offered by a tailor friend and slowly developed a skill as a presser. He made his living steaming suits in a poorly ventilated shop that broiled in the summer and stank in the winter.

Two institutions supported my great-grandfather's family in this difficult time: his shul and his union. Congregation Agudas Israel, a stately red brick building at 222 Woodrow Avenue in Dorchester, was more than just a center for prayer. It was the primary entry point, for my great-grandfather and many others, into the broader world of American civic and social life.

## **Mutual Aid**

In the era before Social Security and health insurance, synagogue-based mutual aid societies supported families in

times of crisis. *Shul* members who were locked out of downtown banks started their own credit unions. Any politician who wanted to get elected in Boston's Ward 14 paid a visit to the congregation's rabbi, and it was in these meetings that resources for the community were negotiated.

Perhaps most importantly for my family, meetings for the local presser's union convened in the synagogue's basement. Abraham Lipman played a leading role in the formation of the presser's union, served as its local president, and was elected to serve as chairman of the board of the Massachusetts Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Worker's Union. It was because of the organizing taking place in both his synagogue and his workplace that my great-grandfather was able to save enough to buy a single-family home in Revere and provide his children with the opportunity for a college education.

My grandfather, Henry Lipman, worked at my great-grandfather's pressing shop during the day while attending the Harvard Extension School in the evening. He left Boston, completed a master's degree, and fought in World War II. After the war, he purchased a home in an affluent New York suburb where he raised my father, who grew up to become a Harvard-educated physician. I grew up in Montgomery County, Maryland, attended some of the nation's best public schools, and followed the footsteps of my father and grandfather to Harvard.

My grandfather, who grew up in poverty on Woodrow Avenue and secured for his family a firm position

among this country's economic and intellectual elite, passed away this summer at age 87. With him died my family's firsthand knowledge of poverty and the immigrant experience.

## Changing Neighborhoods

During this span, the Mattapan and Dorchester neighborhoods were transformed just as dramatically as the Lipman family. For thirty-five years after my great-grandfather moved to Revere, the neighborhood survived steady attrition to the suburbs and remained a center of Jewish life in Boston. Suddenly, in the two years between 1968 and 1970, Mattapan changed radically from majority Jewish to majority African-American. Synagogues sold their buildings, moved or died. The center of Boston's Jewish community relocated to the suburbs of Brookline and Newton, while Dorchester and Mattapan suffered from abandonment, disinvestment and crime. (This rapid change, a consequence of poorly conceived urban renewal programs, discriminatory lending, anti-Semitism, Jewish racism, panic selling, blockbusting, and unscrupulous real estate practices, is meticulously documented in the book *The Death of an American Jewish Community* by Lawrence Harmon and Hillel Levine.)

Mattapan experienced a second transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, as waves of Caribbean immigrants, primarily from Haiti, settled into what was by then the most affordable, and most decrepit, neighborhood in Boston.

This was not the Jewish history, fam-

ily history, or American urban history I learned growing up. I was in complete ignorance of my family's roots in this neighborhood when I first knocked on the door of 222 Woodrow Avenue to meet the senior pastor of a flourishing 1200-member Haitian Seventh Day Adventist church that owns the building once occupied by Agudas Israel, my great-grandfather's shul.

## How to "Build Community" Without Really Trying

I tell the much-forgotten story of my great-grandfather and the neighborhood that received him because I believe that the sharing of our collective history in America is critical as we search for a meaningful civic and spiritual life in our synagogues.

The contemporary synagogue revitalization movement emphasizes the values of "social justice" and "community building" in order to attract Jews who have been alienated by the anti-septic suburban synagogue centers of their parents' generation. This well-intentioned push has led to a rash of canned food drives, walk-a-thons, potluck dinners, email list-serves, name-tags and designated greeters. All of these may contribute to a synagogue's life, but they are insufficient in and of themselves to create either justice or a cohesive community.

The phrases "social justice" and "community-building" would have been foreign to my great-grandfather's generation, who instead of worrying about such things spent their civic and religious energies bringing together

their members to form credit partnerships, mutual-aid societies and trade unions. Yet by pursuing those self-interests, they achieved both the community building and the social justice that modern congregations seek.

## **Acting Out of Common Interest**

What Jews of that first generation knew instinctively was that social justice happens not out of the work of a committee but when a community comes together to act powerfully on a common interest. Community happens not out of email lists and *onegs*, but when people invest in relationships and common action. In a sense, community is like happiness – it cannot be found by searching for it. Rather, it appears in the process of common pursuit.

I also tell my family story so that we do not forget how American Jewish history is intertwined with that of African-Americans and the more recent African, Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian immigrants whose present speaks very much of our past. Jews on the whole are no longer the urban creatures that we were eighty years ago.

However, if the Jewish community falls out of relationship with the waves of immigrants and African-Americans who occupy the neighborhoods we left behind, we will lose touch with our past reality, their present reality, and the similarities and differences between the two.

Broad-based, interfaith organizing like that taking place within GBIO provides the best opportunity for Jew-

ish congregations to fulfill their justice mandate while also connecting in a meaningful, sustainable, reciprocal way with contemporary urban communities outside the synagogue walls.

“Ideally, a synagogue should be of the world,” explains Ashley Adams, the past president of GBIO Reconstructionist congregation Temple Hillel B’nai Torah and a GBIO board member. “GBIO, and other IAF groups like it across the United States, give Jews an entry into the world in which we live. We get to act on our values alongside others who share them. Perhaps most important, membership in GBIO has been good for us because our synagogue has become more attractive to Jewish families interested in a shul that’s involved in its neighborhood. It’s helped our membership grow. And it’s been good because it has helped serve as a training ground for leaders who can help us with the many tasks that a vibrant shul needs.”

## **Talking About Money**

Synagogues that are considering membership in an IAF organization usually hit two stumbling blocks: 1) the financial cost of membership; and 2) concerns about involving the congregation in public action. I would like to address these two issues head on.

IAF organizations rely on membership dues for 50 to 75 percent of their operating budgets. There is no other way to sustain a vibrant, independent organization with a talented organizing staff; government money comes with too many strings, and foundation

money is unreliable. Each IAF organization has a different way of assessing dues, but most have a structure similar to that of GBIO. Each GBIO member congregation contributes 1 percent of its yearly operating budget for dues, with a minimum payment of \$250 and a maximum payment of \$10,000.

My experience is that both church and synagogue leaders alike get squeamish when the talk turns to money. Money is profane, they insist, and has nothing to do with the spiritual work of the congregation. This, of course, could not be further from the truth. Money is a statement of value, and the true values of a congregation are made quite explicit in the organizational budget.

## Contrasting Priorities

I attended pre-school, became a bar mitzvah and completed confirmation in a large Conservative suburban synagogue with many of the features spurring the synagogue revitalization movement: an anonymous membership (with the exception of several Washington-area celebrities, whom the synagogue kept far from anonymous), empty ritual, and an emphasis on couture over action. I remember the synagogue board pitching a \$2 million capital campaign to renovate the sanctuary so that it might be more pleasing to the eyes of the fashionable membership.

Five years later, I served as director of a small homeless shelter for twenty-three men and women located in the basement of a Lutheran church in Harvard Square. This congregation decided that its basement facilities were

not adequate for the shelter. Its board launched a \$1.5 million capital campaign to renovate the basement to better serve the homeless men and women who called their church home. Throughout the renovation, the drab concrete-and-cinder-block sanctuary remained untouched. (As a side note, this Lutheran church also realized that none of the homeless men and women we served would be able to move out of the church basement unless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts committed more resources to the creation of affordable housing, so the congregation joined GBIO to expand the scope of its social action ministries.)

Although both the synagogue of my youth and this Lutheran church gave equal lip service to the idea of social justice at the pulpit, the difference in the true values and commitment of the two congregations could not have been starker. Jewish congregations that are committed to *tikkun olam* and *gemilut hasadim* write those priorities into their budgets, and those that are not write them into their sermons.

## Addressing Systems, Not Symptoms

Most congregations that do have active social justice programming are used to collecting cans of food for the hungry or organizing volunteers for a local soup kitchen. They are not used to negotiating with a local mayor or governor for increased budget expenditures on nutrition programs or permanent housing for homeless people. The former is unanimously acclaimed in the congregation, though it does little to actually solve the

problems of poor people. The latter addresses the systemic causes of hunger and homelessness, but may create tension within the congregation. Many synagogues choose the route of zero tension over the route of effective justice.

The reality is that the major issues we care about in our communities — housing, education, jobs, health care, transportation, the environment, recreation, etc. — cannot be solved exclusively through volunteerism, no matter how well-intentioned or organized. Those serious about social change must enter the realm of public policy, and IAF organizations at their best can be a powerful democratic vehicle for the advancement of a meaningful policy agenda that can improve the lives of thousands of families in our communities. This type of serious engagement is not possible without taking firm stands on policy issues, negotiating with public officials on those issues, and bringing the power of the thousands of families in our congregations to bear through the democratic process.

IAF organizations are never partisan, but they are always political in the sense that the decisions involving the allocation of public resources — the very decisions we seek to influence for justice — are political decisions.

## **Moving Into Action**

How does an IAF organization work in practice? Let us return to Dorchester and Mattapan, once the heart of a vibrant Jewish community and now the heart of a vibrant Haitian community. GBIO has eight member congregations

and allies in this neighborhood, which collectively represent approximately 6,000 Haitians.

Much as Jewish immigrants settled in the garment industry 100 years ago, Haitian workers have concentrated in nursing homes. Approximately 80 percent of low-wage nursing home workers (certified nursing assistants, dietary and environmental staff) in Greater Boston are Haitian. In many of the congregations, up to 50 percent of the women work in this industry. These are the workers who clean bedpans, lift and bathe patients, change diapers, mop the floors, prepare the meals, and perform most of the dirty grunt work that makes quality nursing home care possible. Like Jews in the early waves of immigration, these workers are largely unorganized, and consequently face tremendous difficulty in the workplace.

With wages as low as \$8 per hour, most women work a total of 60 to 90 hours per week, including second and third jobs, in order to provide for their families. Employers deduct from their paychecks \$100 to \$150 per week for family health insurance. Despite federal regulations that suggest that each worker should be assigned to only five to seven patients, often, nursing assistants must care for up to fifteen at a time. This chronic understaffing leads to workplace injuries, stress, exhaustion and poor patient care. Many homes target their Haitian workers with humiliating policies, including prohibitions against speaking Haitian Creole or making telephone calls in the workplace, even in the break room.

## **The Problem of Continuing Injustice**

These stresses can be crippling, and if you are ever privileged with the opportunity to talk with Haitian women at their Wednesday evening prayer meeting after a long day, you will begin to get a sense both of the injustices that take place daily in our community as well as a taste of what life might have been like for our own prior generations.

Although we can draw many parallels to the experiences of Jewish immigrants one hundred years ago and contemporary Haitian immigrants, there are also significant differences that make life for immigrants today more challenging. My great-grandfather rode the boat from Lithuania to Montreal, and then illegally crossed the border into Maine. His undocumented status did not prevent him from getting a job or establishing a life for himself in the United States.

However, Haitian immigrants without proper documentation today are unable to work, study or even obtain drivers licenses. If they are caught, they are deported. After years of hard work, and with the help of his congregation and his union, my great-grandfather was able to buy a single-family home in the working class suburb of Revere. Today, the average single-family home in Revere costs more than \$300,000 — completely unaffordable to a nursing home worker supporting a family on an \$8-per-hour salary.

The treatment of nursing home workers is not just an issue of concern

to the Haitian community, which makes up a key part of the nursing home work force, but is also of significance to anyone who has a loved one in a nursing facility. Upon hearing the stories from these Haitian workers, the Jewish members of GBIO quickly recognized that, in their synagogues packed with baby boomers whose parents are aging, anxiety about the quality of nursing home care was widespread. The connection between the treatment of workers and the quality of care given in nursing homes became clear: Nursing homes cannot provide decent care to patients if the caregivers themselves are abused.

## **New Relationships for Advocacy**

Thus, a campaign based in mutual interest and a desire to create new relationships was formed. At summer training sessions, Jewish and Haitian leaders studied together the organization of Massachusetts' nursing home industry. They learned that much of the power to set wages, benefits and work conditions in nursing homes rests in the arms of state budget writers and law enforcers.

This fall, a team of leaders from Reconstructionist synagogue Dorshei Tzedek and two GBIO Haitian churches met with the Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services to discuss the administration's plans for improving nursing home care and to put our common concerns on the administration's agenda. In the next two months, groups of Haitian nurs-

ing home workers will meet with Jewish nursing home patients and their families to share their stories with each other and commit to a common plan of action. Before the end of the year, GBIO will bring together more than 2500 people from all of our congregations to engage the Governor of Massachusetts, the Attorney General, owners of nursing home chains and other decision-makers around a concrete agenda to improve nursing home care.

If this campaign is successful, it will mean a significant improvement in the quality of life for thousands of nursing home workers and thousands of patients in nursing care. It will also mean the creation of new, meaningful relationships, rooted in mutual interest and respect, between the Jewish community and the Haitian community.

“Interfaith breakfasts and Thanksgiving services are fine — but they seem often to be artificial constructs where we all get to nod our heads at the pious words of our brethren of other faiths,” concludes Ashley Adams of Temple Hillel B’nai Torah. “GBIO is an arena where we get to build the truly strong bonds that are forged in action. GBIO is that crucible that Jews need to really bond with others in our community.”

## **Reville for Reconstructionists**

The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization has been blessed with the most substantial Jewish participation

of any IAF organization nationwide. Thanks to the active support and membership of Boston’s Jewish Community Relations Council, GBIO has five member synagogues (including my own, Temple Israel of Boston) with several others pursuing membership. The talented leadership, organized people, and organized money of our Jewish congregations have increased the power of GBIO to tackle the critical social issues affecting our region.

Through GBIO, Jewish clergy and lay people have stood up alongside African-Americans, Haitians and others to initiate a prophetic vision of justice for our community. These relationships are deep and lasting, and provide for a richer civic and religious life. Thanks to the work of GBIO, Jews are returning to Mattapan for the first time in thirty years — not yet to live, but to build bridges between communities and across time.

It is humbling for me to work in the space where my great-grandfather worshiped ninety years ago, and with the people who are following in his footsteps. The improbability of this connection has provided me with the strongest sense of divine purpose and guidance I have experienced in my 25 years.

It is my sincerest hope that Jewish leaders in Reconstructionist congregations across the country will initiate discoveries like this for themselves, and will repair the world in the process.



# Religious Liberty, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Case of Reconstructionist Judaism

BY REBECCA ALPERT

**T**he performance of the marriage ceremony by clergy provides an interesting location for a discussion of the ways in which religious claims on sexual practices are played out in the public sphere in the United States. Clergy routinely perform the civil function of marriage, which is delegated to them by the state. “By the power vested in me by the state of \_\_\_\_\_ and by my religious denomination, I now pronounce you husband and wife” are words included in wedding ceremonies performed by clergy. This speech act, accompanied by the signing of appropriate licenses, makes the clergy person an agent of the state. Civil and religious marriage in the United States are thus linked together.

This connection would be unremarkable, except in cases where the religious institution or the state approves of a type of marriage that the other re-

jects. Of course, clergy are not compelled to perform any marriage that their denomination deems inappropriate. Many clergy routinely refuse to perform intermarriages, for example, although the state permits them to perform any marriage, even if both participants are outside their church. But clergy also perform ceremonies that may be acceptable to the denomination, but not legal according to U.S. law — for example, those that are at too close a degree of consanguinity, or polygamous unions. Another example of marriage that, although to date illegal, has been deemed acceptable to some denominations is the category of same-sex marriage.

## Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage has come to public attention in the United States because of highly publicized cases in Ha-

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waii, Vermont and Massachusetts. In these cases, courts determined that it would be sex and gender discrimination to deny same-sex couples the right to marry, and legislative initiatives forestalled court mandates for same-sex marriage by, for example, creating a comprehensive reciprocal partners benefits bill in Hawaii, and civil unions in Vermont. In those cases, ballot initiatives were introduced to make sure that marriage would survive as a union between a man and a woman only.

Other states and the U.S. Congress have passed “defense of marriage” legislation that gives them the right not to recognize same-sex marriages should any state decide in favor of this practice.<sup>1</sup> Although no cases are currently pending, same-sex marriage remains on the public policy agenda of the United States, and concerned citizens must consider the question of same-sex marriage.<sup>2</sup>

## **A Religious Issue**

Much of the legal debate about same-sex marriage ignores the religious dimension and concentrates on arguments related to definitions of marriage, gender and sex discrimination, and the reciprocal rights and responsibilities of states. Yet marriage is an important religious issue, both because the state supports religious marriage, and because religious communities have a stake in defining public policy about marriage from a moral perspective. In a pluralistic society, each religious group must have the right to determine who is eligible for marriage in that religion. For these reasons, it is imperative that the

issue of religious freedom be considered part of the public policy debate on this issue.

As would be expected, there is strong religious opposition to same-sex marriage. Some denominations, like the United Methodists for example, have banned ministers from performing these ceremonies, while individuals from these denominations, like Rev. Jimmy Creech, have gained national attention by challenging these rulings. Colleges with religious affiliations have refused same-sex couples the right to use their campus chapels.

Yet while we frequently hear about religious opposition to same-sex marriage, we rarely hear about those religious groups that have supported gay men and lesbians in their desire to have ceremonies to make public declarations regarding their long-term committed relationships. There is strong support in many religious communities for same-sex marriage, and religious leaders have taken the initiative themselves of performing same-sex ceremonies over the past decade. The Society of Friends, United Church of Christ, Lutheran and Universalist-Unitarian ministers, Episcopal priests, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis and Buddhist priests have all performed ceremonies of commitment for gay men and lesbians, including public ceremonies involving hundreds of couples at national marches on Washington in 1987 and 1992.

## **Role for Denominations**

If religious denominations are willing to endorse same-sex marriage, they

ought to have the right to confer the same societal benefits for those marriages as for those of heterosexuals. Despite popular opinion to the contrary, these religious ceremonies have no legal status, because clergy only serve as functionaries, not as arbiters of civil laws on marriage.

The connection between religious and civil marriage opens up the possibility for religious denominations to play a major role in this public policy debate. Rather than viewing these ceremonies as isolated “religious” events that have no bearing on public policy, religious denominational support of same-sex marriage creates an opportunity for progressive religious groups to express moral concern over this particular issue, and to exert influence on public policy by demanding the right to perform same-sex marriages that have legal authority based on religious liberty.

## Religious Liberty

It can be argued that the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment gives clergy the right to perform legally binding same-sex marriages as a matter of religious liberty. There are good reasons why religious denominations that support same-sex marriage might choose to make a claim that their religious liberty is being abridged because members of their faith community lack the right to legal marriage.

The free-exercise clause suggests that the state must make accommodation to religion for a sincerely held and established religious belief, provided there

is no compelling state interest in opposition. Same-sex marriage proponents have argued that the state has no compelling interest in prohibiting same-sex marriage. These marriages would harm no one in society, nor require any cost to the government. These marriages would even support government interests in the stability and support of children, and provide an efficient way to distribute health-care benefits. Same-sex marriage can also be shown to be a sincerely held and established religious belief. The case of Reconstructionist Judaism illustrates this point.

## Ancient and Contemporary Understandings

Clearly, not all denominations in Judaism support same-sex marriage. To understand what makes same-sex marriage problematic in Jewish tradition, we must examine ancient Jewish understandings of same-sex relationships. In biblical law, male homosexual acts are prohibited, while such acts between females are not mentioned. In rabbinic law, lesbian behavior is considered a minor infraction, but not enough to disqualify a woman who indulges in these practices from marrying a priest, which would be the case if she would have been understood to have lost her virginity through a lesbian act. In other words, homosexual behavior was forbidden. It was not understood in terms of relationships, but in terms of specific acts, at least as far as the law was concerned.

Another compilation of Jewish legal precept, Sifra, suggests an awareness of

same-sex marriage in other cultures. A gloss on Leviticus 18:3 suggests an interpretation for what is meant to be prohibited by the commandment against “copying the practices of the land of Egypt.” The commentary in Sifra defines these “practices” as “a man would marry a man, or a woman marry a woman.” Homosexual marriage was unknown in Egyptian culture, so the reference was probably to Roman practices known to the author (second century BCE).

This evidence is sufficient to prohibit same-sex marriage for Orthodox Judaism, which follows a strict interpretation of Jewish law. Because of the differences in the ancient laws, which are stricter for men, Conservative rabbis have suggested the possibility of accepting same-sex marriage for women more readily than for men. But in general, non-Orthodox denominations include a doctrine of “tradition and change” which requires that the wisdom of contemporary times must be weighed alongside the dictates of ancient law. These denominations would therefore consider the purposes and values of marriage before deciding whether same-sex marriage would be acceptable.

The organization of Reform rabbis, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), made news at its 1996 convention by easily passing a measure supporting civil marriage for gays and lesbians and opposing any legislative enactment like the Defense of Marriage Act. Yet the CCAR did not vote in favor of religious marriage for gays and lesbians, but referred the discussion to committee, where it remained for sev-

eral years until its passage in 1999. A union of Orthodox rabbis immediately denounced the Reform initiative.

## The Reconstructionist Approach

The Reconstructionist movement, which has long been in the vanguard on the issue of gay and lesbian rights, publicly supports civil and religious ceremonies for same-sex couples. The case that Robin Shahar brought to the Supreme Court in *Shahar v. Bowers* cited the acceptance of same-sex marriage in Reconstructionist Judaism as support for a public employee who claimed that she was fired from her position because she participated in a same-sex marriage ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

The official statement of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) has left willingness to perform religious ceremonies up to the conscience of the individual rabbi, and expressed unequivocal support for efforts to legalize civil marriage for same-sex couples.<sup>4</sup> In Reconstructionist Judaism, same-sex marriage is understood as a religious value because it provides economic justice, creates stable, committed relationships, and fosters support for child rearing.

## Economic Justice

Marriage in Judaism has an economic basis. As witnessed by the Jewish marriage contract, the *ketubah*, marriage began as an exchange of property: A man would “give” his daughter in marriage to another man. Her economic value was determined by her

sexual status: Virgins were worth more than widows, and virginity had to be substantiated or the terms of the contract could be renegotiated. In exchange, the husband would provide the basic necessities of life for his wife, who was then his property.<sup>5</sup> While a notion of women as property is offensive to modern sensibilities, the Jewish marriage contract provided economic protection for women at a time when choices were limited. Jewish marriage contracts are clearly designed to establish economic well-being for the parties involved.

The political and economic emancipation of women over the past few centuries has changed the terms of the economics of marriage. With those changes have come a variety of changes in the Jewish marriage contract. While traditional Jews still use the ancient *ketubah* contract (which is the only contract currently valid in Israel), contemporary contracts have been written that omit any economic factors, assuming that women no longer need these ancient protections.

In contrast, civil marriage still has great economic significance. For many gay men and lesbians, the reason to fight for same-sex marriage is indeed economic. Married couples automatically share property and inherit from one another; are defined as next of kin in medical decision-making; are allowed to adopt each other's children; receive pension and health benefits; can file joint tax returns; and marriage also provides citizenship for immigrant spouses. The absence of these benefits has caused severe financial hardship to gay and lesbian couples. The traditional

Jewish recognition of the economic basis of marriage gives validation to the Reconstructionist support of gay marriage on the principle of economic justice.

## Public Commitment

Marriage has other purposes in Judaism. Marriage is also about love. It is an opportunity to give communal support to a committed partnership between two individuals. It is a chance to express faith in the relationship and in the community that supports it. Marriage celebrates the religious values of long-term commitment, faithfulness and the willingness to share life's joys and sorrows. The nature of the commitment may no longer be about a woman's protection by and subservience to a man, but rather emphasizes equality between the partners, yet the committed nature of the relationship is paramount and enforces deeply held religious values.

There is no difference, in the case of these religious values, between heterosexual and same-sex marriage. The partners pledge the same commitment to love and devotion, in the presence of a loving community. And there is no evidence to show that the intent to make a lasting commitment is different in either case. Same-sex couples seek to be married within the Jewish tradition for the same reasons that heterosexual couples do: They see this public declaration of their commitment in religious terms. Same-sex couples know that the state does not at this time validate their marriages, but they want to be considered married in the eyes of God and

the Jewish people. They are looking to invest the ceremony with religious meaning. The principle of religious equality espoused by the Reconstructionist movement requires that these expressions of love be given the same societal validation, regardless of the genders of the partners involved.

Reconstructionist Judaism rejects differences based on gender in the wedding ceremony. Equal partners exchange rings and vows; both parties sign the marriage contract and they are often pronounced life partners rather than the traditional husband and wife. Often, both partners break a glass at the conclusion of the wedding ceremony. This egalitarian approach defines a marriage ceremony that is a transaction of interdependence between equals and removes any assumption that those equals must have different genders.

## **Pro-natalism**

The other main purpose of marriage from a Jewish perspective is to control and encourage procreation. In today's society, procreation outside of marriage is not stigmatized as greatly as it once was, although single mothers still receive serious approbation from society. Married people without children are also more common, and childlessness within marriage is more acceptable. But Jewish communal values are strongly pro-natalist. The shrinking of the Jewish community through the Nazi genocide on the one hand and factors of assimilation on the other produce a strong communal value in support of having and raising children. The Jew-

ish population has remained stable over the past few decades. Jews form a very small percentage of the world population. The threat of extinction makes Jewish leaders passionately committed to population growth, despite larger societal concerns.

While many people assume that same-sex marriages are childless, this is far from the truth. Stereotypic notions of gay antipathy to children are slowly being eroded. The availability of children for adoption to single parents (and even to gay couples), the growing awareness and acceptance of alternative insemination methods, and the presence of children from previous heterosexual unions make children commonplace in gay and lesbian communities. In the Jewish community in particular, one can speak of a gay and lesbian baby boom.<sup>6</sup> Gay and lesbian Jews are often attracted to involvement in the Jewish community because of their desire for children. And this desire is often connected to a wish to marry, for legal protection for the children if for no other reason.

Same-sex marriage promotes "family values"—pro-natalism, communal involvement and monogamy. It is an issue of economic justice and gender equality. It is an issue of public policy that directly involves clergy, and individual clergy already perform ceremonies of commitment for same-sex couples that have yet to be recognized by civil law. These factors establish a warrant for Reconstructionist Judaism to define same-sex marriage as a deeply held religious belief, and on that basis to claim the right to perform same-sex marriages as a dimension of religious

liberty. Similar arguments could be made by other denominations that have publicly performed and supported same-sex marriages.

## **A Religious Liberty Approach**

Legal scholars interested in same-sex marriage have been reluctant to argue for same-sex marriage based on this strategy. Their reluctance stems from several factors. They are skeptical about using religious arguments for determining public policy. Efforts to establish the right to marry based on religious liberty have failed in the past. And recent court rulings have begun to place limits on claims of religious liberty. Yet it is precisely for these reasons that this strategy should be employed, in order to challenge restrictions on religious liberty and the role of religion in public life.

Many liberal religious denominations are reluctant to demand public policies that recognize their religious beliefs. In recent years, progressive religious people have been hesitant to involve themselves in the public policy debate, while conservative religious people have spoken out strongly and decisively, powerfully influencing policies governing issues like abortion and gay rights. Perhaps the progressive voices have been silent because they believe that these are issues of privacy. Or perhaps they have forgotten the role that progressive religious voices played in issues like civil rights and U.S. interventions in Latin America. Or perhaps it is because of their understanding of the doctrine of separation of church and state.<sup>7</sup>

This reluctance is particularly mis-

guided in the case of marriage, where religious leaders are given the authority to preside over a civil function. Furthermore, a religious liberty argument does not suggest that a particular religion's values be universally accepted, only that those values be recognized as valid and given respect in the public sphere.

A religious liberty argument also assumes the right of religious people to express their values in the public arena. It is an abdication of responsibility for religious leaders not to speak out about moral issues. The anti-establishment clause in the First Amendment suggests that no particular religious belief should have the authority of state power. It nowhere implies that those with moral values based on religious commitment should not make a persuasive case in the public arena in favor of those values. It only suggests that no particular religious group has the power to determine public policy based on its beliefs. A democratic system requires the full participation of all its citizens in the making of public policy. And moral considerations cannot be omitted from democratic deliberation if we are to make policies that promote liberty and justice.<sup>8</sup>

## **Free Exercise and the Right to Marry**

The courts' rejection of free exercise arguments for polygamy in the past suggests that compelling state interest outweighs religious liberty as it relates to defining a right to marry. But there have been challenges to this judicial perspective,<sup>9</sup> and it is not unreasonable to argue that the 1878 ruling on polyga-

my should also be reconsidered as an abridgement of religious liberty. Constitutional law professor Mark Strasser points out that Native American polygamous unions have been recognized by some states under full faith and credit.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not there is a compelling state interest against polygamous unions should not necessarily determine whether there is a compelling state interest in prohibiting same-sex unions, however. These unions should be viewed on their own merit on the basis of religious liberty strongly supported by religious values.

Another argument against this strategy is that recent court decisions have begun to limit religious liberty, as in the 1990 *Employment Division v. Smith* case that prohibited religious use of peyote by Native American churches.<sup>11</sup> Constitutional scholar David Kairys suggests that this Supreme Court ruling has set a precedent that limits free exercise in the case of non-majoritarian and unpopular practices, and cautions us to be concerned about these limitations on religious freedom that the conservative court has begun to enact.<sup>12</sup> A religious liberty case on same-sex marriage would give supporters of a broader reading of religious liberty an opportunity to articulate their arguments publicly, and a chance to raise the right of individuals to have their religious beliefs and practices accommodated by society, even if these are not the beliefs and practices of the majority.

## Other Strategies

In addition to making the religious

liberty argument, religious groups might also employ other strategies to support same-sex marriage. Public protest and resistance would give religious people opportunities to express outrage about the injustice of the laws and attitudes that prohibit same-sex couples from marrying. They would demonstrate the prophetic function of religion: to show a society when its laws are unjust and must be changed.

There are several situations that would call forth such strategies. For example, legislators have proposed arresting clergy who perform same-sex marriages in states where these ceremonies are not legal. Clergy who would submit to arrest for performing a same-sex marriage could challenge this proposal. Such acts of civil disobedience would surely bring attention to this issue. Religious denominations could also consider challenging the Defense of Marriage Act in court, because it too could be viewed as religious discrimination against denominations that recognize same-sex marriages.

Public support (in the form of friends-of-the-court briefs) for Robin Shahar's stance in *Shahar v. Bowers* is another vehicle for making religious voices heard on this issue. And religious groups could be writing letters to the editor and opinion columns in the press to express their view that same-sex marriage is a matter of religious liberty.

Several groups have generated "declarations of support" for same-sex marriage, garnering hundreds of signatures. Supportive clergy could also perform highly visible same-sex ceremonies on college campuses where there has been



controversy over the use of chapels for such ceremonies, and particularly at Duke University, which ruled that only clergy whose denominations supported these ceremonies could perform same-sex marriages in their chapel. Clergy might also consider a more radical strategy suggested by Rabbi Jane Litman, who refuses to sign any marriage licenses for heterosexuals until same-sex couples are given the right to marry.

Together, these strategies for same-sex marriage based on religious liberty and in opposition to religious discrimination are critical for religious denominations to pursue. Such an approach based on religious values like economic justice and support for building family networks would strengthen the position of liberal religious groups in their efforts to take a role in deliberations over public policy. It would support the idea that religious liberty is a concept that needs to be broadened in scope rather than limited in our society. And it would establish the right to marry as a significant dimension of religious liberty. By publicly advocating same-sex marriage through legal and political strategies, religious denominations could create new possibilities for conversations in the public sphere that acknowledge the crucial role of religious ethics in determining public policy.

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1. For an overview of the legal issues related to same-sex marriage and the Hawaii case, see William Eskridge, *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1996) and Mark Strasser, *Legally Wed:*

*Same-Sex Marriage and the Constitution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

2. For articles about this debate, see two anthologies: Andrew Sullivan, ed., *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con, A Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage: The Moral and Legal Debate* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997).

3. *Shahar v. Bowers*, 70 F.3d 1218, 1223 (11th Cir. 1995). Reconstructionist rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum performed the ceremony in question. Shahar lost the case at the federal district level, but has decided to appeal to the Supreme Court. If the Court decides to hear the case, a religious discrimination argument will be part of the argument presented by Shahar's lawyers, as it was in the lower courts.

4. *Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position. The Report of the Reconstructionist Commission on Homosexuality* (Wyncote, PA, 1993), 40-41.

5. Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

6. See Christie Balka, "Thoughts on Lesbian Parenting and the Challenge to Jewish Communities," *Bridges* 3 (1993): 57-65.

7. See Robert Booth Fowler, *Religion and Politics in America* (Metuchen, NJ: The American Theological Library Association and Scarecrow Press, 1985), 175.

8. For a thorough discussion of the need for moral values in public debates, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Sissela Bok, *Common Values* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Mensch and Alan Freeman, *The Politics of Virtue*

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). See also Phillip E. Hammond, *With Liberty for All: Freedom of Religion in the United States* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Hammond argues for an expanded concept of religious liberty that embraces the rights of conscience, suggesting conscience rather than religious freedom as the warrant for same-sex marriages; see pages 76-79.

9. Mark Strasser points out that William O. Douglas, in his dissent in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* 406 U.S. 205, 247 (1972), commented that this decision would eventuate in overturning *Reynolds v. United States* 98 U.S. 145 (1878), which banned polygamy (65 n. 87).

10. *Ibid.*, 113.

11. The U.S. Congress responded to this case by passing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA 1993). The Supreme Court reiterated its position in *Boerne v. Flores* in 1997, which ruled that Congress exceeded its power in passing RFRA. RFRA was problematic legislation, as it shifted the burden of proof to the states to show compelling interest, rather than on the challenger to prove discrimination.

12. *Employment Division v. Smith* 494 U.S. 872 (1990). For a fuller discussion of the implications of this case for religious liberty of non-majoritarian traditions, see David Kairys, *With Liberty and Justice for Some: A Critique of the Conservative Supreme Court* (New York: Free Press, 1993), chapter 4.

# This Sacred Work

BY LAURIE KAHN

**I**n the past fifteen years of my work as a psychotherapist, I have specialized in treating survivors of trauma, and in training therapists who work with trauma. Ironically, I have never had that much interest in helping people. I was not one to whom friends came for advice. Nor was I the family mediator, or my mother's confidant.

I am not by nature a caretaker. My children seldom sit down to a hot breakfast cooked with tender loving care. More likely, they leave the house with a Pop Tart in their mouths while they sling their backpacks over their shoulders. I holler "I love you" from the second floor. They slam the door and walk at a clip to school because we have all overslept.

So why did I choose this work, if not out of a strong desire to help or care for people in their times of need?

## Confronting Trauma

My clients have included survivors of childhood abuse, incest and neglect, political prisoners who have been tortured, children of Holocaust survivors, veterans of war, victims of rape and domestic violence, and those who witness violence.

A Native American term for trauma

is "a loss of spirit." Bessel Van der Kolk, a professor who has studied trauma, describes it as a "disorder of hope." What makes a life experience traumatic is not solely the severity of the human violation, it is also the extent to which meaning — cherished beliefs about life, love and the divine order — are shattered. The repair of these ruptures and the restoration of meaning form a crucial part of my work with clients.

So am I, as a psychotherapist, to be a sage, a shaman, or a rabbi? Can I repair the soul of the survivor? No, I set a much more humble task for myself. It is the task of being fully human within a respectful relationship — a relationship that honors the gifts and capacities of the client and fans the sparks of spirit as they emerge.

## Collaborative Relationship

This relationship stands in contrast to the abuse of power that trauma survivors have experienced. It is a collaborative relationship, one in which my own mistakes are acknowledged. Healing happens not from a kind of ministering from me but from something that happens between us.

*Tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, or *tikkun atzmi*, the inner process of healing, moves into an interpersonal

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context. Because trauma occurs in the context of a relationship, it must be healed in the context of a compassionate relationship. We create together a sacred space where healing can begin.

Sustaining this healing relationship challenges every skill I possess. Trauma clients do not walk graciously into this space. For survivors of trauma, caring relationships are fraught with danger and betrayal. Often, those who professed to care have wreaked havoc on the sense of safety and trust. So the olive branch of care, respect and compassion is often thrown on the ground many times before my clients can pick it up.

## **Holding on to Wholeness**

The pain of betrayal, camouflaged in many forms, posits itself in the midst of our therapeutic connection. Hostility, distrust, and withdrawal, scars from abuse and horror, must be welcomed, understood, and transformed in order to enable a relationship that facilitates healing to emerge. It is my job to hold onto a belief in the survivor's spirit and wholeness, and not to be fooled by the many maneuvers that defend the vulnerable parts of the client. I pray for the wisdom and patience to sustain my commitment to this work.

My process often resembles a meditation in which I am constantly asked to go inside and acknowledge and sooth parts of myself. These parts are often provoked as clients jab at my competency and test my trustworthiness again and again. I must tolerate my own fears and injuries that are often stirred by

the poignancy expressed by my clients.

I am often reminded that we are on this journey together, that the boundaries between client and helper are both real and not real. I remain humbled and recapture my awe at the courage of my clients and feel a deep respect for the leap of faith that trauma survivors make just to walk into my office and to return week after week. Prayer, awe, and reflection are what sustain my compassion.

## **Witnessing the Story**

As the establishment of a trusting relationship evolves, the next part of the journey is undertaken. The story must be told. The telling may take many forms. It is possible that the story of betrayal has never been told. Abuse and trauma are often riddled with undeserved shame, forcing survivors into isolation with their daunting experiences. The therapist's challenge is to be a witness to the story. Stories are not a stranger to Jewish tradition. Stories of trauma and abuse present special challenges.

Bearing witness is the willingness to hear with your heart another's experience of pain and suffering. It is the willingness to be disturbed by someone's life experience. It is the opposite of indifference. The telling is a pivotal time in the healing process. Through the telling, the narrative can be transformed.

One client, Rachael, came to therapy reporting that her father had sexually abused her beginning at the age of 3. When she was 12, the abuse stopped and her father began abusing her

younger sister. Rachael feared that she had colluded in her father's turning his attention to her sister. Rachael was filled with self-loathing. She wondered how she could be so disloyal to her sister and do such a horrible thing.

As the story was told and retold, Rachael began to have compassion for herself as a 12 year old, and could see through my eyes how vulnerable and young she was. Through many conversations, she came to understand the almost unbearable psychological impact that occurs when one of your primary caretakers to whom you are also very attached is the perpetrator of abuse. Rachael's story changed from a self-denigrating one to one where she held compassion for both herself and her sister as they tried to survive such a devastating betrayal.

## **Indifference Is Not an Option**

The witnessing of the story is the most difficult part of the journey for me. I often want to flee. I do not lose sight of the privilege it is to be trusted with an untold story, yet it does not mitigate my sense of dread as my clients share the details of betrayal. I am asked to witness stories where "love" is so twisted that it becomes unrecognizable, and where children's innocence is randomly taken with no apparent remorse. I am confronted by the human capacity for cruelty. For both of us, the divine order seems momentarily irrelevant. My heart becomes filled with grief. Although we therapists are cautioned not to become "too involved," indifference to cruelty and atrocities

would numb my spirit, making the work of healing through compassion impossible.

In my moments of doubt, coupled with my strong desire for relief from the pain, I fantasize about other professions. Then I wonder, what if no one wanted to listen to the atrocities of the Holocaust? What if we turned a deaf ear because it was too hard to hear?

Noemi Ban, in a speech entitled "Lessons of the Holocaust," explains:

As a survivor and a witness to the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, I need an assurance that the memories of my dear ones, and the memories of millions of other innocent dear ones, will never be forgotten. My hope is no matter how horrific a memory, or haunting a feeling to which you may be asked to bear witness, that in your heart, you will know that there is the strength to go on, and the strength to give hope.

I realize that my work is not just a craft but also the fulfilment of a moral obligation to hear the stories of trauma survivors. The role of witness takes on the character of a mitzvah, a necessity to honor our past and humanity. I recommit to this sacred work, willing to listen with my heart and to hold the hope when others are not able.

## **The Power of Community**

Sustaining the spirit of those doing the witnessing is also a challenge. "Self-care" is a popular concept for caretak-

ers and therapists. However, I am not a strong advocate. I am a believer in community care.

As Jews, we have learned to cherish the power and healing of community. Seven years ago, I began facilitating consultation groups for therapists who work with trauma. It was my hope to create a community that would sustain therapists, a place where therapists could speak to the impact this work has on their soul and their beliefs about self, relationship, the divine order and hope — a place where our cumulative grief could be held collectively. Al-

though we see our clients in the privacy of our offices, I believe that bearing witness is a courageous act that is healing and restorative. However, it is not a task to be undertaken alone. Community tames the terror. We do not say Kaddish alone. The community helps hold the grief that is too much for an individual to carry.

The work of repair, of *tikkun*, remains our challenge. I chose this profession because it is a privilege to do this work, because it is an honor to be a companion to people on their journey, and because it is sacred work.

# Mystical Union and Social Change: A Skeptic Reconsiders

BY LAWRENCE BUSH

“[R]eligion owes a genuine debt to those who have called attention to the danger in our own day of drugging the human with the opiate of other-worldliness. The effect of such an opiate . . . is to keep us from the attainment of salvation on earth.”

—Mordecai Kaplan

*The Meaning of God  
in Modern Jewish Religion*<sup>1</sup>

“You open our eyes to see  
You have made us free. . .  
Beyond imagination  
Your presence fills creation.”

—Shefa Gold

“Morning Will Unfold for Us”

**D**oes God exist outside the human mind? Classical Reconstructionist theology, in a historic compromise with humanism, tends to limit its sightings of God to the realm of “godly” human deeds, relationships and emotions. “Godhood can have no meaning for us,” wrote Mordecai Kaplan, “apart from human ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty,

interwoven in a pattern of holiness.”<sup>2</sup> A humanistic theology like this soothes the agnostic who lurks in the minds of most modern people and permits them to observe holiday and worship rituals, and to exalt their ethical and moral commitments, without having to make a real “leap of faith.”

For some who enter into deep ritual practice, however, the “leap” nevertheless happens through a mystical “encounter with God.” In a state of altered consciousness induced by prayer, meditation, dance, fasting, sensory deprivation or other means, people experience the dissolution of their ego boundaries (*bittul ha-yesh*, the “annihilation of the self,” is the Hebrew term) and feel themselves merging with some underlying “super intelligence” or “force of love” or “absolute reality” that seems nearly impossible to describe. For minds comfortable with theological metaphors, “the presence of God” seems the most apt phrase for this astounding merger experience — which is almost always accompanied by the conviction that the unity being perceived, the presence be-

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ing felt, is more real and fundamental than what we daily perceive as separate-ness, boundary and polarity.

## Evidence of God?

These direct mystical experiences, along with second-hand accounts,<sup>3</sup> are most often interpreted as evidence that God exists independently of our minds. The universality of mystical union experiences across religious cultures makes it seem plausible that God may be out there as an abiding (if coy) being whose presence we can actually encounter through prodigious religious effort.

For Doubting Thomases (or Skeptical Shloimes) like myself, however, mystical experience is no more a “proof” of God’s presence than those universal, near-death reports about the “tunnel” and the “white light” are proof of there being consciousness after death. Subjective experience, we argue, is notoriously unreliable as proof of objective reality, and the universal content of mysticism (or of near-death hallucinations) may say far less about God (or the afterlife) than about the wiring of the human brain.

On the other hand, I am aware that the Torah’s fundamental passages about the Covenant are essentially stories of mystical encounter: Abraham in Haran (Gen. 12: 1-8) and, with Sarah, by the terebinths of Mamre in Hebron (Gen. 18); Isaac in Gerar (Gen. 26: 2-6) and Beersheba (Gen. 26: 24); Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28: 12-19) and Peniel (Gen. 32: 25-31); Moses in Midian (Ex. 3: 3-6), the whole people at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20: 15-18), etc. These stories

have been a binding ingredient of Jewish peoplehood, so I feel obliged, as a Jew drawn to Reconstructionism, to approach them with an interpretive rather than dismissive cast of mind.

In addition, as a user of psychedelic drugs during my teen years, I have had my own exalting (and frightening) experiences of mystical union that directly challenged my rationalism and contributed to my self-knowledge. I feel personally compelled, therefore, to investigate, rather than ignore, the mystical experience by asking: Is there a way to interpret this experience from a humanistic or “this-worldly” perspective? Does the mystical union experience yield genuine transformation in people, so that it might be harnessed for what Kaplan called “salvation on earth”?

## Psychedelic Mysticism

During the 1960s, research with psychedelic drugs provided reinforcement for this skeptical view by revealing that mystical glimpses of “God” are not exclusively gifts bestowed upon the pious and the disciplined but can be commonly induced by tinkering with brain chemistry. Researchers Walter Pahnke and William Richards, among others, worked with LSD and advocated its use as a psychotherapeutic tool before it was fully outlawed in 1967. They described nine categories of “mystical consciousness” associated with the effects of LSD upon the brain. Among these were:

- “Unity” — “The empirical ego . . . seems to die away or fade away while pure consciousness of what is being experienced paradoxically remains and seems



to expand as a vast inner world is encountered”;

- “Transcendence of space and time” — “a radical change in perspective in which [the subject] suddenly feels . . . outside of time, in eternity or infinity, beyond both past and future”;
- “Sense of sacredness” — “a non-rational, intuitive, hushed, palpitant response in the presence of inspiring realities. . . . a profound sense of holiness and sacredness.”<sup>4</sup>

Such generic descriptions of mystical union could apply equally to the experiences of Abraham Abulafia (13th-century Jewish kabbalist) and Theresa of Avila (16th-century Roman Catholic saint), Milarepa (10th-11th-century Tibetan Buddhist) and al Ghazali (11th-century Islamic theologian), Black Elk (20th century Oglala shaman) and Starhawk (contemporary Wiccan teacher).

## Drugs Challenge Religion

Psychedelic drugs gave pause to some religious leaders about their own beliefs. Writing in *Commentary* magazine (August, 1966), future Jewish Renewal leader Rabbi Zalman Schachter observed: “When I can undergo the deepest cosmic experience via some minuscule quantity of organic alkaloids or LSD, then the whole validity of my ontological assertions is in doubt.” Schachter went on to decide that

the psychedelic experience can be not only a challenge but a support of my faith. After seeing what really happens at the point where all is One . . . I can also see Judaism

in a new and amazing light. The questions to which the Torah is the answer are recovered in me.

To my reading, however, the retrieval of “questions” seems less telling and significant than the loss of “ontological assertions” when we are speaking about theology.

With at least one of every five baby-boomers having experimented with psychedelic drugs<sup>5</sup> — many with results similar to, or at least on a continuum with, Schachter’s — psychedelics should be seen as a key catalyst of boomer spirituality, which often involves little commitment to formal religious belief systems but more commitment to the simple “high” of mystical union.<sup>6</sup>

## Spirituality and the Brain

Today, more sophisticated research about the physiology of that mystical union experience is being conducted by brain researchers and evaluated by evolutionary biologists. Drs. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili, for example, have taken SPECT camera photographs<sup>7</sup> of the brains of devout Buddhist practitioners at the height of their meditations and of Franciscan nuns caught up in devotional prayer. In their book, *Why God Won’t Go Away*,<sup>8</sup> these researchers shape “a hypothesis that suggests that spiritual experience, at its very root, is intimately interwoven with human biology. That biology,” they suggest, “in some way . . . compels the spiritual urge.”<sup>9</sup>

The authors postulate that the state of mystical union involves the quiet-

ing of the orientation association area of the brain (OAA), the posterior superior parietal lobe — “a small lump of gray matter nestled in the top rear section of the brain.” “The primary job of the OAA,” they write,

is to orient the individual in physical space — it keeps track of which end is up, helps us judge angles and distances, and allows us to negotiate safely the dangerous physical landscape around us. To perform this crucial function, it must first generate a clear, consistent cognition of the physical limits of the self. . . to sort you out from the infinite not-you that makes up the rest of the universe.<sup>10</sup>

When the OAA is dramatically quieted, they suggest, it interprets “its failure to find the borderline between the self and the outside world . . . to mean that such a distinction doesn’t exist . . .” The brain then perceives the self as “endless and intimately interwoven with everyone and everything the mind senses. And this perception . . . feel[s] utterly and unquestionably real.”<sup>11</sup>

## **The Chemistry of Transcendence**

Newberg and D’Aquili go on to detail the structure of the brain and how its “systems,” “association areas” and “operators” function during times of spiritual arousal. They speculate that “the neurological machinery of transcendence may have arisen from the neural circuitry that evolved for mat-

ing and sexual experience.”<sup>12</sup> However,

the strong survival advantages of religious belief make it very likely that evolution would enhance the neurological wiring that makes transcendence possible. This inherited ability to experience spiritual union is the real source of religion’s staying power. It anchors religious belief in something deeper and more potent than intellect and reason; it makes God a reality that can’t be undone by ideas, and that never grows obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the OAA, which shapes our sense of boundary and separateness, evolved because of the advantages it conferred for navigating through a dangerous material world. From an evolutionary perspective, our capacity for mystical union and our usual sense of “separateness” are coequal aspects of human consciousness, with neither more “illusory,” “real,” or human than the other.

## **Where Is God?**

Does the mapping of the mystical union experience within the brain disprove the objective existence of God, or of the “super intelligence” that people encounter at the height of mystical transport? To a skeptic, the identification of this encounter as a mental process that can be triggered through drugs or other “artificial” means firmly places the burden of proof for God’s existence upon the theologian’s shoulders. Newberg and D’Aquili, however,

are agnostic about the implications of their work. While “all spirituality and any experience of the reality of God,” they write, “[can] be reduced to a fleeting rush of electro-chemical blips and flashes, racing along the neural pathways of the brain . . . brain science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, at least not with simple answers.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, they devote much time to resurrecting classic arguments for God’s existence and seem inclined to believe that the mystical encounter with what they call “Absolute Unitary Being” is an evolutionary gift that permits us, uniquely among the species, to commune with a super consciousness that may actually exist outside the boundaries of the brain:

After years of scientific study, and careful consideration of our results, [we believe] that we saw evidence of a neurological process that has evolved to allow us humans to transcend material existence and acknowledge and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived of as an absolute, universal reality that connects us to all that is.<sup>15</sup>

## Humanistic Implications?

By confining their theology, however, to belief in “a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves,” Newberg and D’Aquili do stay within the bounds of humanism. At this point, a skeptic might be sitting pretty, reinforced in his or her dismissal of mysticism as a

kind of boutique version of what Karl Marx famously called the “opiate of the people.” However, just as locating God within the brain demands a reconsideration of all theology, so does it demand a reconsideration of the humanistic implications of the mystical union experience — for if the evolutionary process, indeed, “wired” the human mind for spirituality because it served some positive purpose in human survival, then the typical secular dismissal of religion as merely a culturally constructed escapist fantasy loses validity. The thoughtful skeptic is challenged to ask: What is the survival value of our brain’s capacity for mystical union — and how might we harness it for positive social impact?

It is worthwhile noting here that contemporary scientists other than Newberg and D’Aquili also believe there to be a genetic predisposition to religious belief and transcendent experience in the human animal. Harvard University’s Edward O. Wilson, for example, in his book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, observes a “semiotic resemblance between animal submissive behavior on the one hand and human obeisance to religious and civil authority on the other. . . . True to their primate heritage, people are easily seduced by confident, charismatic leaders, especially males. That predisposition is strongest in religious organizations.” Wilson then adopts a more pen- sive tone:

The symbol-forming human mind, however, never stays satisfied with raw apish feeling in any emotional

realm. It strives to build cultures that are maximally rewarding in every dimension. In religion, there is ritual and prayer to contact the supreme being directly, consolation from coreligionists to soften otherwise unbearable grief, explanations of the unexplainable, and the oceanic sense of communion with the larger whole that otherwise surpasses understanding. . . .

The human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology. Acceptance of the supernatural conveyed a great advantage throughout prehistory, when the brain was evolving.<sup>16</sup>

Pascal Boyer of Washington University, author of *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, also considers the human mind to be religiously inclined, based on its own structural functioning. It should be no surprise, Boyer concludes, that “religious concepts and behaviors have persisted for millennia, probably much longer, and display similar themes the world over. These concepts just happen to be optimal in the sense that they activate a variety of [mental] systems in a way that makes [the concepts] transmission possible.”<sup>17</sup>

What, then, might be the specific survival advantages conferred through the development of a brain that is capable of generating the feelings and perceptions that lie along the continuum from sexual bonding to mystical ecstasy? I am by no stretch of the imagination an evolutionary biologist or psychologist, but it seems appropri-

ate even for a lay person to affirm that the capacity to connect strongly with others, sexually as well as for purposes of hunting, gathering, childrearing, protection, and mutual aid, would have offered obvious survival advantages to early humans. A brain that can be induced through such activities as singing and ecstatic dancing (which are thought to be as ancient as our species) to produce, in Newberg and D’Aquili’s words, “a softening of the self” — along with a conviction that this merger experience is terribly important and more real than the strongly bounded sense of self — is a brain strongly susceptible to communal bonding and all the survival advantages it confers.

## Contemporary Advantages

Evolutionary advantages aside, Pahnke and Richards, the LSD researchers, also described “positive changes in attitude and/or behavior” among their experimental subjects during and after their mystical union experiences:

Increased personality integration is reported, including a renewed sense of personal worth coupled with a relaxation of habitual mechanisms of ego defense. . . . [Subjects described a] deeply felt positive mood [marked by] tenderness, infinite love, penetrating peace, eternal blessing and unconditional acceptance on one hand, and on the other . . . unspeakable awe, overflowing joy, primeval humility, inexpressible gratitude and boundless devotion.<sup>18</sup>

Given that psychedelic experimentation quickly became illegal, studies such as Pahnke's and Richard's involved only small samplings and were not to be repeated. Nevertheless, to the extent that we can generalize from experiences of drug-induced mystical union to those induced by traditional religious methods, it seems that the experience itself can have very positive effects upon people.

## Taking Risks

There are also, of course, psychological dangers inherent in the experience. The Talmud (*BT Hagigah* 14b) describes mystical merger as a "garden" and tells of four who entered it, with only one emerging intact: "Ben Azzai cast a look and died. . . . Ben Zoma looked and became demented. . . . Aher mutilated the shoots [i.e., he became a heretic]. Rabbi Akiva departed unhurt."<sup>19</sup> The aforementioned Jewish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia similarly described the "spirits of jealousy" that surrounded him during his mystical experiences: Over the course of a fifteen-year period, he was "confronted with fantasy and error. My mind was totally confused . . . like a blind man, groping around at noon" while "Satan was at my right hand to mislead me."<sup>20</sup> It is presumably because of these hazards of mystically induced mental disorder that the kabbalistic tradition discouraged mystical pursuits until the age of 40, when a person is rooted enough in life and selfhood to deal with the risk.

Gullibility, lack of discernment and otherworldly escapism are even more common problems that emerge from,

or at least are strongly reinforced by, the experience of mystical union. Many thousands of baby-boomers, tingling with drug-induced perceptions of there being a "greater reality" than the bounded world that we usually perceive, came to believe sincerely and with all their might that a 14-year-old boy from India could alter their consciousness with a poke to their eyeballs, or that the dedicated pursuit of Transcendental Meditation would enable them to defy gravity and levitate, or that "anything is possible" when it comes to healing the human body, or that our waking reality is a veil of illusion. Science and skepticism came to be perceived by many as forms of blindness, close-mindedness, even malevolence, rather than as critical tools for problem-solving and positive social development. Millennial scheming, or the messianic pretensions of one guru or another, often became a stand-in for the hard work of influencing people to make social change.

Even today, when religious organizations have stepped forcefully onto the American political landscape from both the right and the left, the people who are most deeply involved with spirituality are often dismissed by secular social activists, sometimes rightly so, as wishful-thinking, self-involved and "above it all" politically. Much of the rhetoric of mysticism, moreover, speaks of "acceptance," "loss of self" and "surrender of attachment" — hardly the typical passions of political struggle.

## Humanistic Mysticism

Nevertheless, the skeptical view of

mystical union as a mere “opiate of the people” too easily discounts the role of personal transformation in social change. Given the history of political change being corrupted by power-hungry, paranoid or otherwise “unenlightened” leaders, it should seem obvious today that creating a more merciful, equitable, and environmentally responsible social system requires not only the forceful reorganization of property ownership and power relations but the cultivation of *rahmones* (compassion, or “womb-consciousness”) in human beings. The maternal, loving, unfearing side of our nature needs to be developed; the *yetzer hara*, the lustful, egotistical aspect of our nature, needs to be tamed and directed into socially constructive channels. Judging from centuries of testimony about the mystical union experience, it may call forth those very aspects of human self-awareness that make us into loving, open-minded beings.

Could the experience of mystical union, therefore, be harnessed as a therapeutic tool? Would the experience still overawe us and produce its transformative effects if we interpreted mysticism as an exercise of the mind and an expression of its wonderful potential, rather than as an encounter with something that transcends the human realm?

This shift in definition would not be easy to establish, since the mind itself, at the heights of mystical union, is inclined to make the “leap of faith” and jettison its own rationalistic doubts. Whether that surrender of doubt is a critical catalyst in the *teshuvah* process described by Pahnke and Richards (“increased personality integration,” etc.) is

a question I have yet to see addressed.

Nor have I read even speculation about whether all human brains are capable of experiencing transcendence. Do variations in brain structure and function help inform our political perspectives? What is the relationship in brain function between “mob mentality” and mystical union? Is it the neurological experience of mystical union that produces transformative effects, or is it our interpretation of the neurological experience that counts the most? Presumably, future investigations of “neurotheology” — the relationship between spirituality and the brain — will shed light on some of these questions.

## Transformations

For me, peak experiences of mystical union have come about only through my use of psychedelics, which was confined to my much-too-young teenage years. Even under those conditions, however, the mystical union experience helped define my identity as a social critic — for if, indeed, there is any religious principle in which I believe, it is the principle that the unity of all human beings, and of all living beings, must be reflected in social policy or else “curses” will ensue: “Cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country” (Deut. 28: 16). This is, to me, the most urgent, fundamental “reality principle” expressed in the Torah — but it emerged, for me, from the mystical union experience before it was strongly reinforced by my understanding of Judaism.

LSD mysticism also granted me a perception of the natural world as so poignant in its sentience, complexity and unity that the entire paradigm of material progress through dominance over nature came to seem tainted, small-minded, and fundamentally false. This gave rise to an enduring utopian vision in me of a society in true ecological harmony — a vision that informs, without ideologically determining, my opinions of science, technology, social structures and social possibility.

The fact that consciousness-raising drugs are banned in America — and that “seekers” of that consciousness are liable to spend years in the most soul-deadening environment of all, the penitentiary — testifies to the repressive spirit that I see haunting our ostensibly “free” society. Likewise, the marginalization of mysticism in most mainstream religious settings, at least until the baby-boomers took over in leadership roles, is evidence that an agenda of conformity and self-perpetuation rules many religious groups — an agenda better served by the theological dogma than by transformative spirituality.

## Reconstructing Mysticism

As the Reconstructionist movement seeks to plug into that transformative spirituality by opening its institutions to such practices as spiritual direction, meditation and kabbalistic disciplines, the question looms as to whether rationalism and mysticism can be harnessed together in the name of personal and social change. Certainly, the mys-

tical union experience deserves to be encouraged as a means of tapping into the vast feelings of love, tenderness, awe, and interconnection that are fundamental to our human nature and critical to our survival. To do so, however, we need not “mutilate the shoots,” as Aḥer did in the mystical garden. Mordecai Kaplan’s belief that otherworldly religious practice ultimately obstructs this-worldly salvation should not be ignored in the name of “getting high” on mystical unity. Instead, the transformative possibilities of the mystical unity experience should be guarded, like a *golem*, by our rationalism and our humanism.

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1. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 55.

2. *Ibid.*, 26.

3. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, such contemporary “eyewitness” narratives as Carlos Castaneda’s “Don Juan” books and Par-amahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which recounted supernatural feats as though they were everyday realities, helped convince broad swaths of the baby-boom generation that a mystical encounter and remarkable powers were waiting around the next bend (the next drug, the next guru, the next mantra). Interestingly, it was the non-theological spirituality of Castanedas’ writings, and of the waves of Eastern mysticism that washed across the American “counterculture” in the 1970s, that made them so appealing to many Western baby-boomers, who were skeptical about “God with a white beard” theologies but receptive to the idea of religious “technologies” for exploring altered states of con-

sciousness. As a result, even today, most counterculturalists fail to recognize the kinship between Western religious miracle tales (weeping madonnas, speaking in tongues, etc.), of which we are highly skeptical, and the Eastern religious miracle tales that excited our fancies and underwrote many conversionary experiences decades ago.

4. Walter Pahnke and William Richards, "Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism," *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 5, 1966, available on-line at [www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/pahnke4.htm](http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/pahnke4.htm). At the time of his death in 1972, Pahnke was director of clinical sciences at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center.

5. Reliable statistics about illegal drug use are not so easy to come by, but according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 16 percent of high school seniors reported using LSD in 1975, allegedly the peak year. On college campuses, the rate was very likely higher. Factor in the use of other psychedelic drugs, as well as the very widespread use of marijuana and hashish, and you have among the baby-boomers a very sizeable number who experienced the psychedelic impact of drug use, if not outright mystical union, during their younger days.

6. See my article, "Drugs and Jewish Spirituality: That Was Then, This Is Now," in *Tikkun*, May-June, 1999, reprinted in Charles S. Grob, ed., *Hallucinogens, A Reader* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/

Putnam, 2002) and in Arthur Kurzweil, ed., *Best Jewish Writing 2003* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003).

7. SPECT stands for "single photon emission computed tomography," an imaging tool that can accurately show blood-flow patterns in the brain.

8. Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away* (New York, Ballantine Books, 2001). Dr. D'Aquilli died before the manuscript was completed.

9. *Ibid.*, 8.

10. *Ibid.*, 4-5

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 125.

13. *Ibid.*, 139.

14. *Ibid.*, 149.

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 283-4.

17. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 328-9.

18. Pahnke and Richards, op cit.

19. Translated in H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitsky, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah/The Book of Legends* (New York: Schocken, 1992).

20. Translated by Aryeh Kaplan in Diane M. Sharon, "The Mystic's Experience of God," in Shohama Wiener, ed., *The Fifty-Eight Century: A Jewish Renewal Sourcebook* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996).



# The Jewish Organizing Initiative: How One Small Group of People Is Making a Difference in One Big City

BY MICHAEL JACOBY BROWN

**T**here are many good ideas, suggestions and strategies for new directions in Jewish life in America. But what do you do on Monday morning? What is a practical program that might inspire people to work toward the ideals and traditions of Judaism? The Jewish Organizing Initiative (JOI) in Boston is one attempt to answer that question.

## Where Were the Jews?

I have worked as a community organizer for more than twenty-five years. A number of years ago, I sat under a tree with a few other experienced Jewish community organizers at the Jewish Caucus of the National Organizers Alliance. Why, we asked ourselves, is there no Jewish organization that offers young Jews a path to come into the work of community organizing? There was a Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a

Lutheran Volunteer Corps. The Quakers and Unitarians had service projects. Why not the Jews?

There were lots of Jews working in community and labor organizations — but why was there no organized way for young Jews to come into this business of working for justice as part of a Jewish organization? And if we built such an organization, would anyone show up?

So I listened to a lot of people. Their responses surprised me. Many young adults said they would jump at the chance to spend a year working for justice as part of a Jewish group. I was skeptical, but I kept asking, and I kept getting similar responses.

## Start-Up

I also visited those I thought might be good trainers. Many said they would volunteer their time. Some people in Jewish communal work said it was a

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good idea. Larry Sternberg at the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, for example, said that while they were training Jewish communal workers, he immediately recognized that this was different. He volunteered to help develop a curriculum. Another friend of a friend offered money. Rabbi Rachel Cowan at the Nathan Cummings Foundation offered her support. Maybe we were onto something.

After more one-on-one visits, focus groups to develop details of the program, and lining up community organizing jobs for potential “interns” at \$18,000 per year plus health insurance, we put out a call for people to join. People answered. One young woman drove to Boston from Minnesota for an interview. When the interview was over, I asked what she was going to do. “Drive back,” she said. We had more applicants than we had places. We even had to turn some people away.

## **Fast Forward**

Now, six years later, we have more than fifty alumni. We have leveraged more than \$1 million from Boston area community organizations for stipends to host JOI fellows, and more than \$250,000 in in-kind training and advising by Boston area rabbis, Jewish educators, community organizers and others.

The best part has been seeing people discover the support for justice work in Jewish tradition, make connections with like-minded peers, and get inspired to continue at what is often frus-

trating work. The worst part has been having to turn down many good applicants because we just have a limited number of positions.

## **Small Group, Big Impact**

In only five years, this small organization has had an impact on the Boston Jewish community and on work for justice in the city in general. In the Jewish community, one alumna, seeing the impact of professional staff on other community organizations, developed Keshet, a Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered (GLBT) Jewish organization, where she now serves as director and supervises a JOI fellow. Keshet has received funding from the local Federation and has had a noticeable impact on making the Jewish community more welcoming to GLBT Jews.

JOI alumni have become directors of the New England Jewish Labor Committee, revitalizing an organization that supports low-wage workers and builds support for Israel in the labor movement. JOI alumni, among others, have founded and led Tekiah, a new Jewish activist organization of mostly twenty-somethings, that has taken on progressive political action.

Other JOI alumni have gone to work in the Jewish community, for the Jewish Community Relations Council, Geshet City Boston, and the Workmen’s Circle, as well as teaching teens community organizing skills at various synagogues. JOI alumni have just planned a new Jewish social justice program for themselves, their colleagues, and friends.

Their network has inspired young Jews who often could not find much room in the Jewish community for their Judaism and passion for justice. As one fellow said, “When I came to JOI, I thought the ‘real Judaism’ is this other thing, and if they want it so much, let them have it. JOI has shown me something different, the positive part. Now, it’s me.”

## **Impact and Influence**

In the secular community, an alumna serves as the legislative and political coordinator for the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, where she started as a fellow. Others have served as organizers at the North Shore Labor Council, the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation, the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers, HomeStart, and other social justice organizations. JOI has developed a reputation for developing skilled organizers.

We attracted interest from the African-American community, the Irish community, Quakers and others who are interested in developing something similar for their own communities. They understand that developing leaders in social justice requires people who not only have community organizing skills but who also understand their own heritage, identity and tradition and can draw from these sources.

## **What JOI Does**

JOI recruits young Jewish adults to come to Boston for a year of social jus-

tice work, Jewish learning and community building. In some cases, we help find “fellows” positions at community and labor organizations that agree to hire people JOI accepts. Some fellows already have jobs in various social justice organizations and want to win the JOI fellowship for the Jewish learning, training, inspiration, connections and community it offers. JOI has a competitive application process that requires a written application, letters of reference, and a personal interview. We get many more applicants than we can accept.

JOI offers an intensive program of Jewish learning, reflection on working for justice, and an opportunity to learn from the experiences of peers. Fellows also have to complete a group project “of service to the community” that requires them to exercise leadership within a small group and learn how to get a group to accomplish a task — an important skill for a community organizer or leader!

Most JOI fellows work in secular social justice community and labor organizations. They do so “as Jews” — insofar as they come from the “Jewish Organizing Initiative.” They deal with, as well as reflect on, all the complexities of being a Jew working for justice in mostly non-Jewish low-income organizations. One goal is to develop the leadership of these young Jewish adults — to help them understand what it takes, personally and professionally, to do the day-to-day work for justice.

## **Skilled Group Facilitation**

An experienced community orga-

nizer leads the group in the weekly sessions. Area rabbis, Jewish educators, Jewish communal workers, experienced secular Jewish political activists, political leaders and community and labor organizers back her up. They provide a “holding environment” that helps develop the fellows’ leadership.

Alumni provide another important source of help and advice. Alumni members participate in fundraising, donor visits, and recruitment of potential fellows. Several serve on the board of directors and provide training to fellows.

Altogether, these people create a special Jewish community that combines spirituality, civic engagement, Shabbat celebrations, personal and professional support, networking, fund-raising, mentoring, leadership development, matchmaking, backyard barbecues and more.

## **The Program**

The core “curriculum” is the overall experience, including:

- Daily work (paid or volunteer) in social justice in a real world setting;
- A regularly-meeting group of other Jewish peers from diverse backgrounds but also with similar interest and commitment to Judaism and justice;
- Weekly reflection, training and learning about Judaism, ourselves, building community and practical skills of working for justice;
- Experience in building a small-group community and exercising leadership in that group;
- Jewish ritual, learning, and text study;

- Celebration of Shabbat and Jewish holidays;
- A group project that tests the group’s ability to accomplish a common task of its own choosing;
- Fundraising;
- An opportunity to teach and lead others and participate in the on-going JOI organization in a wide variety of ways — including recruiting and mentoring new fellows, serving on the board, speaking on behalf of JOI at public events, etc.

## **Goals and Principles**

There are certain goal and principles that guide JOI. They are based in part on the strengths of Jewish tradition and on the experience of many community organizing trainers in what has worked in developing new and skillful community organizers.

- Effective work for justice means developing leaders and building powerful organizations. This is the basic strategy for social change that we try to practice. We believe that lack of justice for people stems from their lack of power, and often arises because of the actions of well-intentioned but ill-informed policy-makers and well-intentioned but dysfunctional managers.
- Never do for people what they can do for themselves. This is the “iron rule” of organizing. We try to practice it at all times and encourage the fellows to practice it at work.
- Learning about justice comes from doing the work. JOI provides training in organizing skills, but you need to practice working in a “real world” organiza-

tion — with regular time for group and personal reflection on that experience.

- “Expect but do not accept” bad stuff. We try to inoculate the fellows against “bad stuff” that is likely to happen at work. (The fellows often come into the work for justice with very high ideals and expectations about the organizations they work for.)

- Raising money is part of the job. Fundraising is part of organizing and helps people feel like a part of the organization. We see the fellows as contributors to, more than recipients of, the program.

- Judaism has much to teach us. Jewish tradition is an important source from which to learn the practice and understanding of justice.

- We respect all religious practices of Judaism. We don’t require that people practice in any one way, but expect all to participate and at times lead the group’s Jewish rituals.

- Understanding your Jewish identity makes you a better organizer. If you are going to organize others, it helps to know who you are and where you come from.

- Learning comes from community building. People learn leadership by practicing it in a small group of ten to fifteen people.

- The JOI community is a priority. We are not a cult, but we expect active participation and also recognize that fellows have families, other friends and commitments.

- If someone is in trouble, the group focuses on that person. We also turn out for *simhas!*

- Teamwork is fundamental. The

group project not only provides a chance to learn how to work in a group, but also provides an opportunity to give back to the community.

- Learning comes from one another. Much of what the fellows learn comes from their peers. The program director facilitates that learning and develops the leadership of the fellows and encourages them to take ever increasing responsibility for the group and the larger world.

- “Jews ‘R’ Us.” Your experience or “brand” of Judaism is just as valid as anyone else’s. We encourage fellows to take ownership of Jewish tradition.

## Replicating the Program

What would it take to do something like the JOI in your city? Organizing this program is not rocket science, but it does take serious planning and skillful staff. It takes money to hire a good group facilitator with a strong commitment to Judaism and an understanding of community organizing, not an easy skill set to find. S/he must understand how to develop a sense of community and leadership with a group of young Jewish adults who are used to challenging authority and who come to this “fellowship” with often wildly diverse Jewish backgrounds. It takes about ten people (a minyan) or more — but probably no more than fifteen in each group to get enough “groupness” for effective learning.

Caring supervisors matter. Fellows can be already working in a social justice organization full or part time, as long as they get enough real world work

experience to reflect on it. It helps to have a group of Jewish educators, rabbis, community organizers and leaders to comprise a “holding environment” for the group. It helps to be in a city where young Jewish adults want to live.

It would take at least a month of training in the myriad details (where the God and the devil always lurk) to learn what works — and does not work. Over the years, we have developed a set of expectations, recruitment practices, interview questions, budgets, text studies, retreat agendas, curriculum and training materials, and experience in how to build a group that can

support the fellows and help them learn.

This is one way to help young people build a Jewish community that is not “your father’s Oldsmobile.” Many people are looking to work for meaning more than money. They seek a sense of community, a chance to make a difference in the world, to incorporate their Jewish identity, history, and tradition, and to make a connection to like-minded peers. JOI is one model of a Jewish community that combines spiritual practice, political action, and personal growth in a holistic framework where such people are, in fact, making a difference.

# Hands On with the JOI

BY TALYA WEISBARD

I began my studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College after participating in an intensive program, the Jewish Organizing Initiative (JOI), in Boston. The JOI trains young Jewish activists as community organizers. Twelve of us explored the interconnections between Judaism and social justice work.

Mondays through Thursdays, we worked at various Boston-area non-profit agencies, including NARAL, Parents United for Child Care, the AFL-CIO, and an economic justice agency. On Fridays, and on occasional Shabbat retreats, we met as a group to study the Jewish values underpinning our work. We met powerful members of Boston's political and Jewish communities, received advanced training for our jobs and offered support to each other through personal and professional challenges.

I worked on some fascinating projects through my office, the Irish Immigration Center (what's a nice Jewish girl like me doing . . . ?). My major project for the year was to build up the office's cross-cultural portfolio. My office, founded by an Irish nun who still directs the work of the agency, helps immigrants from everywhere sort their way through the Immigration and Naturalization Service bureaucracy, ap-

ply for visas and citizenship, and find jobs, housing, and counseling services as necessary.

## Improving Relations

In Boston, race relations between Irish, Italians, African-Americans and Jews have been notoriously bad for decades. Unlike some other big cities, where people were forced to mingle through living on the same streets, Boston has a history of very strong ethnic enclaves. In the 1970s, when school busing began during the first effort to create integrated schools, some adults in South Boston (a strongly Irish-American neighborhood) threw stones at African-American schoolchildren riding the buses.

When I began my job, I could not believe there had been that much hate in my lifetime in Boston, a city I generally think of as liberal and tolerant. Many young African-American adults in Boston who lived through these attacks are still hesitant to drive through South Boston to get from home to work, and instead drive halfway around the city to feel safe. Similarly, many Irish-Americans would not dream of riding the Orange Line subway, which goes through a heavily African-American part of town.

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The nun who founded the agency recognized some Irish-American culpability for these poor race relations, and wanted to do something to bring African-American and Irish communities together, to slowly begin to build trust between the groups. Nine years ago, she initiated a yearly program bringing together “black” and “green” for an afternoon of cultural exploration. Over the years, both categories have expanded to include other ethnic groups.

## **Building Trust**

I shifted the focus of the program from a one-day yearly event to monthly meetings of an interracial committee. The members of this diverse committee had time to slowly get to know each other and build up trust, to share our stories with each other, and to begin to notice the commonalities in our lives. We shared our experiences of racial injustices and successes, while planning a community-wide program where a larger group could begin to delve into some of the complexities of current intercultural relations.

It was a bit funny for me to work for an Irish organization, working to connect them with the African-American community, while I was a member of neither group. Some days I would pick up the phone in my office and get asked “So, what county are you from (in Ireland)?” (I guess I picked up a little accent from my coworkers.) At the same time, I think I helped the office gain credibility through my complex identity. African-Americans know that in the past, the Irish were often no

friends to Jews, so seeing me working comfortably in the office may have made them more willing to take a step and attend a program hosted at the Irish Immigration Center program. When I spoke at a Black Ministerial Alliance meeting, I won a few friends by mentioning that I planned to become a rabbi. They were happy to mentor a young person along her religious path.

## **Immigrant Advocacy**

Another area my JOI work focused on was immigrant advocacy. This being Boston, as an “Irish” organization, we often got more respect from local and state politicians (many of whom were themselves of Irish descent) than from other recent immigrant groups. Recognizing this privilege, we felt obligated to join many immigrant coalitions to work for change in local and national immigration legislation.

One major area of concern in Massachusetts was drivers’ licenses. Many immigrants who are here in the country legally, but not work-authorized, are ineligible for Social Security numbers, and without them, usually cannot receive licenses. This makes life very difficult for families in which one parent works and the other would like to take care of the kids and the household, but cannot get around without driving.

A coalition of Brazilians, Irish, Pan-Latin Americans, Haitians, the AFL-CIO, Lawyers for Social Change and the Mayor’s Office for New Bostonians all met to plead this case to the head registrar of motor vehicles in the state. I



did much of the background research for this presentation, helping collect testimony from immigrants and police officers and traffic court judges about what's happening now on the streets and what productive changes could be made to the system.

## **Easing Access**

With my fellow members of the Jewish Organizing Initiative, we also worked on a project within the Jewish community. We were concerned about access paths into Jewish life for young Jews with limited income. We collected testimony from ourselves and other young people about what types of programs and support we needed from the Jewish community to present to Barry Shrage and Nancy Kaufman, the heads, respectively, of Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies and the Jewish Community Relations Council. We advocated for free admission to High Holiday services, rides to distant synagogues, and free courses in Torah yoga and lectures, rather than fancy, expensive get-togethers in bars. As a first step, one of us was hired to direct adult social programming for young Jewish adults in Boston.

Learning to be a community organizer before entering rabbinical school has its benefits and its drawbacks. I learned how to be organized, and how to build a coalition of diverse interests into a powerful force for change. I know how to *shmooze* and get to know many dif-

ferent people's concerns. On the other hand, I'm very frustrated when I see the principles I learned in JOI being overlooked by Jewish communal agencies, when communication breakdowns and ineffective publicity hinder the building of connections between people. JOI helped me learn some tools for systemic analysis, so now I can at least diagnose such problems — the first step in solving them.

My experience at JOI, including building up a diverse coalition and leading it through a yearlong process of exploration while ostensibly working to plan a one-day program, will be very helpful to me as a rabbi. I look forward to continuing intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

At RRC, I have participated in a joint group of rabbinical students and Lutheran seminarians studying Psalms. It is always challenging to find a topic of mutual interest that different groups can study or work on, delve into deeply enough to examine fundamental differences, and still remain on friendly terms at the end.

While being a rabbi and working as an activist community organizer may seem to require different skill sets, I believe that my training in JOI will be incredibly helpful and powerful in the impact it will have on my future rabbinate. In particular, it will help me build communities and work to promote productive social change through community.

# The Medical Care Crisis: Seeking a Jewish Approach

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

Success inevitably leads to new challenges. Not that many years ago, the best available medical care more often than not failed. Today, advances in technology, genetics, pharmaceuticals and virtually every other part of medical science have revolutionized health care. For most people, the result of this extraordinary array of advances is both better quality and greater quantity of life.

Unsurprisingly, providing this rapidly growing set of services has become more expensive. Currently, health care consumes 14 to 15 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As the quality and quantity of health care and the resulting costs of providing it have increased, health insurance costs have similarly increased. This is no big surprise, as insurance premiums must cover the increased costs of medical care provision.

Some see large malpractice settlements as a problem because of their impact on malpractice insurance bills and, consequently, on health-care costs. Others have noted that our porous social safety net results in people without health insurance having very lim-

ited access to medical care. As the number of people without health insurance grows, emergency rooms often become the primary source of medical care for individuals. This is both unnecessarily expensive and inadequate, in that emergency rooms do virtually nothing about preventive care.

## Health-care Policy as a Jewish Concern

In what sense is health-care policy a Jewish problem? Several answers are immediately apparent. First, it is a problem that affects Jews — some are uninsured, some pay a great deal for insurance, some work in the health-care industry, and all are affected by how the health-care industry works.

Second, Jewish tradition recognizes an individual and collective duty to help people heal. In contemporary society, we depend upon secular institutions, in whole or in part, to fulfill that duty. Thus, as Jews, we have a moral concern about health-care public-policy issues as well as about how the medical system operates.

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Third, we have concerns for the dignity of everyone in our society. How the medical system operates provides a core experience for how we see our own dignity as well as that of others.

## Identifying Indicators

Given this reality, what tools can we discover within Jewish tradition that may provide a basis for a distinctly Jewish point of view? This is a tricky question, because any time a “pick-and-choose” method is employed, it can simply be an elegant way for justifying one’s biases, assumptions, or already-formulated conclusions. There are no simple, clear precedents within the *halakha* that those who do not consider themselves bound by the *halakha* would consider directly compelling or powerful.

With this caveat, I nonetheless want to mine Jewish tradition for values and concepts that are resonant, and can provide guidance.

Since the Jewish community will shape public policy by itself in this area, and since the public-policy questions are extraordinarily complex, the suggestions below should be taken as indicative of an approach rather than as embodying an entire analysis. How medical schools function, how medical research is conducted under not-for-profit and for-profit auspices, how the complex system of regulatory societies, state and federal law, hospitals, nurses, physicians, and others interact is enormously complicated. Changing any part of the funding system — governmental, insurance-based, individually

paid, and other third-party reimbursed — will have ramifications throughout the medical system. These can only be considered when looked at with great care from the point of view of medical economics, sociology, moral concerns and service delivery.

## Public Health

The *kehillah*, the structured and self-governing Jewish community of pre-modern times, had public health responsibilities. Its obligation to provide sewers, bridges, and other facilities for public safety is clear from a number of sources. One of the public considerations for the *kehillah* was its obligation to provide a physician. Thus, there is within Jewish tradition the notion that at least some basic level of medical care should be available to every member of the community.

Interestingly, physicians would not work exclusively for the *kehillah*, but would earn most of their income from fees for direct service to individuals. The community would provide funding to the physician to provide basic services to those who could not afford to pay. For the physician, this resulted in a two-tiered system. Health care was provided on request to those who could pay for it, and only minimal health care was provided to those who could not.

Such a two-tiered system can exist in the United States, as well. Most recently, it has been instituted in the state of Maine. In that system, those who pay privately or through health insurance receive whatever services are paid for in that way. The state provides a

minimum-care safety net for those who could not otherwise afford care. A well-designed system of this type provides not only emergency care and hospitalization; it also provides preventive care, which in the long run actually saves the health-care system money. Public health care either provides funding for people to go to private physicians or it funds clinics where routine medical care can be provided. Such a system does not necessarily mean inferior medical care; it only means less medical care. For example, the public insurance system will not pay for plastic surgery in cases that are purely cosmetic. It does not provide funding for optional services not essential to good health.

While some efforts in this direction have run into trouble, that does not indicate a flaw in the basic idea but rather in the methods selected for implementation. Oregon, for example, instituted a system that ran into severe financial problems because it did not achieve a workable balance between the amount of state funding and the number of services provided. Such systems confront us with extremely challenging moral and prudential choices. Our desire to avoid them, however, is not a justification for failing to provide basic medical care.

## Malpractice Settlements

There have been many public discussions about what to do about high malpractice settlements. Some analyses indicate that the cost of malpractice settlements actually has a relatively small impact on the cost of medical

care. Nonetheless, these very public events tend to undermine our perception of how the system works. The issue of whether to cap tort settlements has to do with how we weigh the balance between the public's good and each individual's good.

We understand malpractice settlements to be about several different things: damages for real hurt to the individual harmed, punishment to the wrongdoer, and the creation of an incentive for physicians to do the best they can. However, huge settlements do not necessarily improve physicians' attention. In fact, they are more likely to create too great a degree of caution, with physicians generating extra procedures and tests, instead of acting fully in the patient's best interest.

Anyway, most physicians will do everything they can to do what they perceive to be best for the patient. Malevolent or careless physicians are unlikely to avoid self-destructive behavior. Therefore there is no reason to think that the public gains from these very high tort settlements.

The public does have much to gain by increased toughness in licensure procedures and supervision of physician error. All too often, medical societies protect doctors in marginal cases rather than sternly disciplining them. The pressure of peers can play a critical role in improving medical care.

Jewish tradition recognizes that the community has the right to cap the size of tort settlements for the public good. Whether this should be undertaken or not is a complicated question, but there is certainly a precedent in Jewish

sources for considering tort caps as an option.

## Regulating Costs

The health industry is an extraordinarily complicated and interactive entity. Professional networks, large institutions, government, insurance and pharmaceutical firms and other companies all play important roles. Consumers usually have very imperfect knowledge about fees, which does not usually play a major role in their selection of a particular hospital or physician beyond making sure that their insurance is valid in a particular place.

These are conditions where market forces are unlikely to produce a level of competition that will bring prices to the lowest acceptable level. Achieving the lowest acceptable level of pricing might have an unmeasurable but significant impact on the quality of care. Even if we could achieve it, that might not be a desirable goal. Given that reality, the regulation of costs will take place outside of having the individual simply comparison-shop based on prices for similar services. Other methods must be used to control costs.

The efforts of health maintenance organizations to set hospital and physician fees have had very mixed success. Similar efforts by Medicare and Medicaid have also come with huge problems. Nonetheless, the question of cost is worthy of our attention. In terms of the benefits gained from the medical industry, we might well decide that spending 15 percent of the GDP in order to achieve our current astoundingly

high-quality medical care is a perfectly reasonable price to pay. Even so, how to maximize the efficiency of the system without undermining its effectiveness remains an important question.

## Health-care Education

Health-care education is one of the key elements in reducing costs in the health-care system and improving its effectiveness. One challenge to the Jewish community is to determine how synagogues and other Jewish institutions can play a role in providing health-care education. Sometimes, this is more obvious: One example is the need to do genetic counseling in the case of genetic defects that are common primarily to Jews. It seems reasonable that other, more general forms of health-care education should take place as well. Basic issues in health-care choices and ethics are critical to moral Jewish living. Furthermore, public discussions in the Jewish community of health-care policy can have a positive impact on governmental and industry choices.

One precedent from Jewish tradition that could prove valuable here is the notion that the government (*kehilah*) has the right to make decisions about how to manage costs. This does not solve the problem. In many ways, it actually creates new problems. But it opens one important avenue toward thinking about how the very complicated system of individuals and institutions involved in health care can be handled in order to assure efficient, fair, and reasonable financial arrangements.

## Rationing

It is clear that every country rations health care. If that were not the case, people would avail themselves of almost infinite amounts of medical care. Placing costs on medical care is one easy form of rationing. When we know that it will cost us \$10 every time we call the doctor, we do not call as often. Insurance companies' decisions not to cover certain procedures — whether because they are cosmetic or because they are experimental — are another example of rationing to control costs.

We make decisions all the time about how to balance safety against expense. Speed limits and the bumpers on cars are examples of that. Jewish tradition attempts to find such a balance as well. For example, the Torah requires that a roof that can serve as a deck must have a parapet around it. The rabbinic discussion about how high the parapet must be clearly indicates that it needs to be an effective barrier without being so high that someone couldn't still fall over the top of it. Thus, the rules require the homeowner to reduce the risk but not to eliminate it.

In the case of medical care, it is clear that for the system to remain affordable, some kind of rationing needs to take place. Since there must always be some rationing, it would be unreasonable for us to get up on our moral high horse to yell "Foul!" in every instance. The question is not *whether* we should ration but *where* and *when*. How do we do it in a fair way that takes into account the extraordinary competition for resources? The potential need is

infinite. We can not afford to provide all the medical care everybody wants, any more than we can provide prime cuts of meat at little cost to all those who would like them.

## Taking Personal Responsibility

Many public-health issues are affected by what individuals and groups do. Individual choices around smoking, healthy eating, drug use, alcohol consumption, and sexually transmitted diseases all have a profound effect on the individuals' own health as well as on the costs to the medical system. How much we sleep, whether we exercise and how well we tend to those around us will all have significant impact on our longevity, productivity and health-care costs.

Those who strongly or frequently abuse their bodies will probably be much less positively affected by better health-care access than those who tend to themselves with greater care. Nevertheless, most of us would not want to say that medical care should be restricted to people who have taken really good care of themselves. Not only would doing so be unfair, it would be extraordinarily difficult to administer, though some steps in this direction may be possible. For example, it may be reasonable to create a health insurance surcharge for those who smoke.

Sometimes, such factors must be considered, as in cases of rationing organs. People who are poor health risks because of poor self-care inevitably must be put farther down on the organ recipient list than those who con-

tinue to take good care of themselves and who would therefore be likely to live longer.

## Principles for Distribution of Care

If it is to be done fairly, rationing must be based on a system of principles and values. Several principles emerge from our tradition. One is equal respect for all persons. Another is *pikuah nefesh* (saving a life), a principle that says that we ought to do all we can to maximize the length of life. In addition to these concepts, there is also the idea that the *tereyfah* (one who has an injury or illness that will certainly lead to death) has less of a claim on medical care than others whose lives can be preserved if there are insufficient resources to treat both.

Values like *k'vod habriyot* (human dignity) mean that we ought to try to honor the wishes of individuals, including their own understanding of what is best for them in preserving a balance between their quality and quantity of life. *Hesed* (lovingkindness) and *briyut* (preserving health) are also values worthy of consideration.

These ideas do not lead to an exhaustive system, but they certainly do point in the right direction. When we also consider the tradition's willingness to support capitalist principles, in which

people can buy what they can afford and others are willing to sell, we may have more of a capacity for proceeding toward reasonable procedures than may at first be apparent.

There are other methods of distribution that have in various times and places been utilized by Jewish tradition. These include *yichus* (social status), social need, productivity for society, level of learning, queuing and the relationship to the rescuer. How these might apply in some situations is a question that deserves much more substantial treatment than can be undertaken here.

How do we balance *tzelem Elohim* — the idea that human beings have infinite worth because they are created in the image of God — with the reality of finite resources? That is a question that plagues us repeatedly. We might say that it is an unavoidable part of the human condition.

Regardless of the fact that we cannot finally reconcile these two, we must keep that profoundly troubling question before us as a guide. It prevents us from swerving away from the constant moral challenge that the questions surrounding medical care raise for us. If indeed we keep asking the questions and strengthening the dialogue about them, we can then reasonably hope we will make decisions that reflect our best moral and prudential judgments.

# Reappraising the Haggadah's Vision of Redemption

BY DAVID ARNOW

A curious myth has grown up about the Passover seder: that the traditional Haggadah makes not a single mention of Moses. On the Web, you can easily find examples that run the denominational spectrum. The most common interpretation suggests that the Haggadah wants to teach us that the credit for redemption from Egypt — and by implication from the oppression that befalls us today — belongs exclusively to God. The myth has become so powerful that it has blinded even usually astute readers of text to a simple fact: Traditional *haggadot* do mention Moses, once explicitly and once implicitly.

First, let's take a look at these two references to Moses and at the historical factors that may have led to minimizing his role in the Haggadah. This lays the foundation for reappraising the Haggadah's understanding of redemption. Although the Haggadah clearly accords God the starring role, it also alludes to a human contribution to the redemptive process. In our difficult times, this is not a message we can afford to ignore.

## Moses and the Haggadah

Moses appears in the section of the Haggadah that quotes a third-century midrash in which Rabbi Yossi the Galilean proves that the Egyptians suffered fifty plagues at the Red Sea. The midrash cites the following passage: "And when Israel saw the great hand which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31). As is often the case in rabbinic literature, this midrash only quotes the beginning of the biblical verse and therefore excludes the name of Moses.

*Haggadot* of the Geonim (leaders of the Babylonian Jewish community) from the ninth century included this midrash but did so with its partial quotation from Exodus. Illuminated European *haggadot* from the early 14th century routinely included the full verse from Exodus and, with it, Moses' name. Today, all traditional renderings of the Haggadah include this single, explicit mention of Moses.

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David Arnow is the author of *Creating Lively Passover Seders: A Sourcebook of Engaging Tales, Texts and Activities*, published by Jewish Lights. This article is based on sections from that book and is used with permission from Jewish Lights Publishing.



Of note, Maimonides (1135-1204) omitted the midrash on the plagues from his Haggadah because he believed the seder should focus exclusively on the events that occurred during the night of Passover and not on what later befell the Egyptians at the Red Sea. But he hardly intended to exclude Moses from the seder. To the contrary, Maimonides wrote that during the seder, parents should inform their children about “what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles wrought for us by Moses, our teacher . . .” Since a number of modern *haggadot* have dropped the passage about the plagues at the Red Sea — perhaps following Maimonides’ lead — some will indeed find that Moses’ name has completely disappeared from the story. But this is a recent development.

## Minimizing Moses

By the ninth century, and probably much earlier than that, Babylonian *haggadot* also included an important implicit reference to Moses. It appears in the Haggadah’s elaboration on the following verse from Deuteronomy: “The Lord took us out from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents’ (Deut. 26:8) ‘And by signs: This is the rod, as it is said, ‘. . . And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs’” (Ex. 4:17). “You” refers to Moses. The Haggadah quotes the conclusion of God’s instructions to Moses at the burning bush. Indeed, many contemporary translations read, “This is the rod of Moses,”

adding his name although it does not appear in the Hebrew.

Still, given his prominence in the Exodus, the Haggadah’s minimization of Moses is certainly striking. Several factors help explain this.

First, at a time when nascent Christianity was constructing a religion that revolved around Jesus as the redeeming intermediary — in the Gospel of John (14:6), Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father but through Me” — the Haggadah emphasized redemption through an unmediated relationship between God and humanity. As the Haggadah put it, “And the Lord took us out from Egypt’ (Deut. 26:8): not by the hands of an angel, and not by the hands of a seraph, and not by the hands of a messenger, but the Holy One . . . Himself.”

## Derailing Deification

Second, the Haggadah sought to derail tendencies to deify Moses. This was precisely one of the issues of debate in the ancient but long-simmering conflict with the Samaritans, a sect that not only revered Moses as God’s only true prophet, but elevated him to an almost Christ-like position: Moses served as humanity’s intercessor before God and in the future would bring the final redemption. Of note, the midrash preserves ancient Jewish notions about Moses that were remarkably similar.

Finally, giving God the spotlight at the seder may also have reflected a desire to reaffirm God’s redemptive power in the face of the disasters that had befallen the Jewish people in the era of

the seder's earliest development. The Great Revolt against Rome led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The Bar Kokhba rebellion in 135 CE resulted in the exile of most Jews from Israel. That the great Rabbi Akiva endorsed Bar Kokhba as the messiah may have augmented the interest in downplaying the human role in the redemptive process. Excessive attention to Moses might have whetted the appetite for dangerous messianic schemes.

But there's a big difference between minimizing Moses and erasing him. Even in his diminished presence, Moses offers a pointed challenge to the idea that deliverance from Egypt was purely a divine project. Whatever miraculous properties the rod of Moses may have possessed, it did not walk into Pharaoh's palace on its own. God chose a human being to bring it there. God and Moses — God and humanity, in a broader sense — work together to bring about redemption. The presence of Moses' rod in the Haggadah reminds us of that element of the redemptive process that we hold in our hands.

Now, let's consider four other examples of this in the Haggadah.

## **Covenantal Context of Redemption**

The Haggadah clearly wants us to understand redemption in the context of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people that began with Abraham. That's why the Haggadah includes the passage from Genesis (15:13-14) known as the Covenant of the Pieces, in which God says to

Abraham, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nations they shall serve, and in the end they shall go out with great wealth."

Why did God make a covenant with Abraham? God later explains, ". . . I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him" (Gen. 18:19). Abraham keeps his part of the bargain and God does the same.

Something similar applies to the Israelites in Egypt. The midrash highlights the Israelites' qualities that marked them as worthy spiritual descendants of Abraham — they were above suspicion with regard to chastity, they refrained from tale bearing, and they did not change their names or give up their language. As the Haggadah notes, the Israelites "became a distinguishable people in Egypt," i.e., rather than assimilate and disappear, they developed a more distinct identity. Had they assimilated — assuming that was an option — there would not have been a people for God to take out.

## **Righteous Women, Apple Trees and *Haroset***

In the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva expounds on another aspect of the Israelite contribution to redemptive process. He argues "that Israel merited redemption because of the righteousness

of the women of that generation.” The Haggadah alludes to Pharaoh’s plan to destroy the Israelites by preventing them from procreating — “the enforced separation of husband and wife.” Akiva credits the women with thwarting Pharaoh’s scheme by defiantly meeting their weary husbands in the fields under the apple trees, feeding them warm food, anointing them with oil, seducing them, and later stealing off to deliver their children. For Akiva, women’s unwillingness to forsake love and sensuality in the midst of degradation were the critical ingredients that human beings contributed to their redemption from Egypt.

Akiva’s allusion to the apple tree finds its way onto the seder plate. The Talmud explains that *haroset* — in many traditions made with apples — must be thick as a reminder of the clay from which the Israelites made bricks. But it must also be “tart to commemorate the apple trees” and the events that transpired beneath them. Had the separation between husband and wife to stand, the Israelites would have disappeared. End of story. No Exodus. So *haroset* reminds us of oppression, but also of the human defiance without which the Exodus would have been impossible.

### **“In Every Generation . . .”**

The phrase, “in every generation,” occurs twice in the Haggadah. “In every generation, there are those who rise up to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.” Later, we read, “In every gen-

eration, each individual should feel as if he [or she] had actually gone out from Egypt.”

In the first instance, God plays the expected role of redeemer. In the second, God is missing and we are simply to see ourselves as if we had gone out of Egypt. We would have expected the Haggadah to say that we should feel as if we “had been brought out.” The difference in language highlights the point that God and humanity both participate in the redemptive process: “You can’t have one without the other . . .”

### **Purim in the Haggadah**

Now, let’s look at one of the Ashkenazi Haggadah’s most poetic and intriguing passages: “We praise . . . the One who has brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to a festival, from darkness to great light and from bondage to redemption.”

Eighteen hundred years ago, the Mishnah included only the first expression, “from slavery to freedom.” In the spirit of the Haggadah’s dictum that “whoever elaborates on the story of the Exodus deserves praise,” the passage grew, but in a surprising way.

The phrase, “from sorrow to joy, from mourning to a festival,” occurs near the very end of the book of Esther (9:22) in connection with the institution of the festival of Purim. The Jews have just been saved from Haman’s genocidal plan and Mordecai sends out instructions to observe Purim annually on “the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and [in]

the same month which had been transformed for them from one of sorrow to joy and from mourning to festivity (*yom tov*).” (From the point of view of Jewish law, it is worth noting that a festival cancels many of the rites of mourning.)

Why bring Purim into the seder? In part, because the climax of the Purim story unfolds during Passover. On the fifteenth of *Nisan*, the first night of Passover, Queen Esther arranged a “wine feast” for the king and approached him for a fateful audience. She requested his permission for a second wine feast the next night, at which she intended to engineer Haman’s downfall. Esther’s plan succeeded and the king executed Haman on the sixteenth of *Nisan*, the second day of Passover. In this regard, the allusion to Purim would seem to be the perfect illustration of the Haggadah’s claim that “in every generation they rise up to destroy us, but the Holy One . . . saves us from their hand.”

### **Increasing Human Responsibility**

Upon closer inspection, however, Purim appears to teach a rather different lesson. On the Jewish calendar, Passover is the first holiday, Purim the last. God’s active presence defines the Exodus. The Purim story draws the starkest contrast: Not only do human

beings redeem the Jews of Shushan, but the book of Esther does not even mention God. The cycle of the Jewish year traces the course of God’s decreasing intervention on the one hand and humanity’s maturing responsibility on the other.

Purim reminds us that in a world where God’s hand remains hidden, redemption lies in our hands. In placing an allusion to Purim at the heart of the seder, the compilers of the Haggadah are subtly calling us to remember humanity’s responsibility for the work of redemption at the very moment we celebrate God’s role in the process.

### **Partners in Redemption**

We are hardly the first generation to live in times when the active hand of a redeeming God seems to have withdrawn from sight. The longing for God to return to the stage of history to redeem the righteous and punish the wicked is palpable throughout the Haggadah.

But the Haggadah also speaks, albeit in a quieter voice that reminds us that the responsibility for redemption cannot be left to God alone. Our job is to assure that the celebration of Passover, along with every other sacred act, strengthens our commitment to join with others to redeem our broken world.

# Spiritual Activism: From Confusion to Liberation

BY CLAUDIA HORWITZ

I was an activist for a long time before I ever opened myself to the gifts of the spiritual realm. Raised as a Reform Jew, I went to synagogue and Hebrew school largely out of obligation to my parents and because I figured that since I was always going to be Jewish, I might as well learn something about it. I connected with many parts of the culture — celebrating the holidays, learning Hebrew, studying stories from Torah. But somehow, I could not forge a connection with God or find what mattered most to me: greater expressions of love, more authentic relationships, and a deeper articulation of truth. I put aside hope of finding any of this through Judaism and shelved whatever inclination I had for spiritual seeking.

## Finding God Through Burnout

After college, I plunged into social-change work. In my early years as an activist, I educated and organized other young people to work toward ending

hunger and homelessness. I spent weeks at a time on the road doing workshops, meeting with students and developing an analysis of economic injustice. My colleagues and I built a tight-knit community, based on shared commitment and inspiration. We were eager to overcome the isolation of a path misunderstood by family and friends and disparaged by the broader society. And our legitimate anger at the disenfranchisement of poor people led to a demonization of whichever “other” we felt was responsible.

Unfortunately, the activist lifestyle in which I immersed myself was also one prone to illness, fatigue and burnout. In the midst of twelve-hour days and hot dog lunches, it never occurred to me to take better care of myself, and no one ever suggested it. Consumed by purpose and righteousness, I did not notice the slow deterioration of my physical energy and emotional health. I was living a dangerous irony of social-change work — complete emphasis on my external commitment to help-

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ing others in need with virtually no awareness of how I was suffering myself.

The universe gave me a series of noticeable wake up calls, namely migraine headaches and a prolonged depression. Finally forced to accept my own limitations, I entered a period of painful confusion. Where I'd once been full of answers, now there were only questions: How would I find my way out of depression? Could I live a healthy life and still work effectively for what I believed in? And what would enable activists to sustain themselves for the long haul in the face of mounting injustice?

## **Prayer and Meditation**

Thankfully, some of the most powerful transformations come when a source of pain or confusion is harnessed as a force for good. In the midst of an extremely challenging work situation, I mysteriously found myself praying. To what, exactly, I did not know, and my confusion grew. Desperate for some kind of relief, I shared my suffering with a mentor who introduced me to mediation. Shortly thereafter, I made my first trip to Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, and was introduced to a compassion-centered approach to yoga. Together, these practices helped me to interrupt the cycle of crisis and despair.

At first I wondered, "What use could this be, to just stop and breathe, or move my body in some intentional way? With everything going on inside myself and out in the world, what was the point?" The practices themselves

answered these questions. In meditation, my mind found ways to steady itself and drop beneath the endless chatter. I didn't overreact as much and I began to feel more authentic in my words and my actions. With yoga, I felt a gentle release of the long-held aggression I had felt toward my physical form and, with it, a softening around the edges of my heart.

Miraculously, I connected with some fundamental, overarching energy that I initially called the life force, and then, more tentatively, God. With this new spiritual awareness, I could see how my pain and discomfort impacted my efforts to create change in society, how quickly I got caught up in urgency, and how I formed judgments about my own performance and the actions and words of others. As I grew stronger, I noticed an increased willingness to hold onto the many complex layers of my reality and I found a new ability to wait for the wise response.

## **The Seeds of Spiritual Activism**

I became curious about what role a spiritual life might play in the lives of my colleagues, friends, and other activists with similar struggles. Wouldn't a growing consciousness of spirit shed light on the places of darkness (our limitations, internal demons, and ineffective strategies) and transform our work for justice?

I began helping activists deepen their own spiritual base, both to strengthen our work and to be a resource for our own liberation. We needed to honor and make manifest the inextricable link

between our evolving alignment with the divine (however we defined it) and our passion for justice and fairness. The idea of spiritual activism took hold, and I have come to believe that it is the essence of our humanity — both our birthright and our obligation.

As American Jews in a historical moment that is pregnant with possibility, we must understand that spiritual activism matters more than ever if we hope to fulfill our responsibility to *tikkun olam*. We pride ourselves on our activist history, recounting the contributions we have made to many movements for civil and human rights. But we must begin to engage our texts, our beliefs and each other in a way that fully expresses our desire to assist in repairing the world. Instead of applying this mandate consistently and universally, we often make disturbing choices to limit its reaches. Looking at the paradox inherent in our compound identity may help us understand why this is the case.

## **A Paradoxical Existence**

Many Jews experience themselves in a place of marginalization, both in the United States and around the world. We have inherited a legacy of anti-Semitism and experienced it ourselves and, not surprisingly, we have internalized both.

It is useful to understand the distinctions. The legacy is the impact of a history that has preceded us; for my generation, this includes everything from the story of the Exodus to the horrors of the Holocaust. The impact of direct prejudice is quite different, often less

epic but more painful in its felt experience. Both have made us understandably fearful of oppression and sensitive to self-preservation.

At the same time, many Jews in the United States also experience a great deal of privilege, because most of us are white and we possess all of the power that this carries. As an identity, whiteness is easily ignored or denied because it is normative. We do not have to notice that it is our type of ethnicity running government, portrayed in popular culture, defining how history is taught, or creating institutions that govern much of our global community.

My friend Tema Okun is a member of the anti-racist training collective Changework and an activist with Jews for a Just Peace in North Carolina. After years of working to help people dismantle racism in multiple forms, Tema explains, “This is how our culture works. It gives white people privileges just because we are white and then teaches us to believe that is because we deserve it. We cannot escape this experience or this message; we swim in it every day.” I know that I have sometimes had great difficulty reconciling these two seemingly contradictory elements of our identity. At times, I deny one element — my whiteness — while favoring the other — my Jewishness — without actually mining the lessons of either.

## **The Middle East**

This paradox is very alive in our response to what is happening in the Middle East. As Jews, we can use our

visceral and intellectual understanding of what it means to be perceived as “the other.” This could be the wellspring of compassion for individuals or groups of people who are similarly thought of as “other” and oppressed as such. As white people, we can make the choice to keep moving beyond guilt and shame to a place where we can use the privilege we have for good, even as we attempt to dismantle it. It happens through deep engagement with others and ourselves in an ongoing commitment to find space for the wide range of reactions and questions inherent in the question of how peace will finally come to the region.

We can, for example, take the ache we feel every time we hear of another senseless suicide bombing in Israel and let this ache nurture our reverence for life. Throughout history, Jews have suffered humiliations not unlike the levels of humiliation Palestinians suffer in the course of everyday life. Remembering the devastation of the Holocaust might help us collectively imagine what it feels like for innocent Palestinian citizens to have their homes destroyed and gainful means of employment taken away. Perhaps by recalling our history of being oppressed by stronger, wealthier nations we can acknowledge the vast financial and military resources of the Israeli government and think well about how these might be employed in the service of peace.

When we are willing to see the breadth and depth of the paradox, we have access to a broader spectrum of creative response. The Jewish community here in the United States is just

beginning to sustain meaningful dialogue about the Israeli government's prolonged combination of closure and curfew in the Palestinian territories. In the face of staggering complexity, groups like Jews for a Just Peace, Brit Tzedek, the Shalom Center, and *Tikkun* magazine are creating spaces for this difficult conversation in the context of a moral, ethical framework and providing outlets for action. With these available resources, I have been perplexed by the slow pace of engagement and saddened by the reluctance of the broader Jewish community to embrace this conversation.

## **Embracing Our Confusion**

After much deliberation, I can only conclude that we are in a period of profound confusion. I mean this with all seriousness and I say it with a mix of compassion and frustration. (We can take some comfort in knowing we are not alone. Increased levels of military force without justification, irresponsible globalization policies, and visionless “leaders” have made the world a pretty confusing place for everyone.) Our ancestors spent forty years in a desert of confusion. The problem comes when we react out of our emotional response and rush toward the quick fix when we might be greatly aided by resting in our discomfort and unknowing. Our spiritual challenge is to make space for this confusion and to have faith in whatever clarity will follow.

A colleague once told me that “periods of confusion are usually followed by great breakthroughs,” and I have



found this to be the case repeatedly in my own life. Confusion signals the brink of transformation, a readiness to release a previously limiting belief. What if our intellectual and emotional confusion about the Middle East holds the key to the liberation of this very holy land from endless cycles of violence and despair? What if our uncertainty is the doorway to redefining our entire concept of security? It might even allow us more fully to comprehend our complicated identity. We will never know until we make a collective commitment to embrace our confusion and extract its many possibilities.

### **Being With What Is**

So, how do we sit with our confusion? How do we create the capacity and infrastructure for deliberate, ongoing, profound reflection on our behavior and its effect on us and on other people?

Hopefully, we can look to our spiritual life for assistance when we feel confused or encounter pain. In these times, we usually look for the escape route, a way to avoid feeling unhappiness, fear, or anger. But we can make a revolutionary choice to experience whatever arises, to simply be with what is. This is a profound teaching: to surrender into the totality of the moment, whether it is our grief over an act of senseless violence or our anger with outdated policies. Instead of meeting crisis with fight (aggression) or flight (denial), we open ourselves to new re-

sponses and actions. We find an intelligent and expansive peace on the inside that points the way. When we are brave enough to go through this process, we can find a liberation we might not have imagined was possible.

### **Compassionate Attention**

It takes courage to face the world with compassionate attention, to be candid about the injustices we understand, and to probe those we do not. We try, stumble, and try again. Consciousness is a daily walk. When we turn inward, we find stillness and rest, truth and chaos resting together. We can ignore what we find or we can embrace it — all of it. When we turn outward, we see levels of suffering that mirror and exceed our own. We know this world is not what it could or should be for far too many people.

The path may not be easy, but that does not make it less necessary. Living a life where our values manifest in daily actions — actions that promote the basic health and welfare of all we can possibly imagine — is within reach for us. It is not something that will rest only in the hands of our rabbis or politicians. We are all seekers. In the midst of an ever-complex, ever-quickenning universe, we can create ways to remember what matters most. In the face of suffering, we can uncover new and better ways to respond. As spiritual activists, we can learn to move more freely between confusion and liberation; our global future depends on it.

# Mitzvah and Autonomy

*Duties of the Soul: The Role of Commandments in Liberal Judaism*

edited by Niles E. Goldstein and Peter S. Knobel

(UAHC Press, 1999), 163 pages

REVIEWED BY REBA CARMEL

Several years ago, I attended the annual Rabbinic Seminar at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. The topic was “The Foundation of mitzvah,” and one of the areas of discussion was the nature of being commanded — what does it mean; is there a way we “ought” to feel commanded, and, if so, how should we act?

Rabbi Donniel Hartman suggested that rather than feel that the 613 *mitzvot* are commandments that we must fulfill; we should view each mitzvah as an opportunity to establish a relationship with God. We begin by performing one mitzvah richly, deeply and meaningfully, and building upon that foundation, we embrace a second, a third and so on. The number is less important than how the *mitzvot* inform our lives, and how we draw upon them to forge our spiritual bond with the Divine.

## Mitzvah and Autonomy

I am reminded of this approach to being commanded as I read the struggles of the contributors to *Duties of the Soul: The Role of Commandments in Liberal Judaism*. The overriding issue

with which these essayists grapple is how — if at all — the Reform movement can honestly embrace the notion of *mitzvot* while not compromising personal autonomy. Can authority be reconciled with personal choice and, if so, how?

The book is divided into three parts. Drawing upon the post-Enlightenment philosophical underpinnings of the early Reform movement, the first part reviews the intellectual history of the Reform movement and how the historical/cultural milieu informed its theology. Part two presents the spiritual journeys of those who are redefining the meaning of authority, commandment and *mitzvot* within a Reform context, and the third section shows us how to build mitzvah-based communities that pray, study and practice, communities that embrace the present and past Jewish story as their own.

## Multiple Perspectives

Just as tradition affirms that there are multiple aspects to the Torah, each of the seven essayists in the book’s first section presents a different aspect of mitzvah as a reflection of divine author-

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ity in relationship to personal autonomy. To those unfamiliar with Reform's ideological history, Daniel Bronstein highlights the conclusions of the movement's platforms as they relate to religious practice. He also provides some insight into the theoretical background that informed the platforms' authors.

Commenting on the current status of the discussion, Bronstein states:

[I]t is more than possible that the ongoing confrontation between autonomy and authority will never be fully resolved for Reform Jews. The retention of individual religious freedom is seemingly inconsistent with full participation in an authoritative, mitzvah-based system of Judaism. If we decide as a community to preserve the ceasefire between mitzvah and freedom, Reform Jews will have to persist in devising creative solutions so for establishing and maintaining the sense of obligation toward *mitzvot*, as did our forebears.

However, given our continued belief in the desirability of an authoritative mitzvah system, Reform Jews may decide to relegate the philosophy of personal autonomy to a lower rung in our belief system. This, of course, would mean that Reform Judaism would become a denomination forbidding some types of behavior while mandating other rituals, and that appears antithetical to Reform ideology. [18]

Despite this seemingly irresolvable tension, Bronstein concludes that "we

can take comfort in the vibrancy of a community willing to examine itself and willing . . . to reassess its position and consider change."

## Ethics and Ritual

In approaching *mitzvot*, Arnold Jacob Wolf calls upon us to "ethicize the ritual and ritualize the ethics." Quoting Heschel, Wolf notes that "we Jews begin with a leap of action, not a leap of faith." [25] He calls upon Reform Judaism to surrender once and for all any elements of a fatal Pauline antinomianism that denies value to obedience. Having said that, however, he succinctly states:

We are not trying to be Orthodox. We are trying to be Jewish. Terms such as autonomy or freedom no longer instruct our sensibilities. We are prepared to go back, far past where our Reform forebears ever went, neither idolizing nor disparaging what they have left us as a heritage. [26]

Both Bronstein and Wolf call upon Reform Jews to consider another paradigm — one that seriously considers the role of authority in a Reform context. In addition, Wolf alludes to what may perhaps be the more important issue for progressive Judaism in general, which is how to create a self-definition that includes Jewish authenticity. For Wolf, that may mean reexamining the role of Sinaitic covenant theology in a way that can accommodate Reform ideology.

## Search for Authenticity

A persistent undercurrent in this book is the Reform struggle, both subjectively and objectively, for “Jewish authenticity.” For those authors who raise this issue it would appear that creating a self definition that includes mitzvah would assist the movement in gaining Jewish authenticity, however that may be defined.

However attractive and (perhaps even necessary) mitzvah may be for Jewish authenticity, the question of acquiescing to the authority of mitzvah still remains open. In his essay, Eric Yoffie begins by pointing out what mitzvah is not. Mitzvah is neither any Jewish act that we choose to do for virtually any reason, nor is it identical with ritual, *sancta* or *minhagim*.

In other words, we are not “off the hook” as Jews even if we do use our vibrant past to create a meaningful present:

Customs, ancient or modern that are put forward to meet immediate needs and that are regularly discarded if the response is not satisfactory, must not be confused with *mitzvot*, which by their very nature are lasting and divinely commanded. [30]

For Yoffie, mitzvah is an encounter between God and Jew originating at Sinai. It means that one is prepared to live one’s life as God’s partner.

Yoffie seems to imply that our Sinaitic experience yielded a covenantal rather than a hierarchical relationship. Yet he concludes that despite the fact

that we know the “word of God is multivalent and multivocal . . .”, we also know that “it is still the word of God; it is still God’s commanding voice and mitzvah is God’s instrument that transforms what happened at Sinai into a way of life and a religious destiny.” [37] Yoffie seems, in fact, to conclude that our Sinaitic experience did indeed yield a hierarchical relationship to which we must acquiesce; but we are not yet offered enough information as to how we ought to “transform Sinai into a way of life.” How, using Wolf’s paradigm derived from Heschel, does one transform this leap of faith into a leap of action?

## Mitzvah and Relationship

A workable model of how to integrate a genuine acceptance of authority and mitzvah into our daily lives begins to emerge in the second section of the book. Elyse D. Frishman views mitzvah as part of a relationship, rather than an obligation. If one has little sense of relationship, she says, then the covenant will seem burdensome. On the other hand, if we view the Sinai experience as forging a covenantal relationship rather than forming a power structure, we will be in a better position to say how we heard God’s voice.

In support of her position, Frishman raises two points. The first, though perhaps obvious, needs to be restated in the context of a book grappling with the question of authority. Frishman teaches that the Exodus is our master story — we were freed not to become the servants of God but rather to be-

come fulfilled human beings.

Her second point relies upon the biblical text. She contends that whenever God addresses our people in the Torah about something significant, the verbs used to initiate that conversation are not the verbs of command, but rather the verbs of dialogue, of conversation. God speaks; rarely does God command. What came to be *mitzvot*, Frishman concludes, were originally gifts, words to direct and guide our lives meaningfully and draw us close to God and holiness.

### **Mitzvah-Based Communities**

The third section of the book presents perhaps the most dramatic shift in the dialogue between authority and autonomy. All three essayists encourage the creation of narrative mitzvah-based communities that identify the Jewish story as their own. The primary element in the Jewish story, affirms Peter Knobel, is the collective encounter with God, which is re-experienced in Torah study and *mitzvot*.

While one can have a mitzvah-driven life as an individual within a community, it is difficult to have a mitzvah-driven life as an individual without a community. Establishing a mitzvah community means establishing a community that regularly stud-

ies and worships together, as well as acts together — for example, honoring the dead through the establishment of a progressive *hevra kadisha*.

### **Rethinking Autonomy**

This is courageous book, for several reasons. First, because some of the most committed leaders of the Reform movement willingly and publicly re-examine the primacy of autonomy by subjecting it, in Michael Morgan's words, to the same scrutiny as any other doctrine defining Reform Judaism. Secondly, the authors are no longer willing to surrender *mitzvot* and *halakha* to the Orthodox.

As Morgan points out, *halakha* simply means “way,” and while Hinduism and Buddhism have their “way,” of which each is proud — and to which many Jews appear to be flocking — in Morgan's opinion, the Reform movement has relinquished our otherwise organic, evolving Jewish “way” to the Orthodox, who have turned it into an often static and sometimes oppressive religious regime. [71]

Finally, the book warmly renews our covenantal bond with God and challenges us to discover the countless opportunities we have as members of progressive communities to form a relationship with the divine.

# Paradigms of Pastoral Presence

*Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook  
from Traditional and Contemporary Sources*

edited by Dayle A. Friedman

(Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001) 422 pages

REVIEWED BY SHEILA SEGAL

Jewish pastoral care, the subject of Rabbi Dayle Friedman's skillfully compiled volume, is a specialized profession practiced by trained Jewish chaplains and pastoral counselors, most but not all of them rabbis. Jewish pastoral care is also the religious and emotional support that rabbis and cantors are expected to provide for their congregants during times of crisis or life passage. But in the framework of sacred community, Jewish pastoral care is an activity in which all of us are expected to participate.

Rooted in the Jewish values of *hesed* (lovingkindness), pastoral care is the compassionate support provided to individuals who are experiencing the troubles and transitions that we all have to face, such as illness, loss, aging, and bereavement, and those travails that afflict greater numbers of our communities than we often realize, such as trauma, abuse, and addiction. In the course of a lifetime, each of us will be in need of pastoral care, and most of

us will face situations in which we wish we could provide it. This book helps prepare us for those times of spiritual need.

## Pastoral Encounter

One of the paradigms of Jewish pastoral care, presented by Friedman in the introduction to this landmark publication, emerges from the biblical story of Hagar, concubine of Sarah, who has given birth to Abraham's first son, Ishmael. The "pastoral encounter" occurs when God hears and responds to the mother's cries in the wilderness (Gen. 16) and then later (Gen. 21:17), when God hears the cry of the boy *ba'asher hu sham*, literally "in the place when he is." From this text, as Friedman so beautifully explains, we begin to learn that the very essence of Jewish pastoral care is to meet people *ba'asher hem sham*, "in whatever they are experiencing, wherever they are."

Often, we find them in the "wilder-

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ness,” in places where they are cut off from the normal flow of life. We find them in places of physical and spiritual alienation, such as hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and war zones. We find them in the liminal places where they are gripped by grief or fear or confusion. We find them in places where it may seem to them, as it seemed to Hagar and Ishmael, that there is no one even to hear their cries. Responding to those cries, whether articulated or silent, is the essence of Jewish pastoral care.

## Narrative Paradigms

To heed such calls, explains Joseph S. Ozarowski in one of the book’s early chapters, is “to walk in God’s ways,” to perform acts of *hesed* that emulate the divine attributes of compassion and love.

In Genesis 18, for example, God models the importance of *bikur holim*, visiting the sick, by appearing to Abraham immediately after Abraham has undergone circumcision. Just as the Holy One visits the sick, so, too, are we enjoined to visit the sick. Mining rabbinic sources, Ozarowski offers us a paradigm for Jewish pastoral care based on the *mitzvah* of *bikur holim*.

In addition to these examples of divine behavior, several contributors turn to a particular series of talmudic stories (actually, three tellings of the same story) to illumine the human dynamic of *bikur holim*. Each telling is about a pair of rabbis, one ill and the other paying a visit. In the first and last telling, Rabbi Yoḥanan is the visitor; in

the second, the roles are reversed and he is the one suffering from illness.

In each version, the visitor asks the one who is ailing about the meaning of his illness, to which the reply is always that the sufferings are “unwelcome.” In each case, the visitor finds no helpful words to offer — though Rabbi Yoḥanan tries unsuccessfully in the third version. But each encounter concludes with a simple, healing connection: “He gave him his hand and he raised him up” (*TB Berakhot* 5a).

Modeled in these fascinating stories is the quality of “connection” that professional chaplains call “presence.” The pastoral caregiver must be fully “present” to the suffering of the other for a healing connection to take place. This means being completely focused on the situation of the other, while also being fully aware of one’s own vulnerability. The effective pastoral encounter requires a quality of empathic presence that allows the sufferer to feel completely heard and understood by one who is right there, *ba’asher hu sham*.

## The Shepherd-Companion

Jewish pastoral caregivers may be called to take the rabbinic role of teacher, the ritual role of priest, or the prophetic role of advocate. Each of these has its place in providing good pastoral support. But the most distinctive role of the pastoral caregiver is to be present as a peer in the experience of suffering.

It is more appropriate, then, to think of the pastoral caregiver not as someone sermonizing from the pulpit, but

as a shepherd who goes out into the fields and walks along with the flock, paying special attention to those who may be lost, limping, caught in a thicket or otherwise in peril. The term “pastoral caregiver” evokes the image of God as “my shepherd” in Psalm 23: “Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

The source of comfort to which the psalmist refers is the awareness of God’s presence, but often it takes the presence of another human being in that “valley of deepest darkness” to bring the Divine Presence back into awareness. The role of that individual is not so much to provide direction to those who are estranged, but, in Friedman’s formulation, “to help them to use the resources within and around them to come through the experience whole. It is a relationship in which the helper meets the one in need on an egalitarian footing, not through a hierarchical power connection.”

## Spiritual Accompaniment

Such a relationship, Friedman suggests, is not fully captured by the term “pastoral care.” From a Jewish perspective, the relationship is more accurately described by the Hebrew term *hitlavut ruhanit*, “spiritual accompaniment.” It is a model of “being there” that reflects the mystery and the wisdom of the talmudic stories cited above.

“Being there” is not as simple as it sounds. Some of us go more easily to those painful places of illness, loss, and estrangement, while others feel more

awkward or even resistant; but at some time in our lives, every one of us will be called to “be there” for another human being in the ways that this book describes.

*Jewish Pastoral Care* is therefore a much needed and indispensable resource. It is an essential reference for rabbis, cantors, professional chaplains, pastoral counselors and other professionals who might be called to situations requiring pastoral intervention. It is also a valuable resource for those who serve as parachaplains in their communities and for those involved with *bikur holim* committees through synagogues, Jewish federations, or community centers.

## Theological Perspectives

Part I (“Foundational Concepts for Jewish Pastoral Care”) presents four theological perspectives to inspire and shape the work of the spiritual caregiver. These include an exploration by Myriam Klotz of the blessings that can be wrested from suffering, and Joseph Ozarowski’s *bikur holim* paradigm for pastoral caregiving. Friedman offers a model for *hitlavut ruhanit* in which she draws on the classic four-tiered approach to interpreting sacred texts known as PaRDeS (*peshat, remes, drash* and *sod* — obvious, allegorical, interpretive and hidden) to suggest four possible levels of interpretation and connection in the pastoral encounter.

Part II (“Basic Tools for the Jewish Pastoral Caregiver”) begins with Barbara Breitman’s excellent survey of skills and techniques, and it includes such



wonderful resources as Simcha Weintraub's chapter on the use of Psalms. Nancy Flam contributes an important chapter on the often overlooked need for self-care among pastoral caregivers.

Among the nine specialized offerings in Part III ("Jewish Pastoral Care for Specific Needs and Settings") are the editor's essay on "accompanying" the elderly and their families, a field in which she is widely regarded as a leader; an essay on spiritual care for the dying and for their families by Amy Eilberg, who has been at the forefront in the Jewish hospice movement; and an over-

view of Jewish chaplaincy in an acute-care setting by Jeffrey Silberman, who was the first Jewish supervisor for Clinical Pastoral Education.

*Jewish Pastoral Care* is a defining volume in a field that continues to grow, a volume to which one can return again and again for guidance and insight. For those who are called to the profession of Jewish pastoral care, and for those who are ever called to "be there" for another human being — be it a loved one, a friend, or a stranger — this book is a precious resource.

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